What does it mean to be a researcher in 21st century academia?

Doctoral School
DSh

Research group
HARP

Name(s) of the VUB organizer(s)
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Inter-university activity?
- KU Leuven
- UGent
- Universiteit Antwerpen

Role of external member(s) (if applicable)
General co-organisers of the course. Local organisers of sessions at their respective universities.

Academic field(s) in which the activity is situated
Research ethics and deontology; publication strategies; science, technology and society studies; gender and diversity

Relevance for the VUB PhD community
Over the past few years, numerous scholars and university personnel have raised their concerns about research deontology, increasing publication pressure and the changing professional environment in which academics have to work. Cases of scientific fraud such as that of Diederik Stapel in the Netherlands, suspended in
2011 by Tilburg University, caused quite a stir within the academic community. Stapel was exposed for fabricating and manipulating data for research publications, a malpractice that was apparently going on for years. The scope of Stapel’s case may have been an exception. However, in March 2013, the Belgian scientific magazine EOS revealed in a study that 1 out of 12 researchers admitted to manipulating data sometimes in order to cope with the increasing pressure to publish. Even where publication pressures don’t necessarily lead to malpractice, they play a decisive role in determining what topics are addressed and what kinds of questions are asked. This situation obviously raises serious questions about ethics, deontology, norms, the conduct of research itself, and the relationship between science and society/democracy in general. In response, Belgian universities have expressed an interest in raising awareness among the academic population and pointed to the Doctoral Schools as a way of accomplishing this. Yet, while pertinent, raising awareness among young scholars cannot be reduced to a condemnation of individual practices alone. It is important to situate and contextualize these cases of individual malpractice within a broader context of academic internationalization and the position of local research institutions and universities in an increasingly global and competitive environment. The seminars and debate organized in this course – titled "What does it mean to be a researcher in the 21st century?" – address these broader questions. The course sets out to raise awareness among researchers not only of their individual obligations and role within academic institutions, but also of the broader context of the research environment in which they try to build a career. This course answers the structural need for thorough deontological, ethical and socio-political self-reflection about the changing role of academic knowledge and academics in our current society.

**Detailed format of the activity**
- The program consists of eight distinct contact moments: six sessions for PhD students, a public debate and a follow-up session with our PhD students.
  - In each of these sessions we aim to have ample time to let our participants debate with leading figures from the university management, funding organizations, the ministry of education, unions and representatives of junior/senior faculty.
  - The first session for PhD students (day 1, morning session) aims to raise awareness about the broader social, political and economic context of research by starting with a topic most young researchers are confronted with: publication pressure. The second session (day 1, afternoon session) will further focus on the specificities of higher education financing and the Belgian allocation model. This sets out to give deeper insights into the political economy of knowledge production and research by exploring funding/investment strategies and priorities.
  - On the second day of the course (day 2, morning session), we will go on to tackle the effects of hypermobility and increasing precarity on the mental health and wellbeing of academic personnel. In the afternoon session (day 2, afternoon session), we will broaden the scope and
move from a personal level to a more structural analysis, the fourth session will focus on issues of diversity (i.e., race and gender) and explore the ways in which contemporary academia impacts upon both the diversity at the different faculties as well as the diversity of research topics.

- On the third day (day 3, morning session), we will focus on the interrelations between academia and society, aiming to investigate the political, economic and social role of academics and academia.
- These five sessions include a talk by at least two speakers, combined with a suitable form of debate/interaction (either through intense interaction during the talk, through group debates or through a preparatory assignment). The overall goal is to involve the students as actively as possible in order to come up with concrete concerns, questions and suggestions which will be raised during the public debate. Students will also have to prepare these sessions by writing a short reflection with regard to the main topics of the course and the required readings outlining their own personal concerns. This information will be used as a guideline for the discussion in the different sessions.
- The sixth session (day 3, afternoon) consists of a reflective afternoon session in the form of a discussion and debate where, based on the insights gained from the five previous sessions, participants will be encouraged to reflect upon what it means to be a researcher in 21st century academia. During this session we aim to shift from theory to practice.
- The seventh session is a debate that is open to the broader public (day 3, evening session). Here our aim is to start from the questions, concerns and suggestions raised within the six preceding sessions instead of starting from a prepared talk from each individual panel member. As such, we wish to incite our panel to answer directly to the issues that have been raised in the different sessions.
- In the eighth and final session, students will be encouraged to use the critical insights gained in the previous sessions to come up with concrete actions. Session six will offer participants the time to prepare for this session.

Timing/planning of activity
First day: 19 April 2018, 10:00–13:00; 14:15–17:15 (KULeuven)
Second day: 20 April 2018, 10:00–13:00; 14:15–17:15 (UGent)
Third day: 23 April 2018, 10:00–13:00; 14:15–17:15 (VUB)
Debate: 23 April 2018, 20:00–20:30 (VUB)
Fourth day: 24 April 2018, 10:00–17:15
Registration Contact person (one person) Pieter Present

Step 1: Registration

To register please follow this link: [https://webappsx.ugent.be/eventManager/events/whatdoesitmean](https://webappsx.ugent.be/eventManager/events/whatdoesitmean)

Registration involves a commitment! A no-show fee can be charged. Cancellation at the latest 5 days before the start of the 1st session is only possible by e-mail to doctorschools@ugent.be

If you would be interested to attend the workshops without taking the whole course, this is also possible. Please contact Charlotte.Bollaert@UGent.be for more information.”

Step 2: Zephyr Account

Zephyr is an online platform (similar to Minerva or Toledo) that gives access to participants from all universities. We will use the platform to send you updates on the course and to provide you with the reading material, moreover, we will ask you to upload your essays here.

How does it work?

To make an account (if you already have a Zephyr account you can skip these steps)

2. Click the registration button on the left
3. Fill in the registration form
4. You will receive an e-mail with an activation link
5. When you activate your account you will receive a second e-mail with your login and password.

To enroll:

1. click the button ‘Inschrijven op cursussen’
2. search for What does it mean to be a researcher in 21st century academia 2017-2018
3. click the button ‘Inschrijven’ next to the course title.

Short description (max. 50 words)

The course aims to raise awareness among researchers of their role within academic institutions, and the context in which they try to build a career. This course answers the structural need for thorough deontological, ethical and socio-political reflection about the role of academic knowledge and academics in our current society.

Target audience

This seminar series targets PhD students, young researchers at the beginning of their academic career from all Doctoral Schools, and postdoctoral researchers. The minimum amount of participants is 25, the maximum amount is 40. The seminar is also open to supervisors and other interested academic personnel.

Competences
● To have a critical understanding of the contemporary political economy of academic research environments and academic knowledge production more generally.
● To have critical insight into and awareness of the current responsibilities and societal role of academic research.
● To gain comprehensive knowledge of current debates on a series of topics related to today's role of academic research, such as publication policies and strategies, research ethics, intellectual property regimes, etc.
● To obtain critical insights into the relationships between academic institutions, markets and society/democracy.
● To formulate critical arguments and engage in interactive debates.
● To formulate a critical analysis of the elaborated topics and defend one's own arguments in short academic essays.
● To apply the obtained critical insights during a public debate with policy makers and university staff.
● To translate the obtained awareness and insights into action in their personal academic environments.
Content

1. *Publish and/or perish?*
Over the last decade, the Flemish government has urged Flemish universities to use bibliometric data as objective, quantifiable and repeatable measures to review the quality of research activities. Advocates of this strategy are convinced that publications in international journals with high impact factors are good indicators of the quality of academic research. Yet, others are afraid that the tendency to publish in English and in academic journals will hamper the role of science in the society at large.
In this session, we ask the students to reflect upon their publication strategies and the research climate in which they are developed. Topics that will be discussed include the politics of indexing and ranking, the politics of internationalization and the politics of performance measurement.

Presentations:
Nick Schuermans [confirmed]: On the topic of publish or perish
Freek Van Deynze [confirmed]: On the topic of publish or perish in the particular Flemish context

2. *Financing higher education in Belgium: the allocation model*

Presentations:
Koenraad Debackere [confirmed]: On the topic of the allocation model
Ignace Lemahieu [confirmed]: On the topic of the university policies related to the allocation model

3. *Mental Health, Hypermobility and Precarity*

Increasingly, universities in Europe have been alarmed about rising levels of mental illness amongst academics amid the pressure of job insecurity, constant demand for results and an increasingly marketed higher education system. More and more studies document how demands for increased productivity, stress over student satisfaction surveys and research output causes symptoms of psychological distress, anxiety and depression. Yet, because of the persistent vision of ‘if you can’t stand the heat, you shouldn’t be here’, there is a continuing stigma amongst academia over seeking help to counter reduced well-being. In this session we debate on the personal costs of academic success and on the general ‘culture of acceptance’ around well-being in higher education. The discussion includes experiences of not only lectures but also students, administrative and other university staff and also aims to approach these issues in a broader context of the impact of current tendencies in academia. Furthermore we expand on this topic by highlighting the effect of hypermobility requirements for research and job precarity.

Presentations:
Ingeborg Meijer [confirmed]: On the topic of mental health
Yannis Tzaninis [confirmed]: On the topic of hypermobility and precarity in academia

4. Gender and Diversity at University

Diversity has been a part of policy jargon for years. However, ‘classical’ policy practices focusing on diversity have often yielded limited results when it comes to ameliorating the position of specific groups – women, ethnic minorities, disadvantaged economic classes – in institutions such as the university. This panel aims to dissect the basic assumptions underlying the term ‘diversity’ and the ways in which it might distract attention away from structural causes of subordination by veiling interpersonal and institutional mechanisms – such as dominant discourses, discrimination, exclusion from certain networks,... – which (re)produce power imbalances. Concentrating on how the relations between social identities and their associated competences might inform power relations between actors, we’ll try to formulate ways of countering inequality in its multi-layered forms. To this end, we will contrast strategies that center on communication and branding, on one hand, with reflections and tactics that have come out of feminist intersectional and interference thinking, as well as out of recent struggles against the eurocentric foundations of global academia, on the other hand.

Presentations:
Evelien Geerts [confirmed]: On the topic of intersectionality, situated knowledges and feminist philosophy.
Jelle Mampaey [confirmed]: On the topic of policies on social and ethnic diversity in higher education.

5. Activism and scholarship

Presentations:
David van der Ha [confirmed]: On the topic of “Sustainability Policy of Ghent University”
Iman Lechkar [confirmed]: On the topic of “How academia tries to meet society: ‘Slam the city’ as an example”

6. Reflective afternoon

Part 1: Session with union representatives on the rights of doctoral students: Jo Coulier (ABVV), Tim Van de Voorde (ACLVB), Tania Stadsbader (ACV) [confirmed]
Part 2: Reflection

In this session we aim to work with some of the insights gained from the first five sessions and let students reflect on their own position in academia in the form of a debate and discussion. A broad range of topics related to academic work will be addressed. Students will be encouraged to actively discuss and debate publication strategies, challenges of particular research environments, visions on the relationship between research, education and society, views on how research relates to social/political engagements, and finally also about the
students’ perspectives on their own mental health (i.e. the impact of stress, output–related pressure, competition and job insecurity). The discussion will be moderated by a member of the organizing committee.

**The aim of the session is threefold and builds further on the students’ preparatory essays:**

1. Link back to the preparatory essay the students wrote in the light of the insights gained during the doctoral school. How did the students interpret the situation at their university, department, research group, etc. in relation to the required reading list before the doctoral school and after the five sessions.
2. Prepare the follow-up day more concretely by trying to answer the question as to how academia could be organized and developed differently and in better ways (both collectively and individually). Time will be provided to think of concrete actions@academia, which will form the starting point for session 8.
3. Make use of this discussion to formulate questions (based on the topics discussed in the sessions and the required readings) to be raised during the public debate.

**7. Debate: The Future of the University**

This debate is a public event where we try to connect some of the issues that were raised in our doctoral school sessions with a wider academic and professional audience. It is our explicit aim to start from the questions, concerns and suggestions themselves raised within the different sessions instead of starting from a prepared talk from each individual panel member. As such, we wish to incite our panel to answer directly to the issues that have been raised in the different sessions. The debate will be organized in cooperation with DeBuren, up–to–date information on the debate and the panel can be found via this link: [https://www.deburen.eu/programma/4603/de-democratische-erfenis-van-68-waar-staat-de-universiteit-vandaag](https://www.deburen.eu/programma/4603/de-democratische-erfenis-van-68-waar-staat-de-universiteit-vandaag) (The debate will be free of cost for participants in de DS.)

**8. Another university is possible: Towards a slow science ethics and politics**

In this closing session we connect all the main questions raised in the previous sessions and in the debate, and integrate them into a crucial discussion on ‘how another science/university is possible’. First, students will be asked to think of a hypothetical group action/campaign concerning one of the issues raised in the previous seminars, meetings, debates during session 6. The students will be asked to present their action@academia, which will be discussed with members of the organizing committee and mediated by the organisation VredesActie who have extensive experience in offering action–trainings to groups.

VredesActie [confirmed]
Vredesactie is a pluralistic organisation that is part of the peace movement, making a radical
plea for a society in which conflicts are resolved without violence or the threat of violence. Vredesactie is an engine for the development of non-violent action and the realization of a pacifist peace policy. Social action, peace economy and peace education are the organisation’s foundation stones. Through these, Vredesactie aims at actively engaging citizens in society, amongst others by organizing campaigns and trainings on non-violent action.

**Study material**

*Preparatory reading*

The PhD students will be asked to prepare the course by writing a short reflection on the required literature in relation to their own observations, questions and sense of the contemporary university. Participants should select two topics and write a short essay (max. two pages, in English or in Dutch, due one week before the beginning of the course) based on the required readings for these topics, focusing on the following broad questions: How do I interpret the current situation at my university, department or research group in relation to the two themes and to the issues discussed in the required readings for these two themes? How could it be organized and developed differently and in better ways?

1. **Publish and/or perish?**

Journal of Cynical Geographies 1(1).

2. **Financing higher education**


3. **Mental health, hypermobility and precarity**


4. **Gender and diversity at university**

5. Activism and scholarship


**Condition(s) for attribution of credits**
Participants will be evaluated on their attendance of all sessions, active engagement in the discussions and adequacy of the preparatory essay.

**Credits 1**