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## A Decisive Meeting in Department X

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**published in**  
Critical Storytelling  
2022

**document version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal](#)

**citation for published version (APA)**  
Wouters, D., Noens, T., & Velle, T. (2022). A Decisive Meeting in Department X. In J. Hansen, & I. Nilsson (Eds.), *Critical Storytelling: Experiences of Power Abuse in Academia* (pp. 18-30). (Critical Storytelling; Vol. 7). Brill. <https://brill.com/view/book/9789004521025/BP000011.xml>

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# A Decisive Meeting in Department X

*Dinah Wouters, Tim Noens, Thomas Velle and Anonymous 2*

## 1 Email Invitation

From: Frank Jacobs <frank.jacobs@university.edu>  
Date: Friday, April 20, 2020 at 11:51 AM  
Subject: Convening an extra meeting of the departmental committee  
To: Department list

To all members of the Department of X  
To all members of the Department Council

Dear Colleagues,

Today, the Faculty Board has forwarded the request by the Chancellor and the co-directors, addressed to all departments, to draw up a report in view of the general well-being of their members, teaching staff, research fellows, administrators and students. Our particular attention is asked for the situation of the doctoral students and the postdoctoral fellows, due to some recent commotion in the press. You all know the background and it would be useless to come back to the case itself, but, nonetheless, we will have to take a position on what was transmitted to the press and mainly on how to avoid similar things from happening in our department. This report will constitute one of the preparatory documents to be handed over to those responsible for the risk analysis that our department will be subjected to as a result of the recent events. As this risk analysis ought to start before the end of this month, we are obliged to convene a department meeting at the beginning of next week. Our meeting is planned for Monday, and we start early, at 10 am, because we need a true discussion in order to have a first draft of the report.

Both by email and during a quick and improvised discussion, a number of colleagues have tried to single out some of the more urgent points and problems in view of the risk analysis. They particularly paid attention to the difficulties PhD students encounter in their relationship with their supervisors. They could take as a basis the recent PhD survey as it was conducted among

PhD students of the entire university and of our faculty. I am very grateful for this work done by Prof. Susan Haas, Prof. Paul Renard and Prof. Olivia Monti.

In the end, they came up with following points that we must take into consideration:

- How do we welcome junior members in the department?
- How do we inform junior members about what is expected from them?
- How do we stimulate junior members to talk about problems if they ever encounter them?
- How can we help junior members find the resources that are designed to help them?

Although we think it superfluous to stress, we still want to emphasize that the meeting is not meant to address the concrete event in which our near colleague is involved nor the commotion it caused in the press. We can assure all members of the department that the university authorities are taking care of this. Our only task is to ask how our department fulfills its responsibilities in the future as to the guidance of PhD students and postdoctoral research fellows. We hope to draft the most essential elements of the report as we must transmit it to the committee that was entrusted with screening our department.

With kind regards,  
Frank Jacobs

## 2 Meeting

F. Jacobs: Thank you all for coming today, I know you are all very busy. Unfortunately, it came to my attention only after the invitation was sent that there is an overlap between this department meeting and the Career Day for early-career researchers organized by the university. I regret that, but I thought it would be better not to bother you all with additional emails and new dates. And we are in a hurry, as we mentioned. I can see there aren't that many PhD students and post-docs present today, but I'm sure the other participants will be able to empathize with their position and voice their concerns. We've all been there, haven't we?

O. Monti: It's not illogical that we as academic staff have a somewhat stronger representation in meetings. Anyway, there is a nice balance between men and women today, that's good at least.

F. Jacobs: Given the subject of the meeting, I would have preferred to see more PhD students. But I can assure everyone that we will take this matter with us to

the preparation of the next meeting. Before we start, we just have to deal with a small problem. Our secretary has been ill since yesterday, so I'm looking for a volunteer to take notes. Any candidates? Perhaps one of the PhD students?

S. Nielsen: Ehm, yes, I could do that.

F. Jacobs: That's wonderful. Thank you so much, Sander. You can start off by noting the names of the people present. Full professors, let's see ... Susan Haas, Olivia Monti, Paul Renard ... and Ian Lang. Do I forget anyone? Emma Davies, then, is assistant professor, as well as Lucia Flores. And the doctoral students present are ...

S. Eder: Sara. Sara Eder.

F. Jacobs: Sara, right. So, Sara Eder and yourself, Sander. I don't see Nicolas here. And Emily is also absent, you might have to note that as well.

S. Nielsen: So, there are no postdoctoral researchers present?

F. Jacobs: I'm afraid not, Sander. I'll first give the word to Emma, our ombudsperson, who will talk you through the results of the PhD survey. She won't say anything about the unfortunate case that has recently occurred between the colleague from our department and one of his PhD students. As I wrote in my email, we all regret what happened but we have to get past this specific case. The aim of this meeting is to look towards the future. Emma, the floor is yours.

E. Davies: Thank you, Frank! I'll keep it short. In the survey, PhD students were asked for their opinion about various aspects of the department's doctoral guidance policy. Two results are relevant within the context of this meeting. The first concerns the guidance PhD students receive from their supervisor. The second is about the conflicts PhD students have already experienced with their supervisor. We're talking here about serious and long-running conflicts about matters like intellectual property, abuse of power, sexual or other kinds of intimidation, racism and discrimination, and so on. You can see both results projected on the screen.

S. Haas: Thank you, Emma. I must say that I am very happy with these results. Seventy percent of the PhD students are satisfied with the guidance by their supervisor: a clear majority!

P. Renard: And only fifteen percent claim to have already had a more serious conflict with their supervisor. It is such a relief to read that. The newspapers from the past few days, reporting on the unfortunate recent case, gave the impression that this department is full of predators who routinely mistreat their PhD students. This result clearly shows that these kinds of conflicts are just exceptions.

F. Jacobs: The press communication has been very difficult. It has been impossible for me as the department's chair to gain control over the story. Before you have a chance to speak up, journalists have twisted your words and written all sorts of things about our department that are simply not true.

I. Lang: You did a good job, Frank. And as Paul and Susan said: the results of the survey prove that our efforts are widely appreciated by our PhD students. Let's focus on these numbers and not on what the press has been saying about us.

S. Eder: With all respect, but I find it difficult to follow your interpretations of the survey's results. These numbers also mean that more than 1 in 4 indicate that they receive insufficient guidance. And I don't think that fifteen percent reporting on serious conflicts is insignificant. On the contrary!

I. Lang: You are right, Sara. But we should also look at the response rate, of course, which is 37 percent. I suspect an overrepresentation of people who are unsatisfied or have some personal grievance with their supervisor. In that case, 30 and 15 percent is really not that much. You cannot make everyone happy. Some people just fill out these surveys to get back at someone.

S. Eder: Can I say something to that? I don't want to deny that resentment might play a minor role, but if we assume that the survey is not representative, why do we take it as the basis for this discussion?

S. Nielsen: I do think it gives a good picture of the fact that the majority of people have no complaints and have developed a good relationship with their supervisor. Of course I agree with you, Sara, that we should reach out to these few exceptions that are experiencing problems.

S. Haas: But how can we reach out to them? The survey is anonymous. If they do not come to the ombudspersons of their own accord, what can we do?

O. Monti: It's such a shame that people use these surveys to complain but do not come to us with their problems. We cannot do anything if they don't take the first step.

L. Flores: That's easy to say, but from what I hear from my own PhD students, people find it hard to take that step and report problems they are facing with their supervisor. The low response might also be an indication of this, even though the survey was anonymous. PhD students are dependent on their supervisor for guidance, a network, and recommendations in the future. We should not underestimate this.

P. Renard: I would be very sad to hear that PhD students do not trust the goodwill of their supervisors. All people make mistakes, of course, and academics are very busy people, but I cannot think of anyone in this department who does not take the well-being of his students to heart.

O. Monti: or her—

P. Renard: Beg your pardon?

O. Monti: Or her. You said "his students"—

P. Renard: Right, of course.

L. Flores: Perhaps you should say that to the PhD student who was sexually assaulted by one of our colleagues last week, Paul.

P. Renard: That's a very unfortunate case!

L. Flores: That we as a department allowed to happen!

F. Jacobs: Let's not get emotional! I see your point, Lucia. Actually, Emma and I anticipated it. Right, Emma?

E. Davies: Yes! Frank asked me to develop a concrete plan to prevent similar cases in the future and to optimize the department's doctoral policy. First of all, I wrote a protocol listing a couple of good practices regarding doctoral guidance. We can hand this document to new PhD students. In this way, it will be immediately clear to them what the department expects of them and what they may expect of their supervisor.

P. Renard: You said "protocol." Does this mean this will be a binding instrument?

E. Davies: Well, yes. From my experience as the ombudsperson, I can say that it's better to have clear rules. But I can assure you that all the guidelines I propose are very reasonable. I state, for instance, that supervisors must talk with their PhD students about their research on a regular basis, at least once per trimester. I also include a paragraph on how to give feedback in a decent way, and another one on respecting each other's professional and personal boundaries.

O. Monti: Aren't we overreacting? Just because there are a handful of troubled relationships between a PhD student and a supervisor in the department, we do not suddenly need moral protocols. I don't see why we should hold everybody to the same little rules because of a few cases where things go wrong.

P. Renard: I mean, where are we, kindergarten? We are all highly intelligent people who should be trusted with knowing what works best for us.

L. Flores: What strikes me is that the discussion has so far been dominated by professors. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think I am attending a meeting on the well-being of PhD students. So perhaps we should listen to what they have to say. Sander, I see you are busy writing, but what is your opinion on the measures that have been proposed?

F. Jacobs: Good point, Lucia! Please, Sander, speak up!—

S. Nielsen: Well, ehm, it is clear that it is a complex debate. I have a good relationship with my supervisor—

O. Monti: Thank you, my dear. I also think that we have an excellent connection—

S. Nielsen: Regardless, I think it will be good to have a protocol on PhD guidance. As PhD representatives, we have been asking for such a document for a long time. Also, I agree with Emma that the protocol should be more than a list of good practices. It should be an instrument for PhD students to hold their supervisors accountable. I mean, in case of lacking guidance or abuse of power, where it is really necessary. In my case, for instance, there is no need.

I. Lang: "Accountable?" This horrifies me. What has become of mutual trust and respect? Only people who cannot take responsibility for their own problems would call in the help of protocols, accountability, rules. It horrifies me that the university is turning more and more into a place where everyone mistrusts each other and we must account for everything that we do.

S. Nielsen: That is not what I mean. I am as wary as you are of the corporatization of universities, but I am not calling for more optimization or administrative burdens. On the contrary, I want more responsibility in dealing with each other.

I. Lang: Exactly, responsibility. That includes the responsibility of supervisors to provide guidance and the responsibility of PhD students to stand up for themselves. If I think about how it used to be ... in our time, we were not waiting for others to come and ask us how we were doing. We had to stand up for ourselves!

F. Jacobs: Please let us stay calm. We can decide whether or not we make these guidelines a binding instrument in a later meeting. Incidentally, the issue of taking responsibility to come forward with complaints brings us seamlessly to the next point, right, Emma?

E. Davies: Indeed. Apart from the protocol, we need to think about ways to encourage PhD students to talk about their problems. As the ombudsperson, I was shocked that I wasn't aware of the misbehavior from one of our colleagues, until I read about it in last week's newspapers. How can we find out about these issues more quickly? How can we help these PhD students?

O. Monti: You shouldn't blame yourself, Emma. You are a wonderful ombudsperson. Really.

I. Lang: Absolutely! You can't help it if PhD students don't come to you.

E. Davies: I know. But how can I make them come to me?

F. Jacobs: Any ideas?

P. Renard: Well, our department's website really is a mess. Everything is so unclear there. It wouldn't surprise me if PhD students who want to ask for help simply get lost.

E. Davies: So, you suggest improving the website?

P. Renard: Yes! But this will probably take a while. For now, we can place this information on the home page.

F. Jacobs: Excellent idea, Paul. That should help! I'll pass this to the website's administrator. Sander, have you written down this suggestion? It should go into



the meeting's minutes. I shall also mention it in the press release that I have to send out this evening, together with the protocol Emma proposed. Any other suggestions?

S. Eder: I don't have the feeling that we are taking this serious enough. The case that elicited this meeting is very serious and the media do have a point when they talk of widespread abuse of power. [Indignant exclamations, Sara speaks louder.] I heard you talking about responsibility and trust. I am talking about people in power not taking their responsibilities and people in precarious positions not being able to trust those in charge. This case is not an exception, and it rests on many smaller abuses that pass unreprimed each day.

F. Jacobs: Alright, Sara, general accusations are not very helpful. Can you give us a few examples of what you are referring to?

S. Eder: I am referring to supervisors who will not grant their PhD students the right to a holiday, who expect them to be at their beck and call at all times, who invade their personal space, who appropriate their publications through unrightful co-authorship, or who do not provide any guidance at all.

I. Lang: If these problems are as omnipresent as you say, why do we hear nothing about this? Examples are all very well, but can you give us names? Why are these people not speaking to us?

S. Eder: I hear from many of my colleagues that taking this first step is difficult because they haven't met any examples in their surroundings of problems that have been properly solved by taking such a step. It's the reigning impunity and a certain powerlessness of the administrative course they have to take that makes it not worthwhile to even start with it.

F. Jacobs: I'm not sure what you are insinuating.

E. Davies: Indeed, as the ombudsperson, I sometimes feel quite powerless myself when I cannot help a situation move forward. I'm not allowed, for example, to get back in touch with someone who had been complaining about a malpractice before. The initiative should always come from this person.

F. Jacobs: Yes, but that is for privacy reasons, of course. It is not our responsibility or even within our powers to look back, I'm afraid.

L. Flores: But it is there you find the malpractices! You should not interview current PhD students, but PhD students who have left, who have not finished their PhDs, etc.

S. Haas: That, I find, is very dangerous. They are full of grievances towards their old job. Did you know, by the way, that the word “ombudsman” goes back to the Old Norse *umboðsmaðr*, which means representative? You can only represent someone who wants to be represented.

[Hesitant silence.]

S. Eder: The problem is that our jobs are temporary and that our future in academia depends on the recommendations of our supervisors. And we should not forget another characteristic of our academic culture: most of the PhD students are very young, often doing a PhD as their first experience with a working environment. How would they know what is normal and abnormal, also in a working environment that is loosely structured in comparison with other sectors?

F. Jacobs: That’s why agreeing on good and bad practices is important. We should communicate them more clearly to the PhD students when they start, so they know their rights.

S. Eder: I just wanted to explain why most people don’t even take the first step. Once they know something is not right, they are probably closer to the finish than to the start of their PhD, so why risk the entire endeavor at that point? Why would they even come to a department meeting discussing matters that will be implemented long after they are gone, in the best-case scenario?

S. Haas: It seems as if you are implying that all professors are bad guys who intimidate and bully their PhD students. 70 percent are satisfied with the guidance they receive from their supervisor. 70 percent!

F. Jacobs: Let’s all stay calm. Perhaps that’s also good advice in case of conflicts. Stay calm, talk to each other and eat cake together. In my experience, a freshly baked cake can do wonders.

O. Monti: Absolutely! Almond cake is my personal favorite, I admit.

F. Jacobs: Good choice, Olivia! All kidding aside, I take note of your concerns, Sara, thank you for your intervention. For now, we stick to the plan to communicate the protocol. If necessary, we can take extra measures.

E. Davies: In my experience, it is often the little things that help create a good and inviting environment. The other day, we went with a group of colleagues to a bar, which was very nice.

F. Jacobs: Of course, not all supervisors should have to go to a bar with their students. Personally, I think one should also keep a certain distance.

E. Davies: Perhaps it is a good idea to work with large pieces of paper to make mood boards in smaller groups, to brainstorm together and work out some suggestions to improve the work environment.

S. Haas: Maybe that suggestion should be tabled until the next meeting. That deserves a separate get-together.

F. Jacobs: Indeed, Susan, that might be a good idea, but let me remind you all that we have been making quite some progress already. Olivia already took the initiative earlier this year to have a group sport activity. The turnout was quite poor, but we might have to make this into an annual activity, every year another sport or an excursion.

[Person in the back coughs.]

F. Jacobs: We are also currently having discussions with the university about the possibility of moving some things around in the building in order to create space for new breakrooms.

[Happy chatting.]

F. Jacobs: An update on this will be given later this month. We will also reconsider coffee machines. We had those in the past, but the machines tended to break down and the repair costs turned out to be too high. But as I hear you all speak today, I will move this up on the priority list. I will also contact some people to create a team to organize these annual team building activities ...

L. Flores: [muttering indistinctly] Ridiculous ...

[Lucia Flores leaves the room; door slamming.]

F. Jacobs: I see some colleagues are leaving; we are indeed running overtime. I want to thank everyone for their engagement. I think this meeting has been very fruitful, given the short time. I will end by briefly summarizing the

measures we have agreed upon: first, to put together a list of good practices concerning the guidance of PhD students, second, to put the necessary information for PhD students, like the ombuds and health services, more visibly on the faculty website, and third, to organize yearly team-building activities. Sander, will you communicate these measures to the doctoral and postdoctoral researchers and put them in the minutes? Thank you so much. I have to run now. Take care!

### **Minutes of the meeting**

Meeting of the departmental committee in response to the request by the Vice-Chancellor to carry out a risk analysis and propose some measures towards improving the well-being of doctoral students and postdoctoral employees

**Date and time:** Monday, April 23, 2020, 10:00-12:00

#### **Present:**

Professor Frank Jacobs, head of department  
Professor Susan Haas  
Professor Olivia Monti  
Professor Paul Renard  
Professor Ian Lang  
Professor Emma Davies  
Assistant Professor Lucia Flores  
Sander Nielsen, doctoral student  
Sara Eder, doctoral student

#### **Absent:**

Dr. Emily Smith, postdoctoral researcher  
Nicolas Leroy, doctoral student

**Chair:** Professor Frank Jacobs

**Minutes secretary:** Sander Nielsen

**Purpose of the meeting:** to discuss the results of the survey and decide on measures that are needed to further the well-being of PhD students in our department

Items on the agenda:

1. Discussion of the recent survey of doctoral students  
The overall impression is positive: a majority of respondents are satisfied with the guidance they receive.  
There is concern for a minority of people who indicate that they receive insufficient guidance. The committee members hope these people will find their way to the ombudspersons.
2. How can the quality of PhD supervision be optimized?  
Action item: The ombudsperson has put together a list of good and bad practices. These will be communicated to doctoral students.
3. How can we encourage PhD students to seek help when they experience problems with their supervisor or others?  
Action item: We will bring together information on the ombudspersons and other facilities on the department's homepage.  
Next step: Create a dedicated page when the new website is launched.
4. What can we do to alleviate stress among PhD students?  
Action item: We will reconsider the costs of repair for the coffee machines, as places where people meet and connect with each other.  
Action item: We will make the excursion a yearly team-building event and advertise the event more widely.  
Next step: We will organize a meeting on the idea of mood boards that will help people to connect with each other.

### 3 Afterword

This contribution is fictional, although based on personal experiences and actual meetings from a group of researchers in different faculties and universities. The names and characters have been largely fictionalized.<sup>1</sup>

In writing this depiction, it was not our intention to address the issues concerning harassment in the workplace in a direct manner, nor to reflect on or promote certain solutions. Instead, we wanted to show the Kafkaesque situation PhD students and policymakers alike end up in, often despite good intentions. The very process that leads towards needed change in academic culture is a path scattered with surveys, meetings and reports, with half-hearted objectives, selective interim conclusions and short-term solutions. This arduous work is set in an environment that esteems intellectual freedom very highly and considers HR policies to be part of the business world, or at least to be a bit childish. Not surprisingly, individual needs and concerns hardly trickle

down to the policies that are actually implemented. Accordingly, the effects on academic culture remain insignificant.

In the meantime, persons who become victims of harassment are labeled as the exception. They are either “vengeful” or “avoiding help,” and are hereby silenced. Their anonymous testimonies are not taken seriously, or at best are considered shaky foundations for bold and general policies that potentially affect all supervisors. And thus, in this administrative process, victims of harassment become victims once more, now of seemingly harmful platitudes—the bad apple and the bunch, the half-empty or half-full glass of wine—that have real-life consequences and deprive them and their future colleagues of any perspective.

Above all, we wanted to show that the systemic nature of this process, most clearly visible during endless meetings, has the dangerous consequence that it nullifies all sense of urgency. Before actual change is enforced or even considered as a need, PhD students have either already left academia, accepted their situation in the hopes of pursuing an academic career, or become part of the same academic milieu that condoned previous harassment. By then, the urgency appears to have gone down, as a new generation of PhD students is still in the process of discovering how academia works, separating good from bad practices, and starting to learn how to stand up for themselves and via which channels.

Although universities and faculties can vary in degrees of transparency and goodwill, it is our hope the fictional documents above will be recognizable in their core. Once this modest goal is achieved, we can all go quietly back to work. We do have meetings to attend.

### **Publisher’s Note**

The identity of one of the authors of this chapter has been anonymized. Brill is aware of the real identity of the author. The inclusion of anonymized chapters has been permitted by Brill in view of risks to the general security of the author.

### **Note**

- 1 We are very grateful to the colleagues and friends with whom we discussed this contribution and whose extensive suggestions and feedback tremendously improved its argument. They wholeheartedly support this book’s aim and intentions yet have chosen not to be mentioned by name.