

Close reading UNL's response to 0.7

In September of last year, following the [true](#) opening of the academic year, 0.7 sent out a [letter](#) to the executive boards of several Dutch universities in which we demanded that they take responsibility for the precarity at their institutions. It was a sincere call for change. Research and education are visibly in decline, but what's worse, the working conditions are horrid in academia. So many of our colleagues are burned out, so many talented researchers and teachers have left academia after many years of servitude on temporary contracts, and to make matters worse we see misconduct and intimidation on a daily basis. We accompanied the letter with a [petition](#) and a [doomsday clock](#), which was set to run out on 20 December 2021, to increase the pressure and set consequences.

The doomsday clock has expired by now, and after collecting nearly a thousand signatures we will close the petition later this month. We can say that the letter has been a modest success. The university boards (*colleges van bestuur*, CvB's) took notice of our initiative, and we were supported by WOInActie and the unions. Most importantly, the letter was taken up by several local action groups, collectively known as [Casual Academy](#), who addressed these matters directly with their respective CvB's. We now have a foot in the door of the high offices at Leiden University, Utrecht University, Radboud University, Maastricht University, and the University of Amsterdam (see our [statement](#) for a full account on the response of the universities). But then, the funniest thing happened.

On the 24 December 2021 we got [a letter](#) from an organisation calling itself the UNL; ostensibly a response to our plea for change. This was curious, since our letter wasn't addressed to them. It turns out that the [UNL](#) (*Universiteiten van Nederland*) was until very recently known as the VSNU (*Vereniging van Samenwerkende Nederlandse Universiteiten*), the employers' association of Dutch universities. This organisation has been very unpopular with Dutch academics, and all serious [calls for reform](#) have proposed to end this layer of management and create a new institution that is built on academic and public values. Much of the more recent unpopularity is due to its chairman and signatory of the letter, Pieter Duisenberg, who as a member of parliament for the VVD suggested that we should [inventory the political affiliation of academic staff](#), wanted to cut funding to education that [is not market-oriented](#) (he meant [the Humanities](#)), and was also an enthusiastic proponent of the disastrous decision to abolish the basic study grant (*basisbeurs*) in favour of a state loan. 0.7 has no faith in the VSNU or its chairman, but we decided to read the letter anyway. Sadly, it met our low expectations.

As we'll show below, this letter was not written to us in good faith. It is not an attempt to engage in conversation, address problems, ask questions or provide answers to our own. It does not recognize the severity of the problems, nor the VSNU's role in them; it merely pretends to do so. Written with the eloquence of a call centre, the letter falsely states that the VSNU are already doing everything we ask for. Since we refuse to engage sincerely with untruthfulness, we will not respond in the traditional sense. We want to avoid that their 'letter' will

whitewash their failure as an institution. Instead of futile correspondence, we will use this letter to demonstrate where the non-activist paths to change in academia leads: straight into a brick wall of gaslighting. And, since we are academics, we'll do this not just by factchecking and peeling off the layers of manager-speak, but by exposing its aims and finding its underlying meaning. In other words, a close reading!

A CLOSE READING

Beste vertegenwoordigers van O.7e,

The VSNU misspelled our name even though, in contrast to theirs, ours has remained rather stable. Also, our letter was written in English, but their reply is in Dutch. Universities in the Netherlands have a contradictory stance when it comes to language use: while many courses and other academic activities have become English-only to facilitate the hoarding of massive amounts of international students and PhDs, many bodies of management, worker's councils, and employee participation initiatives refuse to speak English at all. In this manner, a huge part of the staff and students are excluded from these decision-making bodies, effectively making them second class 'citizens' in their own institutions. We will communicate in English as long as there is no policy to address this. However, we are not going to translate the words of the UNL here. We reckon we do enough free labour for them and theirs already.

Op 25 oktober jl. heeft u een open brief geschreven aan de colleges van bestuur van alle universiteiten in Nederland. Hierin vraagt u aandacht voor de werkomstandigheden in het hoger onderwijs. Het gaat daarbij specifiek om medewerkers met een tijdelijk contract, om werkdruk en sociale veiligheid.'

Omdat u zich in uw open brief richt tot alle colleges van bestuur, reageren wij hier namens alle universiteiten. De universiteiten zijn blijvend in gesprek met studenten en medewerkers. Zoals u wellicht zult begrijpen, vinden de formele onderhandelingen over rechtspositie, arbeidsvoorwaarden en arbeidsomstandigheden plaats met de vakbonden en in de medezeggenschapsorganen, waarin verschillende leden uit uw achterban ook vertegenwoordigd zijn. Derhalve zullen wij met hen de belangrijkste vervolgstappen zetten in het verbeteren van de arbeidsomstandigheden op universiteiten.

To maintain etiquette, we do want to thank the UNL for their proactive letter, but we would point out again that it wasn't addressed to them. While we are always open to discuss our cause with new relevant partners, we don't see the need to discuss these matters with the UNL. O.7 was founded on the idea that universities need to be held accountable for the precarity and casualisation within their walls, and that the currently existing bodies were unable or unwilling to realize this. We didn't care to wait any longer for such bodies to take up their responsibility. Instead, we have started to agitate for change ourselves. So far, we have made great progress through direct action and discussions with individual universities.

All the developments the letter cites are developments we are involved with. The ongoing conversation in the universities is one that we, along with CasualLeiden, reignited. The unions now address our problems because we brought those to them. And of course we are aware of the importance of local participation councils, since we have taken seats in those councils across different universities. All this took an enormous effort on our part, but the letter does not recognize this struggle and makes it seem as if this was all naturally going to happen anyway, as if it was an inevitable process. Moreover, the UNL didn't contribute to any of these efforts. We are investing our free time and jeopardizing our careers, doing the job of advocacy *that they should be doing*. When we were standing up for our rights to the—at that time—unwilling universities, the UNL were conspicuously quiet. Now that we have finally convinced some of the universities of the urgency of the problem, suddenly the UNL sends us an email as if we ever addressed ourselves to them. This is not just a case of too little, too late; the UNL are trying to insert themselves as proponents of a change that is happening *despite* them. Their letter erases the presence and efforts of the action groups that led to this change.

Wij herkennen de werkdruk binnen de sector en begrijpen uw zorgen. Het onderwerp werkdruk staat dan ook hoog op de agenda van alle colleges van bestuur. Het terugdringen van het aantal tijdelijke contracten, het verlagen van de werkdruk en sociale veiligheid zijn thema's die iedere universiteit zeer belangrijk vindt, en waarvoor plannen worden gemaakt en/of al in uitvoering zijn. Deze plannen hebben hoge urgentie, doelstellingen en deadlines. Ook zijn de werkomstandigheden in het hoger onderwijs een vast gespreksonderwerp met de werknemersorganisaties; zo is er in de afgelopen cao een aantal [afspraken](#) gemaakt over werkdruk, werkomstandigheden en werkzekerheid. Daarnaast heeft de Inspectie SZW in 2021 onderzoek gedaan naar de werkdruk binnen de sector en geconcludeerd dat de sector al veel maatregelen neemt om de arbeidsomstandigheden aan universiteiten te verbeteren.

Het effect van deze maatregelen moet wel nog beter in beeld gebracht worden: "De Inspectie SZW heeft besloten geen verdere aanvullende vragen meer te stellen over de ingezonden stukken, zoals eerder aangekondigd. Dit mede doordat opgemerkt is dat het merendeel van de universiteiten veel maatregelen en voorzieningen heeft getroffen in het kader van arbeidsomstandigheden, of zich midden in de implementatie daarvan bevindt. Het effect van de getroffen maatregelen is daarom (nog) niet overal inzichtelijk."

Instantly recognizable as management speak - designed to be devoid of specificity, analysis and introspection -, this apparently supportive passage is meant to justify inaction. It employs the well-known tactics of delay and deflection ('we understand your concern', 'we are still investigating the issue', etc.), since they can no longer fully deny the problem. An example of this is the new collective labour agreement (*collective arbeidsovereenkomst*, CAO) for Dutch higher education, which [barely](#) got accepted by the members of the AOb because it fails to protect the employees in the most precarious positions. More importantly, the spirit and letter of the CAO are often not followed in practice. The UNL know this, because we have told them over and over again. Therefore,

pointing to the CAO here as an example of how things are already 'changing for the better' is insincere and not supportive at all.

Another excuse the UNL uses for their passivity is a recent report by the *Inspectie SZW* (Dutch Labour Inspection). They mischaracterize the words of the labour inspection, in order to deflect our criticism that not enough is being done to effect meaningful change. Firstly, the passage cited here does not come from the [report](#) concerning all universities, but from a report specifically on the situation at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The labour inspection summarizes the conclusions of the general report as: '[Universities' working conditions policy \(arbo\) still insufficient](#)'. To interpret that report as saying that the sector is already doing a lot is a deliberate misrepresentation and beyond insincere. Secondly, the quote isn't even a good representation of [the conclusions of the SZW about the measures taken at EUR](#), since it comes right after an eleven-point(!) list of issues the EUR still needs to address. Furthermore, why should we rely on the labour inspection to evaluate our working conditions to begin with? In his contribution in the [WO&O magazine](#) of union [AOB](#), labour law expert Harry van Dongelen makes short work of the report. He states that the inspection falsely underestimates its own jurisdiction and responsibilities by waiting for other agencies to intervene, even when the ruling labour laws are directly violated. This deflection of responsibility sounds very familiar to us.

What the UNL's response suggests is that more time and more reports are needed, and that other layers of management should take charge. We have no need for further research on the effects of structural precarity, casualisation and social unsafety, since these are immediately obvious to us. No more delay tactics. There is plenty of research already.¹ The troubling stories from the academic workplace are already seeping through the cracks of the ivory walls, spilling into broad daylight for all to see and hear. And universities are now themselves admitting that there are major problems. To 'recognize' our concerns is to recognize that we speak of crisis. Such recognition warrants immediate action and change. The current situation is unethical and unlawful, to the detriment of science, of education, and of the health and lives of your employees.

Daar waar het binnen onze mogelijkheden ligt, blijven wij ons iedere dag inspannen om de werkomstandigheden in het hoger onderwijs te verbeteren. Daarbij moeten we met u ook constateren dat de problemen ook samenhangen met financiën. De afgelopen jaren hebben de universiteiten, o.a. via Universiteiten van Nederland, zich samen met studenten, medewerkers, vakbonden en andere kennisinstellingen sterk gemaakt voor adequate financiering van het hoger onderwijs. Op 6 april sprongen we gezamenlijk in de

¹ These are just a few examples collected on the spot, we could fill up bibliography easy.

<https://www.vumc.nl/research/ethiek-recht-humaniora/onderzoek/goede-wetenschap.htm>;
<https://www.strategyand.pwc.com/nl/en/press-releases/2021/management-samenvatting.html>;
<https://www.berenschot.nl/nieuws/optimale-verhouding-vaste-en-variabele-bekostiging-in-het-ho>;
<https://www.inspectieszw.nl/publicaties/rapporten/2021/07/08/woinactie>; <https://hetpnn.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PNN-PhD-Survey-report-Wellbeing.pdf>; <https://www.lnvh.nl/a-3043/nederland-heeft-het-laagste-aandeel-vrouwelijke-onderzoekers-van-europa>; <https://sites.google.com/view/casualleiden/home?authuser=0>;
[Extra docenten die na een jaar weer verdwenen, en 5 miljoen voor 400 studieplekken; hoe de voorinvesteringen mislukten - Folia.](#)

Hofvijver, om duidelijk te maken dat het water ons aan de lippen staat en er €1,1 miljard extra geïnvesteerd moet worden in onderwijs en onderzoek om op een [normaal academisch peil](#) te komen.

In het vorige week gepresenteerde coalitieakkoord wordt €700 miljoen structureel geïnvesteerd in vervolgopleidingen/onderzoek, wordt een fonds opgericht met €5 miljard voor tien jaar voor vrij en ongebonden onderzoek en wordt de kennis- en innovatiepijler van het Groeifonds verhoogd met €6,7 miljard. In het coalitieakkoord wordt hiermee onder meer beoogd om ruimte te maken voor ongebonden onderzoek en ontwikkeling, een betere balans tussen eerste en tweede geldstroom en het verlagen van de werkdruk en het inhalen van achtergebleven investeringen. Daarnaast staat in het coalitieakkoord het voornemen om de voorspelbaarheid van de bekostiging te vergroten, de vaste voet te verhogen en ruimte te bieden aan meer vaste contracten.

We want to stress that we care not about 'ludic' protests if they are just insincere antics. Duisenberg getting his feet wet is not activism but a performance. The UNL uses these demonstrations to deflect criticism and wash their hands of any true responsibility. We do not take part in the *Normaal Academisch Peil* campaign because the UNL is in it, and we don't trust them, and we don't acknowledge them. The only good UNL is an abolished UNL. But since they are still formally the employers' association of all 14 Dutch universities, we will offer a few suggestions on what the UNL could do to help bring about change.

What we would like to see is for the UNL to use their leverage as a political actor and as a central authority. First and foremost, they should convey that the current situation is untenable to our new minister for education. Secondly, they should demand that Dutch universities no longer ride roughshod over the collective labour agreement and European labour law. Rather than explaining our activist work back to us, we need them to lead.

Unfortunately, the UNL have stated that they are [satisfied with the new coalition agreement](#), which does not provide enough funding to pay for the real costs of higher education. 700 million euro of a [1.1 billion euro deficit](#) still means we're missing 400 million—and the sad expectation is that the total deficit has even grown to 1.5 billion by now. Are we to understand that they want us to compensate for the remaining deficit with our free labour, our free time, and our health? There are also no guarantees that the 700 million will actually be allocated effectively to lowering the teaching workload and providing solid contracts. The coalition agreement was very unspecific in that regard, and we are worried that organisations like the NWO (or the universities themselves for that matter) will funnel whatever funds they get to their respective star athletes instead of investing in a safe, just and [accessible academia](#). If the UNL want to help bring about change, they should demand more than this. This doesn't necessarily mean an additional 400 million; it can also mean that they demand that universities bring the workload down by shortening the academic year, reduce grading workloads, offer payment for grant writing and reviewing, cut away useless bureaucracy, allow for a numerus fixus... Do something. Act!

De Universiteiten van Nederland hebben aangegeven dat deze en andere investeringen in academisch onderwijs en onderzoek, ruimte bieden om de basis op orde te brengen. Het zal nu aankomen op de uitwerking. Hierover gaan wij zo spoedig mogelijk met het nieuwe kabinet in gesprek. Universiteiten zetten hoe dan ook, voortbouwend op de cao, meer tijdelijke contracten om naar vast, gaan daarvoor door op de ingeslagen weg van risicovoller begroten en zetten eigen reserves in. In het kader van 'ruimte voor talent' zetten wij ook ons programma Erkennen en Waarderen door.

Most of the individual universities we speak to are open to change. The UNL have consistently hampered this process, but now that things are finally moving forward, they are suddenly happy to act like they were the instigator of this whole movement. Duisenberg will even put on a snorkel as long as it poses no risk and requires no systemic change. The risk was all ours. The efforts were all ours. Moreover, while we do appreciate the *Erkennen en Waarderen* programme and its intentions, we also know [it is no solution for the problems we seek to address](#). Merely listing positive developments and projects is not the same as formulating effective solutions to the issues that we raise.

In conclusion, the lack of urgency on the UNL's part worries us immensely. To say that universities are 'already taking many measures' to improve working conditions, when we see unlawful and unethical contracts being handed out every week and receive stories about unsafe working conditions almost every day, is a key indicator for how far Duisenberg and the UNL are removed from the everyday practice. This is happening now, as it has been happening for years and years. Every month we wait is another month we have to see our colleagues and friends get sick and/or leave academia disillusioned.

Inaction in the face of crisis is what characterizes the UNL. In fact, this is typical of most neoliberal organisations, that consider small management as good management but distrust their workers just enough to set up elaborate mechanisms of control. The result: bureaucracy and surveillance for the bottom of the food chain, and a lack of accountability for those at the top. This is not good enough. A lack of leadership is not good management. Not when we are in crisis. Not when Dutch higher education is on the verge of taking a nosedive. If nothing changes, the university will increasingly become a place for a small, privileged class, to the detriment of science, education, and accessibility to the public institution that we ought to be. Let the employers' association of the universities and Dutch universities act now and act accordingly.

But this letter is not addressed to them.

DEAR ACADEMIA,

The response from Duisenberg and the UNL is a lazy attempt to foster an image of themselves as proponents of a better academia, aimed at an apathic audience of academics on permanent contracts who welcome any excuse not to speak up. This is what fear and privilege will do to you. They are counting on your compliance. We know some of you have worn your red squares already, but

change doesn't happen after one demonstration. It can only result from ongoing, concrete efforts. Next semester, we will—once again—make that effort. For ourselves, and for you. But we could really use your help.

Therefore, we address this letter to you, Academia, the community of Dutch universities, who are supposed to share a common goal and a common set of values. Of you we dare to ask if this is in your name? Your name is smeared by the Duisenbergs². Is it in your name that thousands of your members are forced to work unpaid hours, to work irregular hours, to work evenings, weekends and vacations, to do structural work on temporary contracts? Do you endorse the fact that that they are denied job security, despite years and years of contribution? And will you tolerate that they are subjected to intimidation, coercion and worse?

If your answer to all these questions is a resounding 'NO!', then join us!³

Right now Academia is surviving on our backs. On our precarity. But we are leaving in record numbers, because *Academia won't love us back*. This Valentine's Day, 14 February 2022, we will start a semester of action. [Watch the channels](#) for more [information](#). A program will be posted soon. We hope to see you there.

In solidarity,

0.7

² Also known as Droogstoppels

³ See socials and websites of [CasualLeiden, 0.7](#) and [WOinActie](#) for updates about this.