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young academy  
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## **YAG call for effective communication on academic freedom within the UG**

The Young Academy Groningen (YAG) wants to continue the conversation on social safety and academic freedom, following up on the statement by the Board of the University (CvB) on “Social safety and academic freedom within the UG” (March 31, 2023) but also on concerns raised by members of our academic community, in particular early-career researchers (ECRs).

The YAG welcomes the statement by the CvB, but believes that it only partially addressed the concerns raised by members of the academic community. The recent student and staff protests, the public petition, the press coverage, and the conversations within and outside the UG, have all demonstrated the urgent need for extensive conversations about social safety and academic freedom (and their interplay) within our university.

Beyond the social safety campaign recently launched by the CvB, we also believe that there is now a window of opportunity to kickstart genuine organizational changes regarding social safety and academic freedom, and for the UG to be in the forefront about these important issues.

As YAG, we have internally discussed the multiple issues and events, and would like to highlight priorities for concrete action to facilitate the required cultural change. In this statement, we identify two key matters that require attention as a starting point:

1. Transparent and empathetic **communication** as central to effective **leadership**.
2. Clarity regarding **academic freedom** for ECRs.

## ***Effective leadership hinges on transparent and empathetic communication***

Open, effective and meaningful communication is the cornerstone of efficient leadership. We take note of the CvB's call for shared responsibility, and share the view that making the UG a safe environment for students and staff is a collaborative effort. We are convinced that strong leadership requires not only vision and focus, but also communication of empathy and compassion and openness to feedback.

The YAG calls for a stronger investment in changing communication norms across all levels, so that concerns voiced by many are heard, taken seriously and clearly addressed in a timely and empathetic manner. Because actions speak louder than words, we propose to give open and empathic communication a central role in the new leadership vision (currently under development) and in performance evaluations, for instance by taking a 360-degree perspective and including views by those with whom the person communicates.

## ***Academic freedom and interconnected matters***

Academic freedom is a multifaceted issue that deserves intense discussion across the university. The YAG wishes to draw attention to academic freedom as pertaining to the anxiety experienced by those faced with critical tasks: members of Faculty Councils, ECRs publishing and teaching on topics that challenge the status quo, and those voicing concerns about recent events.

Experiences of anxiety are especially prevalent for those with temporary contracts or those who are working toward promotions, as their futures are often in the hands of those to whom they express criticism (directly or indirectly). In this sense, academic freedom thus ties in closely with social safety and leadership, and requires concrete action.

To address this unique area of academic freedom, ECRs require a clear definition of academic freedom and the boundaries within which we collectively agree to function

within. We believe that ECRs should play an active role in clarifying this definition and the boundaries of academic freedom.

We need to talk openly about what behavior is okay and what is not; from managers to staff, and for staff in their role as educators and researchers. With a clear definition of academic freedom and transparent boundaries, ECRs can function without anxiety and continue to contribute to a thriving and diverse academic community. With this, the YAG wishes to promote a preventive approach to social safety, in addition to the remedial approach that is often promoted (for example, complaint structures within the university).

### ***Looking Forward***

The YAG has been promoting discussions on social safety, academic freedom, and other concerns addressed within the ECR community. We will continue to do so, bring our advice and recommendations to the CvB, and follow up for implementation of the recommendations. While we are and will remain proactive on such fronts, the CvB is responsible for ensuring that the concerns of our diverse academic community are addressed strongly and convincingly.

The YAG calls for the following priority areas to be considered, and for the CvB to develop concrete action points to address these areas:

- Leadership roles need to include a commitment to timely communication that revolves around transparency and empathy;
- Academics, and in particular ECRs, need to be given authority, and a platform, to define how we implement 'academic freedom' with regards to voicing criticism toward the academic structures that we work in in order to ensure social safety.

As the YAG, we will continue to represent and defend the interests of the ECR community and make its voices heard. We look forward to collaborating with the CvB and executive structures across the UG to ensure that the concerns of ECRs are heard and well addressed.

The YAG wants to be an active and constructive partner in any mission to cultivate safe spaces, where each one's abilities and contribution are valued, and there is a concerted effort by all to create an atmosphere of trust, collegiality and solidarity within the UG community.