

# Dedication to education



Ten portraits of inspired teachers  
in higher education

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## Colophon

Dedication to education: ten portraits of inspired teachers in higher education

Publication date 1 July 2022

This publication was created in collaboration with members of the Duurzaam Docentschap circle of the ComeniusNetwerk, the network for innovators in higher education.

We would like to thank the members of the ComeniusNetwerk we interviewed.

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ComeniusNetwerk

*de HogerOnderwijsVernieuwers*

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# Preface

The ambition of the ComeniusNetwerk is to contribute to future-proof education. It does so by creating space and opportunities for lecturers, teachers and other educational professionals in higher education to learn and innovate together. Who are these inspired educational professionals who want to get more out of higher education?

Education in general, but especially higher education, is characterised by different kinds of tasks and roles. This multiplicity of roles offers individual educational professionals the opportunity to choose tasks that are in line with what motivates them and keeps them engaged. Motivated and engaged professionals are the motor of good education; they drive its continual evolution. This collection of portraits is an ode to the diversity of educational roles and teaching profiles in higher education. It offers a unique view of how ten inspired educational professionals get and find the time and space to work on the innovation and improvement of education in their own institutions and beyond.

## *No two teachers are alike*

There is no such thing as a ‘typical’ university teacher. For example, an inventory conducted by the ComeniusNetwerk shows that there are even substantial differences in the way someone becomes a university teacher. Some members of the network quite consciously made the decision to teach at university; others ended up teaching more inadvertently, because it suited them (“I simply followed my passion”) or because they had to (“It is an unavoidable consequence of being a researcher”). The way teaching connects with other roles in higher education is also something that varies greatly from person to person and context to context. For example, consider the dynamic and tension between teaching and research that characterises higher education. We can also differentiate a variety of roles within higher education, such as that of lecturer, instructional designer, assessor, trainer, policy maker, and coordinator.<sup>1</sup> These roles can be practiced at the course level, but they can also be more generally pursued at the programme level or the national or international level. This variety of roles and the ways they are con-

1 Van Dijk et al. *Educ. Res. Rev.* 31, 2021: 100365

nected forms someone's professional identity. They also provide insight into the deeper motivations of teachers in higher education.

It is precisely because of the enormous diversity of tasks and teaching careers that everyone in higher education needs to think through what type of teacher or educational professional they are or would like to be. Teacher identity can be strengthened when you consciously think it through. It also helps if you make conscious decisions, such as how much time you devote to teaching, which teaching tasks you want to be responsible for and why. In its turn, making conscious choices helps you to become aware of the value you attach to these teaching tasks and how you present yourself as a university teacher to the outside world. Studies have shown that researchers who recognise and value their teaching role, do not only remain employed in higher education for longer, they also want to invest more in new developments and get more satisfaction from teaching.<sup>2</sup>

### *The power of sharing stories*

In order to reflect on how you value your teaching role, it can be helpful to exchange stories about teaching with other people. When we talk to colleagues about teaching, we most often focus on negative experiences, such as workload or difficult encounters with students, or we discuss the details and practical organisation of teaching (who does what and what will be addressed in which course). Much less often we create a space for exchanging success stories. For example, times when you really made a difference as a teacher, or when you succeeded in connecting your different roles in an effective manner. Such positive experiences can in fact greatly inspire others – and yourself. Sharing these positive experiences can help to get a clear picture of who you are, who you are not, and more importantly, who you would like to be.

Sharing positive stories also creates a chance to bring more attention to each other's teaching roles and teaching, and to value them more. It contributes to a shared vision and ambition that does not see the delivery and development of education as an obligation, but as sufficiently valuable to warrant the investment of our time and effort. This allows us to develop a greater awareness of teacher identity and helps us make a contribution to teaching with impact.

2 Van Lankveld *et al. Med. Teach.* 43, 2021: 124-136

*In this collection: Ten portraits of inspired teachers from the ComeniusNetworkk*

ComeniusNetworkk is a place where we share stories about higher education. Sometimes these stories are focused and explicit; sometimes they are more implicit and can be read between the lines of a narrative about educational innovation. But in any case, these are always stories that take a positive approach, where the love for teaching shines through. It is apparent that these are the stories of intrinsically motivated, enthusiastic, and inspired educators, whose stories and ambitions easily infect others. By publishing this collection of portraits, we want to share some of these positive stories with those outside the ComeniusNetworkk, in order to increase the visibility of the variety of career paths in higher education and celebrate them.

That's why we have gathered ten portraits of inspired educational professionals in higher education in this publication. The portraits represent a diverse group of professionals, each with a personal vision on higher education and a personal way of expressing it. They all take on different roles and anticipate different possibilities for professional growth and career development. With bold projects they strive to bring about teaching innovation and improve higher education – each in his or her own way. These portraits reveal what drives their commitment to higher education. What can we learn from them? How do they see the future of their teaching and their role in it? And what are the challenges and difficulties they have run into as university teachers?

Although the portraits show us ten individual pioneers in higher education – each following their own individual path and devising a teaching style from their own personal perspective on education – the portraits also show us how much they have in common. These educational pioneers perhaps had not expected, or could not have predicted, that they would end up in their current positions, but in retrospect they can see a pattern emerging. For instance, they all clearly articulate their ambitions and teaching ideas, and consistently seek connections with other people. Driven by their personal engagement and values, they see (or create) possibilities to try out new things. This makes them true pioneers. Innovation, design, and delivery of teaching forms a part of their professional development, which entails a quest for self-improvement as much as for teaching improvement. They often adopt a coaching teaching style, where they prefer to stand beside instead of above their students. Student self-development is one of their primary goals. They work hard, speak eloquently, are socially oriented and full of enthusiasm. And above all, they are always themselves in their work.

### *Stories that inspire*

We hope that the personal stories give you a glimpse into the dynamic and diversified motivations of ten educational professionals in higher education. We also hope that these stories inspire you to think seriously about your own teaching, and that the stories shared provide you with practical suggestions to further enrich and reinforce your own teaching career. Most of all, we hope that we inspire you to start sharing your own stories: with us, with students, with colleagues, or with managers. Exchanging such positive stories helps concretizing aspects of the recognition and rewards movement currently taking shape. We hope that this lead to more dedication to teaching.

Renske Bouwer, Idwer Doosje, Jolien Mouw, and Hans Savelberg  
*Members of the Duurzaam Docentschap circle of the ComeniusNetwerk*



# Ten portraits of inspired teachers in higher education

## For Jolien, education and research are closely intertwined



*Jolien Mouw is an assistant professor of Educational Sciences at the University of Groningen. In 2020, she received a Teaching Fellow grant from the Comenius programme. She used the funding to develop a virtual reality kindergarten classroom to provide a safe training environment for her students—this is just one example of the many playful, innovative methods she uses in her teaching to bridge the gap between theory and practice.*

‘Eighteen years ago, I was at an open day and just happened to wander into a classroom where they were giving a presentation about the primary-school teacher training programme. If I hadn’t, my life may have turned out very differently. But as I sat in that classroom, I just knew: this is what I want to do. Maybe it had something to do with how enthusiastic the people giving the presentation were. It certainly wasn’t for the job prospects in primary education, as appointments were scarce at the time. When I graduated, I was told to “Just sit next to the phone and wait for a substitute teaching job.” I did not feel like doing that at all, so I did a pre-master programme followed by a research Master, and then continued to obtain a PhD in Educational Sciences. As it happens, education isn’t just a wonderful professional field to work in—it’s also a fascinating field of research.’

### ***Not one or the other (but both)***

‘I’ve been working in higher education for over ten years now. The teaching-research ratio in my current appointment? *(Laughs.)* I think it’s 60/40, but I’d have to look that up. For an educational scientist, those activities blend together: I study my own teaching practices and teach about my research findings. I read

literature as a researcher, but also as a teacher. Of course, it can be challenging at times to combine these two aspects of my work. Sometimes I reserve a day to work on a research paper, but if a student drops by with a question I'm not going to say, "This is my research day." So it's a balancing act, but I wouldn't want a full-time research appointment. Teaching is really part of who I am.'

### *Becoming more myself*

'The most important development I've gone through as a teacher is that I've become more and more myself. In my first lectures as a PhD student, I was still groping to figure out: are students OK with not having a professor in front of the class? Am I conveying the content well? Now I really stand there as myself. I use my personal experiences to help students grasp theories. For example, I illustrate a lecture on moral development, with a photo of my son, who threw a tantrum as a one-year-old because he wasn't allowed to touch the oven. In addition, I use a variety of techniques and teaching methods to clarify the main thread of the course: story arcs, interactive digital tools, thought-provoking questions, humour, and sarcasm. I also engage students in a lot of conversation. I want to stimulate them to form their own opinions and find their own voice. It definitely takes a few years to develop a course so thoroughly. Moreover, you need to feel ownership to dare to experiment. My appointment as an assistant professor helps with that. I experience much more freedom now than during my PhD. But it's also in my nature. I always have the urge to develop myself, to try out things that can bring my students even further. That's also how I keep the work interesting for myself.'

**As a scientist, you can also contribute substantially to the academic community through education.**

### *If you can handle kindergartners, you can handle anything*

'One teaching innovation that arose from a combination of student needs and my own interests is the virtual reality kindergarten classroom that I developed by virtue of a Teaching Fellow grant from the Comenius programme. Second-year students in the academic primary-school teacher training programme do a semester-long internship in kindergarten. I often heard them say things like,

“Why do I need a kindergarten-internship? Kindergartners can be cheeky and fidgety, they don’t do what I want, and they cry so easily.” I thought, “If our students are struggling with these kindergartners so much, we’re probably doing something wrong in our instruction.” Moreover, it bothered me that they didn’t like teaching in kindergarten. As a teacher, I actually had such positive experiences with them. Education doesn’t start in third grade. In fact, if you can handle kindergartners, you can do anything. In the virtual reality classroom we offer students a safe environment in which they can try out different strategies to calm down a group of out-of-control kindergartners. Singing, getting angry, or just waiting—these are all possibilities they can try out. After a successful pilot, we are now going to implement the virtual reality classroom in three other primary-school-teacher training programmes.’


### *Expressing your ambitions*

‘It’s partly thanks to my work environment that I feel the freedom to experiment, but I also take a proactive stance. I examine how I can achieve my goals and express these goals. It really helps if you express your ambitions, so that’s what I would recommend to early-career researchers. Don’t start out thinking, “that’s not possible.” Look for opportunities and like-minded people. There’s a lot of educational innovation happening at universities of applied sciences, go talk to them. (Cheerful) Or send me an email! Twitter can also be an effective tool. I use it to show people what I’m working on and to take part in discussions about education. As a scientist, you learn to be modest, so you have to cross a threshold to say: “I am doing something special, I can make a substantial contribution.” For me, what I do feels self-evident, but when I talk about it I find that other people get inspired. During the pandemic, the president of University of Groningen’s executive board tweeted that our university would become the best in online education. I responded and offered my input as a teacher and educational scientist and was invited to a meeting. Now, after four years in Groningen, I’m starting to reap the benefits of my visibility. More and more people know how to find me and reach out to me. Last year, for example, the rector asked me to give a speech at the end of the year with a positive reflection on education.’

### *Education matters*

‘Another recent milestone was selected for membership of Young Academy Groningen. To me, that’s a sign that something is starting to shift in academia. As a member of the Young Academy Groningen, I can convey even more widely that education is a core task of a university and that, as a scientist, you can also contribute substantially to the academic community through education. I try to

make people realize how fun and exciting education can be, and how much energy you can get from it. As teachers, we should more often take the time to celebrate our successes. Even small steps are valuable. It can be something like, “I changed my course and it went well!” Or: “I felt energized when I finished my lecture today.” Or even: “I’m spending time on this course because my students deserve it.” If I can give other researchers just that little push to apply for a Comenius grant instead of working on their umpteenth publication, I’m a fulfilled person.’

	<b>Profile</b>	
	<b>Name</b> Jolien Mouw	<b>Total appointment</b> 0.9 FTE
<b>Position</b> Assistant Professor	<b>Time spent teaching</b> 'I'd have to look it up, but I think it's 60%' Other activities: Research, member of the Faculty Council of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Guiding Coalition Hybrid Education at the University of Groningen, Comenius Teaching Fellow – ComeniusNetwerk (circle Sustainable Teaching), member of the Interfaculty V/Ar Hub, member of Young Academy Groningen	
<b>Institution</b> University of Groningen	<b>Relationship with the ComeniusNetwerk</b> Developed a virtual reality kindergarten classroom in 2020 by virtue of a Teaching Fellow grant	
<b>Programmes</b> Bachelor of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences, Academic Primary-School Teacher Training program and Master of Educational Sciences (tracks: Educational Innovation and Learning in Interaction)		
<b>Work experience in higher education</b> Over 10 years		

## Marike excels at driving educational innovation



*At Saxion University of Applied Sciences' Education Innovation Hub, Marike Lammers brings together educational innovations in an organic way. As a former Top Talent programme director, she believes that every student and every education professional deserves the honours programme treatment.*

'I'd already had two careers in the corporate world when I made the switch to education in 2006. I ended up at Saxion, as a project leader at the Product Design research group, and spent two days a week teaching in the Industrial Product Design programme. Suddenly people saw me as a teacher, which I thought was hilarious. The innovation projects I worked on with students gave me a lot of energy, but I wasn't entirely satisfied. I had to teach the same classes over and over again, and I had no control over my schedule. So when Saxion asked me after three years to become a project leader at Sirius, a national programme to develop and implement excellence tracks in higher education, I didn't have to think twice.'

### *Different hoops for every student*

'As programme director at Top Talent, I was able to fully focus on innovation again. I hadn't worked in higher education very long at that point, but I did have a lot of work field experience. That's why I knew that what a client wants and what they actually need can be two completely different things. So that's how I approached this assignment as well. What does society need and what does that mean for our educational system? For instance, it turned out to be outdated to offer programmes that only covered one discipline and nothing else. Students were – and are – expected to have different skills from the ones they're traditionally taught in professional training. In their working life, they'll need creativity, entrepreneurship, perseverance and the ability to collaborate. Through Sirius, we started thinking about the value of education and saw the downside of how

it's currently organized. The funding and assessment methods that are in place now lead to structures that restrict individual development. Every student has to jump through the same hoops. Sirius gave us the opportunity to develop collective education with different hoops for every student.'

### *Leaning into discomfort*

'When we started out, we didn't know yet what our Top Talent Programme would look like. There were 15 or 16 pilot projects, all with the aim of allowing both students and teachers to reach their full potential. I provided the connection between those pilot projects and annual evaluations. Eventually, this led to the development – in cocreation with students and teachers – of Saxion's honours approach: an explorative learning process for personal-professional development. Students formulate their own ambitions within a safe community and, as a result, students learn more consciously. The interdisciplinary focus also teaches them to work together: a dressed to the nines economics student suddenly has to interact with a detail-oriented techie and a free-spirited social work student. This might be uncomfortable at first, but students are going to encounter these kinds of situations in the outside world as well – issues are no longer solved by one single person in today's time. That's why it's best to seek out discomfort as soon as possible and learn by reflecting on it. It's okay to feel discomfort, and in retrospect students really appreciate having been in these situations. They begin to appreciate their differences and get to know themselves better. We also found that this personal, interdisciplinary approach works for professionals as well, which was a valuable insight for both us and the teachers. After all, professionals are also individuals with unique talents and ambitions.

We're now at a point where the Top Talent Programme is firmly embedded in the organization, but we can't start slacking off. We have to keep experimenting and evaluating. Educational innovation, as far as I'm concerned, comes from this cocktail of collaboration, experimentation and reflection.'

### *Every student deserves an honours approach*

'Our honours courses are extracurricular, which gives us a lot of freedom in how we design them. That said, in 2017 we started to get this nagging feeling. We knew that we could use all these insights to do something for the standard curricula as well. The honours approach should not just be available to the happy few, but also – or especially – to students who have lost their sense of motivation. We wanted to overhaul the entire educational system, but my influence was limited to the Top Talent Programme. So the Comenius Leadership Fellow grant was a real godsend. I really think it's brilliant. It's the only grant that puts educa-

tion first instead of research. To us, it was the catalyst we needed to galvanize a group of people. Joining the ComeniusNetwork was also a relief for me personally: I had finally found an environment where people thought like me. Last year, we capped off the research process with a documentary, and now we're trying to show the entire country the value of education that takes human beings and their talents as its starting point.'

## I'm the person who says, "What do you mean, we can't do this? Why not?"

### *Manager in quotation marks*

'During a reorganization in 2019, the question arose of where to embed the Top Talent Programme. At a strategy meeting, I blurted out, "If we're going to restructure, I want an innovation hub!" (*Satisfied.*) And I got it. It's a network organization with no staff, so the word 'manager' in my job title should really be in quotation marks. I don't manage people; I set processes in motion. I'm the person who says, "What do you mean, we can't do this? Why not?" It never ceases to amaze me that others don't see the opportunities I see. In many ways, my knowledge is limited, but apparently I have the ability to get people going, and to instil confidence. That's also exactly what you want teachers to do for students: create a safe space where they can experiment. Before 2010, the consensus in higher education was that everything we did had to be a success. But that's not how innovation works. Innovation means taking risks. Every once in a while, something will fail and then you just have to accept the consequences and stand behind your people.

The composition of the Education Innovation team changes on a regular basis. The people who think innovation is important tend to stick around for a while, like bees around a honeypot. The core team comes from our honours programme and is supplemented by people who were brooding on ideas by themselves and didn't know where to go with them, or who didn't have the time to develop their plans. They're all very interesting people!'


### *Wishes for higher education*

'What higher education needs? (*Immediately.*) Trust. We have rigged up a system in which we allocate funding based on rules and equate quality with degrees. There are all kinds of tests and checks in there to ensure that everyone is meeting the quality standards, because otherwise someone might graduate with a diploma that's worth nothing. That fear makes higher education a claustrophobic space



to work in. The average teacher feels like they have little room to try something new. I would love it if we started thinking differently: not centred around professional training, but around human beings and their talents and passions. Human beings who go through a development process and then end up somewhere. So you don't start out as a mechanical engineering or nursing student, but you complete your own learning journey that may end up taking you to one of those particular fields. That's complex, because how do you then ensure that someone actually has the right qualifications at the end of their journey? Still, I'm inclined to think, "Can't we just issue a qualification and trust that it will be okay?" In a system like that, doubts and even dropping out would be seen as part of the learning process, instead of being labelled as delays. Such an approach would give every individual the freedom to find the right path. As I said before, every student would be jumping through their own hoops. If you provide good supervision, you can even motivate someone to jump through a higher hoop, or a deeper one, or one farther to the left or right.

Another interest of mine is regenerative education that trains students to shape their lives and work in a more balanced way, and one that considers other people, society and the environment. I'd very much like to remove the limitations of the current education system, and that's still a challenge. I've also been part of this world myself for quite some time now.'

	<b>Profile</b>	
	<b>Name</b> Marike Lammers	<b>Total appointment</b> 1.0 FTE
<b>Position</b> Manager ('though I prefer to call myself an initiator') of the Education Innovation Hub, formerly Top Talent programme director	<b>Other activities</b> 'I keep a lot of plates spinning and it's all a bit chaotic, because everything is intertwined. That's the way I work.'	
<b>Institution</b> Saxion University of Applied Sciences	<b>Relationship with the ComeniusNetwork</b> Received a Comenius Leadership Fellow grant with her team in 2018 to use an existing honours programme for students who had lost their motivation for their studies. And a Leadership Fellow grant in 2022 for Organizing Purpose Driven Learning.	
<b>Department</b> Education and Student Support   Education Innovation Hub		
<b>Work experience in higher education</b> 16 years		

## Stijn sees higher education as a candy store



*At Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Stijn Bollinger fulfils all kinds of roles supporting students and professionals in their development. He likes to spark curiosity in others, and to leave plenty of room for uncertainty in the learning process.*

'I sometimes get asked where I want to be in five years. *(Smiles.)* That makes me nervous, because I don't even know where I want to be tomorrow. I'm not driven by distant, ambitious goals, but by specific values and interests. What fascinates me is how to let people learn. I want to be of value in that process, and there are many ways to do that. Which is also why my career path has been full of twists and turns. I started out with two unfinished teaching degrees, one of which was for primary school teaching (interesting, but not my target audience). Then I worked as a musician for a while before doing a Bachelor's in history and a Master's in American studies. In 2006, I joined the Institute of Law at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences as a Research teacher. A surprising match at first glance, but I've been able to make real strides here in terms of my professional development, and it's still a great place to work for me.'

### ***Uncertainty in the learning process***

'Although I started at the Institute of Law with little knowledge of the law nor teaching experience, I took to teaching right away. I learned a lot myself along the way and – fortunately – so did the students. Gradually, I got a better handle on the content. Because I'm inquisitive by nature, I went on to do a PhD on a part-time basis. At the same time, I started teaching more and more research courses. I also became responsible for the research track in the Social Legal Services programme, and meanwhile my interest was shifting away from the actual subject matter itself to the process. During my PhD work and in my first years of teaching, I often experienced uncertainty, and I saw that students were also deal-

ing with this. Some would go through the entire programme without any hiccups, and then suddenly started struggling when it came time to graduate. Why do we find that uncertainty so frustrating, I wondered. Where does it come from, how much is too much and when is it actually useful? That's when I began studying the role of uncertainty in the learning process as part of the HU Research Group of Research Competence. Now, the research even has an international dimension, as we've teamed up with five European partners. At Utrecht University of Applied Sciences' Teaching & Learning Network, I also train and coach colleagues in this area. It does take some courage to allow space for uncertainty in the learning process, both for students and teachers.'

I have to combine all these highly diverse roles. I am my own instrument, and I've got this deep-seated desire to let others learn.

#### *Student graduation toolkit*

'About four years ago, we received a Teaching Fellow grant from the Comenius programme, which allowed us to translate the insights from our research into a practical thesis toolkit for students. We developed the toolkit together with graduating students from the Social Legal Services programme. It consists of a booklet and a website and is structured around six triggers of uncertainty. For example, an assessment can create uncertainty, but so can the freedom you have when you do research. The tools are tailored to that, and they're also quite diverse: they help graduating students plan their research process, to reflect and to motivate themselves. We talk about 'safe uncertainty' in the toolkit, because safety is necessary to allow uncertainty to become part of the learning process.'

#### *Along for the journey*

'If someone has decided to study a certain subject, I assume they're curious and looking for adventure, and that they want to learn specific career skills. Of course, time constraints, performance expectations and extrinsic motivation also come into play, but I think every student has the will to grow and develop. I love tapping into that, and whenever it happens it's like striking gold. "Why are you here?" I ask the students. "Of course you have to pass that exam that's coming up, but what would you like to learn yourself?" In the back of my mind is always

that iconic teacher from my own student days who would encourage me and show me patience, but who could also be strict when needed. Students all have their own paths to travel and I'm happy to accompany them for part of their journey. They can call on me when they need to, but they're responsible for themselves. I'm curious to see how they view the landscape of their development, and maybe I can occasionally point out something they hadn't noticed themselves. But it's a two-way street – when I talk to students, I'm often so impressed by them! “You coach a football team? How do you do that?” Or: “You're a team leader at your local supermarket, tell me more about that.” Recently, my students nominated me for Teacher of the Year. (*Modestly.*) I didn't win, of course, but it was great to be nominated. I also recognized myself and the things I find important in education in their description of me.'

### *Forging connections*

'I like to forge connections: between research and education, but also between professionals and degree programmes. At Utrecht University of Applied Sciences' Teaching & Learning Network, I'm involved in two clusters: Educational Leadership, in which I support colleagues that innovate their degree programmes, and Implementing Education, which deals with teacher professionalization. It's inspiring to hear others talk about their way of working, their expertise – I can be really impressed by how colleagues handle things. I'm also affiliated with the ComeniusNetwerk. I've attended inspiring meetings and been involved in applications for new projects as a reviewer. This not only allows me to give something back to the Comenius community, but I also get to take what I learn from this back to my colleagues at the Institute of Law and the Investigative Ability research group.'

### *Many different roles*

'It's probably clear by now that I fulfil many different roles at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences: I'm a senior lecturer, thesis coordinator, advisor, coach, trainer and researcher. There's all kinds of interplay between those different roles. Sometimes they reinforce each other, sometimes they blend together, sometimes they collide. If I'm working on a research project, for example, I can't just 'put on my coaching hat', even if I see that a student who's involved in the project is going through a hard time. But I still have to combine all these highly diverse roles. I am my own instrument, and I've got this deep-seated desire to let others learn. For me, higher education is the perfect place to do that, because it allows you to constantly reinvent yourself. In that sense, it's really like a candy store. I can't speak for others, but that's my experience. Maybe I feel that way because I

value my autonomy so much. Sure, I have to initiate new steps myself and align my goals with the ambitions and questions of the organization, but I've never encountered any closed doors in my work. People are more inclined to respond by saying, "That's interesting. It's great that you're so motivated!" The only downside to working in a candy store is the stomach ache you get if you can't contain yourself. This remains a balancing act for me: phases of divergence (embarking on new adventures) and phases of convergence (focusing my attention) alternate. I'm now in a period where I have to make choices so that I can give the tasks that remain the attention they deserve.'



### Profile

#### Name

Stijn Bollinger

#### Time spent teaching

About 50%

#### Positions

Senior lecturer and senior researcher

#### Institution

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences

#### Programmes

Full-time Social Legal Services (SJD) programme and the part-time legal programmes HBO Law, SJD and Bailiff.

#### Work experience in higher education

19 years (16 as a teacher)

#### Total appointment

1.0 FTE

#### Other activities

Thesis coordination in the full-time SJD programme and coordination of the research track in the SJD curriculum, researcher at the Investigative Ability research group, advisor, trainer and coach for the HU University of Applied Sciences Teaching & Learning Network

#### Relationship with the ComeniusNetwork

Used a Teacher Fellow grant in 2018-2019 to create a student graduation toolkit for dealing with uncertainty; reviewer of grant applications

## Sylvia wants to give students what she never had



*Sylvia Bronkhorst set up the Learning with Head, Heart & Hands programme at the HAN University of Applied Sciences. The goal of the programme is to get students, teachers and degree programmes excited about education that approaches human beings holistically, rather than appealing exclusively to the brain.*

‘Twenty-two years ago I graduated cum laude from Wageningen University. A success story, you might say, but my student years had been stressful. I had dutifully jumped through all the hoops, and now that I was done I had no idea which way to go. Because I’m good with numbers, I decided to go work at a bank – a choice I probably never would have made if my studies had allowed me to explore who I was and where my interests lay.’

### **Lost excitement**

‘After several jobs, I became project leader at the HAN Centre for Entrepreneurship in 2009. I was amazed to learn how little had changed in education since my own student days. *(Sighs.)* Both the students and the teachers would often look bored, and classes still consisted primarily of classical, theoretical knowledge transfer. I saw ambitious first-year students who had lost their confidence by the time they graduated. During those four years at the HAN, they had slowly lost their sense of excitement. That made me realize that education should appeal to more than just your head. Learning involves your entire ‘system.’

### **Expressing your ideas**

‘My teaching experience was limited, but my drive to change something was so intense that I talked about it all the time. Because of that, other people also got inspired. There was no strategy behind it, but when people hear you speak with

passion it's contagious. "Are you interested in this? You should mention that to so and so", people would say. Or: "Could you teach a workshop on this?" I didn't have anything concrete to base a workshop on at first, but over time I started to develop a vision and teaching materials, organically and in collaboration with others. Now it's a full-fledged programme: Learning with Head, Heart & Hands. (*Beaming.*) I actually pulled it off!

### **Learning through experience**

'The idea behind Learning with Head, Heart & Hands is that we tap into people's multiple intelligences. We feed the mind with knowledge, while we approach the heart from feelings and experiences: we investigate what drives someone, what their talents and passions are, but also what's holding them back. Finally, we put people's hands to work, because learning is also done by experiencing things. You might think that this would be standard practice in higher vocational education, but many programmes don't pay attention to it at all – even though you often have to do something to find out if you like it.

Besides that, the Learning with Head, Heart & Hands programme is based on four principles: you learn about yourself, you learn in a close-knit community, you learn by experimenting and you learn by having fun. That's what makes our vision substantially different from the one that underpins mainstream education. For us, learning is about unfolding from within rather than cramming things in from outside. It's an approach that takes students very seriously, and for some that takes a while to get used to.'

### **Soft skills & trainers**

'The first thing we developed based on our concept was a minor on entrepreneurship for starting entrepreneurs (Onderneem! De ontdekkingsreis). This was made possible in part by a Teaching Fellow grant from the Comenius programme. Our programme is not an end in itself, but a means, a path you can take. One of my colleagues created a nice visualization of this path. He drew a road shaped like the infinity symbol. The left loop symbolizes your understanding of who you are, the right loop your view of the world. At the crossroads lies your personal destination, your experiment. In the minor, we help students explore what's at that crossroads for them. Some of them end up starting real businesses that pursue social impact. For example, one of our students is developing an app to help other students learn soft skills in a playful way. Two other students saw a potential market for nicer, more comfortable sneakers and are now experimenting with prototypes. (*Laughs.*) The teacher also gets a pair, of course.'

### *Being the person you needed yourself*

‘While we ask big questions in our programme that can’t be fully answered in a few weeks, we do create space for honest personal inquiry. It’s quite natural for a 20-year-old to not know exactly what they want. In our workshops, we sometimes see students – but also professionals – who are mostly sure of what they don’t want, which can also be a powerful motivator. My own disappointment in our education system helped me develop into who I am today. I try to be the person I needed myself.’

Our vision is substantially different from the one that underpins mainstream education. For us, learning is about unfolding from within rather than cramming things in from outside.

### *Out in the open*


‘One of the defining characteristics of my way of working is that I put a lot of energy into creating a close-knit group. Research has shown that feeling safe is crucial to learning. Students often find it uncomfortable at first that we spend so much time on questions like “who am I?” and “who are we?”, but later they’re very positive about it.

You have to feel safe if you’re going to share personal things – the things you find important, but also the things that are holding you back. Getting your insecurities out in the open makes it easier to manage them. A group can help you in that process, because you find out that others also struggle with fear of failure and perfectionism. How do they deal with these things? And what’s it like for someone who’s not a perfectionist? Because I’m part of the group as well, I’m also open about my own fear of failure, which used to flare up from time to time – and still does. I am completely myself in everything I do, so I’m candid about these aspects of myself as well. A student once said to me, “You always throw yourself in front of the bus first.”



## Big ambitions and small successes

‘The HAN’s ambition is for every student and teacher to make a difference on social issues. We want to be an institution that makes an impact and my team knows how to educate people to help them do that. Our programme trains teachers and assists degree programmes with educational development. We get questions and assignments from all kinds of people, which our team is happy to tackle. A lot of things are going well, but we’re still moving too slowly for my taste. Fundamentally changing the education system is very difficult – the existing structures have deep roots. If you start centring education around the student instead of the subject matter, it becomes impossible to predict exactly how things will unfold. Teachers would be given a more facilitating role. The current system was not designed to accommodate this uncertainty. It might generate a lot of resistance, but I’m sure this approach is ultimately more efficient, even for large degree programmes. Still, it’s complex. To stay motivated, we deliberately invest our energy only into teams that are receptive to our approach. That’s what pays off the most. And we celebrate all our successes!’

	<b>Profile</b>
<b>Name</b> Sylvia Bronkhorst	<b>Work experience in higher education</b> Recently celebrated her 12.5-year anniversary ('but it feels like it's only been three years')
<b>Position</b> Responsible for the Learning with Head, Heart & Hands programme ('I sometimes call myself an educational innovator, but that sounds so fluffy')	<b>Total appointment:</b> 0.8 FTE (officially)
<b>Institution</b> HAN University of Applied Sciences	<b>Time devoted to teaching</b> 100% – I spend half my time training students and teachers and the other half is devoted to educational innovation/ curriculum renovation
<b>Department</b> 'I invented my job myself, so I didn't really belong anywhere, but my programme is currently embedded in the Department of Educational Research Quality Assurance'	<b>Relationship with the ComeniusNetwerk</b> Used a Teaching Fellow grant in 2018 to set up the Learning with Head, Heart & Hands programme as part of a minor on entrepreneurship.

## Anique started pioneering way back when she was a student



*As professor and vice director of a research school at Maastricht University, Anique de Bruin is always looking for innovative cross-fertilizations between science and practice. Her specialization is self-regulation in higher education because students reap life-long benefits from learning to learn.*

'In 1995 I discovered a whole new world. I started studying Psychology at Maastricht University. In secondary school I had taken a rather minimalistic approach to learning. I passed my courses, but I wasn't interested in working hard. And why was one teacher good at explaining things while the other wasn't? In university I was finally allowed to explore a field that I had chosen myself: the human psyche. I experienced an enormous sense of freedom and for the first time I realized that reality is not black and white. Scientific insights are nuanced, especially in psychology.'

### ***Pioneer, pioneer and keep pioneering***

'I was in the unique situation of being part of the first cohort of psychology students at Maastricht. We were a small group, had intense contact with our teachers and were allowed to actively contribute to our own education. I quickly realized that I wanted to stay in academia, and to my great joy I became a PhD candidate in the department where I had been an undergraduate. After three months, however, I was asked by my doctoral supervisor Henk Schmidt to join him at Erasmus University Rotterdam, where he was setting up a brand new programme in psychology. From first cohort student in Maastricht I became first cohort lecturer in Rotterdam, where I again felt I had lots of freedom. We worked according to a problem-based, student-centred, small-scale teaching methodology. In Maastricht that had been customary since the seventies, but Schmidt introduced it to Rot-

terdam. I learned so much in those years. *(With some disbelief)* I was an assistant professor at the age of 24: I lectured, coordinated the progress test and chaired the curriculum committee for the incoming student cohort. In between teaching duties I worked on my dissertation on the psychology of education.'

Those doing fundamental research are still a source of inspiration for me, but my own focus changed: from then on I wanted to build bridges between theory and practice.

### *Building bridges*

'When I started with my own research, I was especially charmed by fundamental insights into human cognition. Time passed, I had children, missed a few years of conferences, and when I returned I realized that the focus of the discussion was still the same and concentrated on what I call the "square centimetres" – for example, to the difference between presenting stimuli for three or five seconds. Does this still say something about how people learn or is it really about how you design an experiment with the minimum amount of noise in your data? These researchers were doing wonderful things and are still a great source of inspiration for me, but my own focus had changed: from then on I wanted to build bridges between theory and practice.'

### *Self-regulation*

'I was given the opportunity to combine research, teaching and innovation at the Maastricht University Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences in the School of Health Professions Education. The great thing about this school of research is that we work closely with the lecturers of different study programmes to improve teaching and learning methods. I was successful in winning a Veni grant, which was unusual in those days; I think it was the third Veni that was awarded for research into the psychology of education. I was totally fascinated by self-regulation, which was an up-and-coming subject at the time. That's easy to explain, because there is an increasing need for flexibility in education. If we are going to give students that freedom, we also have to teach them how to handle it.'

### *Study Smart project*

'We discovered that many insights about self-regulation had not yet been applied in educational programmes. We also saw that students sometimes think that they are using effective strategies for learning, but are actually working inefficiently. This is because many effective strategies feel counterintuitive. Moreover, there are huge differences between individual students. We see individuals who have heard for their whole young lives that they aren't capable. They get off to a different start than students who are getting support at home and who've had the wind in their sails. Offering a training course at the start of their study programme was something that we saw as potentially fostering equality. That's how we created Study Smart, a learning strategy training program into which we poured thirty years of research into self-study skills training for students. We involved lecturers and student counsellors from every faculty at Maastricht University in developing the course. Their enthusiasm strengthened my conviction that we are doing something that's really meaningful.'


### *Comenius grant and follow-up projects*

'In 2017 we received a Teaching Fellow grant from the Comenius programme for Study Smart. *(Smiles)* I was in the first cohort of teaching fellows, so you see that I was a pioneer again. This was significant recognition for my ambition to become a teaching innovator. I also found the contact with other lecturers and educational innovators enriching. At the time they were setting up the ComeniusNetwork and I joined the board. I had input into the trajectories (now circles), and ways we could meet to exchange initiatives. It's fantastic to see how the Comenius-Network has developed over the years.

Since then, the first phase of the Study Smart project has been completed, and the training course has been implemented in nearly all the faculties at Maastricht University. Other universities, universities of applied sciences and secondary professional education institutions in both the Netherlands and abroad are using the course we designed. I can see lots of possibilities for expanding it. For example, I want to encourage self-regulation skills not just in the first year, but throughout the curriculum. We started a project to design a blueprint to support these developments based on scientific evidence. The project has received university funding. There's also a focus on the longitudinal development of self-regulation, including after graduation. How do you support students who are choosing courses, deciding on areas of study or making career choices? How can you help them make lasting changes to their study, sleeping and exercise habits? I'm going to be dedicating my Vidi grant to those issues.'

## Diversification

‘The pressure of work in science is gigantic, whether you’re dealing with research, teaching, administration or innovation. A major research appointment such as I have now looks like (and is) a luxury, partially because it gives me time for teaching innovation projects. I wouldn’t be able to obtain this time otherwise because the bridging function is not formally recognized as work-related. At the same time, there are a lot of uncertainties associated with this approach. Whether I will be able to continue my line of research depends on subsidies, and I’m applying for grants that have an award rate of about ten percent. And yet I’m seeing good developments. In recent years an enormous amount of space has been created for innovation, and real teaching careers have been created. As far as I’m concerned, we need more diversification and specialization so that we don’t need to keep all the balls in the air while remaining scarce as hen’s teeth.’

	<b>Profile</b>	
	<b>Name</b> Anique de Bruin	<b>Time devoted to teaching</b> About 20%
<b>Positions</b> Professor of Self-Regulation in Higher Education, Assistant Director of the School of Health Professions Education		<b>Other activities</b> Research (officially 70%, thanks to a Vidi grant, but actually less); administration (officially 10%, but actually more); teaching innovation (officially 0% because it is not a recognized activity, hence for the innovation project Study Smart Anique mostly uses time allocated for research)
<b>Institution</b> Maastricht University		
<b>Departments</b> Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences; School of Health Professions Education		<b>Relationship with the ComeniusNetwork</b> In 2017 received one of the first ten Teaching Fellow grants to develop a training course in self-study skills; member of the founding board of directors from 2018 to 2019.
<b>Work experience in higher education</b> Almost 22 years ('half of my life, I now realize')		
<b>Total appointment</b> 1 FTE ('but I'm well above that, just like the others in this series of portraits')		

## Constant demanded more teaching time (and hopes it won't hurt his career)



*Constant Swinkels is an ecologist. He is pursuing a PhD at Radboud University Nijmegen and sees education as a way to increase his impact on people and nature. Using a grant from the Comenius programme, he is revamping a course on biodiversity to introduce his students to the amazing flora and fauna of the Netherlands.*

‘Two years ago, during the job interview for my PhD position, I asked for extra teaching time. Actually, I demanded it. (Laughs.) Ten percent is the norm here, and many PhD students use that time to follow courses themselves, but I also want to develop as a teacher. That’s why my doctoral programme will take five years to complete instead of four, thirty percent of which I can devote to teaching – although it’s a little more in practice.’

### *Passion for ecology*

‘I got bit by the nature bug at an early age, but I didn’t end up where I am now thanks to some plan. [A1] Still, when I look back, I do see a story that makes sense. When I was twelve, I became a member of the Dutch Youth Association for Nature Studies, and three years later I started organizing and leading my own excursions. I realized early on that policymakers and the general public don’t always know enough about nature. My ultimate wish is to contribute to nature management and biodiversity in the Netherlands. Or maybe even globally, though that might be aiming a bit too high. Doing research is one way to create impact, but sharing the results of that research with other people is just as important to me. You can do that through public lectures or media appearances, but it’s especially important to do it at the university, with the biologists of the future.’

### *More of a guide than a teacher*

'I'm still developing as a teacher. Part of that development happens intuitively, by trying things out in my classes, but there's also a part that's evidence informed – as befits a scientist. I sometimes spend entire evenings reading articles and watching YouTube videos about self-determination theory. I have no children and an enormous hunger for knowledge, so evenings are perfect for self-study. That's also my advice to other PhD students: make the most of these years. What characterises me as a teacher is that I take my students seriously. First-year students are young adults, so that's how I treat them. They are responsible for their own learning process, and I hold them accountable for that. But it's a two-way street – they can also hold me accountable for my efforts. In a sense, I'm more of a guide than a 'traditional' teacher. I'm honest about the limits of my knowledge. Even in fifty years I won't know everything. Sure, I have more experience, and I enjoy sharing that, but there are also questions I can't answer. Those are things we can explore together. I encourage students to think for themselves, and to discover what excites them. I don't want them to be little clones of myself, just like I'm not someone else's clone.'

### *Discovering biodiversity: there's an app for that (and a challenge)*

'During my job interview, I not only requested extra teaching time, but I also explicitly asked for the freedom to revamp the biodiversity course, which I had been involved in for years as a student assistant and member of the innovation committee. I encountered some resistance at first, but then Covid happened. Suddenly, everything was up in the air. We were faced with the challenge of teaching 150 students about biodiversity in the middle of a lockdown, without being able to go into the field with them and no access to lab facilities. I had previously worked on a nature walks app for a European travel guide organization (the Crossbill Guides Foundation) and was just starting a pilot to see if we could use an app like that in the course. So things kind of snowballed from there. We quickly put together a few new walks so that our students could go on field trips near the university. (*Chuckles.*) It must have been strange for tourists: here's this Dutch app for nature walks in the Veluwe, and suddenly these two English-language walks pop up near Nijmegen. We also organized a plant hunt, a challenge in which students had to find and describe as many plants as possible in their own neighbourhoods.'

### *Ownership and connection*

'My main goal for these changes to the course is for students to take ownership of their learning process. I want them to experience what it's like to discover

things for themselves. Biodiversity is a big, abstract concept, but there's a rich, complex world behind it. Take the crossbill: at first glance it's just a bizarre bird with a crossed beak. Learning how that beak evolved to extract seeds from pine cones adds a new dimension to how you perceive it. Still, apps and challenges can't replace a teacher. To stay motivated, students need to feel connected to their degree programme, so we like to engage students in conversations about what they're discovering.

Research gains value when it finds its way to the general public. That's why I think communication and education are so important.

We wanted the lessons we learned during the pandemic to be firmly embedded in the course. A Teaching Fellow grant from the Comenius programme made that possible. We're now in the process of developing a full-fledged app of our own, with an audio tour and assignments. We've also adjusted the challenge: our research shows that only a small proportion of the students are motivated by competition, so we're putting more emphasis on collaboration instead. Students will be working together to build a plant database, while the real enthusiasts will still be able to excel if they want to.'

### **Community**

'Do I feel like I'm part of a community as a teacher? Yes and no. Within my degree programme, some people still see me as a rookie. I don't always feel like I'm taken seriously, and I'm less involved in the programme than I'd like. I've noticed that while educational choices are often less well founded than research choices, people will talk about them with more conviction. As a result, I feel like there's less room for doubt or openness when it comes to my teaching duties, which sometimes makes it difficult to determine whether I'm doing the right thing. How do I know, for instance, if it's normal to spend two days preparing for a one-hour lecture? (*Upbeat.*) But I'm now at a point where I'm fairly satisfied with how I'm doing. And fortunately, my work is appreciated. My immediate colleagues see that the course innovations are working, and I received an Education Award from the students. I also have a good relationship with the Radboud



Teaching and Learning Centre, and there are many like-minded people in the ComeniusNetwerk. I even joined the board this year.'

### *The future is uncertain*

'Part of what makes studying at university so wonderful is that you're taught by experts. To add more depth and coherence to my research and teaching, and to ensure I can continue my work, I'd like to eventually become an associate professor. Teaching full-time doesn't really appeal to me. I see myself primarily as an ecologist, and I find that it's my status as a researcher, as an 'expert', that opens doors. Three years from now, when I finish my doctoral research, I'll have an interesting profile, combining research, communication and teaching. But I don't know if the latter two will be rewarded. When I'm up there in the auditorium defending my dissertation, no one is going to ask me about the classes I taught. It's strange that even though providing education is one of the university's core tasks, it barely pays attention to this in its selection, supervision or assessment of PhD students. If an application committee only looks at publications and how much funding you've managed to secure, I'll lose out to other candidates. That uncertainty makes me queasy sometimes. I don't think about it too much, because that would only discourage me, and what good is that? I focus on the present: I'm happy with what I'm doing, and I stand behind my choices one hundred percent.'



### *Profile*

#### **Name**

Constant Swinkels

#### **Total appointment**

1.0 FTE

#### **Position**

Doctoral candidate

#### **Time devoted to teaching**

30 % (in practice 40 %)

#### **Institution**

Radboud University Nijmegen

#### **Other duties**

Doctoral research, ComeniusNetwerk board member, Face of Science at the KNAW, author at the Crossbill Guides Foundation

#### **Programmes**

Biology (Department of Plant Ecology and Physiology)

#### **Relationship with the ComeniusNetwerk**

Received a Teaching Fellow grant in 2021 to revamp a course on biodiversity and develop a biodiversity field trip app. Member of the board since 2022.

#### **Work experience in higher education**

2.5 years (plus 6 years as a student assistant and member of the innovation and education policy committee)

## Marian has a passion for education, but teaching isn't her calling



*Marian Kat-de Jong is an educational innovator at Avans University of Applied Sciences. She's overseeing Avans' transition on a content-strategic level and strives to embed successful innovations in the school's curriculum.*

'The decision I made in 2012 to become a teacher was a very conscious one. I had been 'circling' higher education for years as a policy researcher, advisor and project leader, and I felt it was time to experience teaching for myself. So I became a lecturer in Life Sciences & Communication at Avans University of Applied Sciences. I was fully committed to that for three years. While developing a writing curriculum, I discovered how change and innovation work in education, and that they require cooperation and persuasion. Since then, I've been focusing more and more on educational innovation. Finally, two years ago I made the switch to the Learning and Innovation Centre. *(Laughs.)* I don't want to become one of those managers who's still going 'I also spent three years in front of the classroom' two decades from now. That's why I find it important to keep venturing outside the policy bubble.'

### **Recognition and confidence**

'The ComeniusNetwerk has played a major role in my professional development. Together with my team, I received a Teaching Fellow grant in 2018 to create and implement the writing curriculum we developed in our laboratory courses. The name of the project was SchrijfGOED (WriteWELL), where GOED stands for Ge-personaliseerd, Open En Digitaal (Personalized, Open And Digital) – we came up with that over pizza one evening. As a result, I became a Teaching Fellow, which felt like a nice bit of recognition for my innovative approach, perseverance and way of thinking – I was going to absolutely make sure we'd end up with a well-founded and well-written plan.'

Around the time we wrapped up the project, another opportunity came along. Through one of my networks, I came across a job opening for a position as teacher professionalization liaison for the National Acceleration Plan Educational Innovation Through ICT. I read the job description and thought: bingo! This is me! It was all a bit impulsive, but I applied and ended up getting seconded from Avans for two days a week. I worked together with a 'zone' of about twenty people from various institutions, looking at questions like: What do teachers need to reap the benefits of digitization? How do they learn? What are their preferences? What are they insecure about? I stayed with that project for three years and had an amazing time. Just like in the ComeniusNetwerk, it brought together innovators who knew the sector well and who were enormously motivated to be of service to education. Another parallel with the ComeniusNetwerk was that the funder, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, had a great deal of confidence in the project. That allowed us to deliver something substantial.'

### *The next step*

'After working on the Acceleration Plan for a year, I started feeling out of place at Avans. One day I'd have a meeting with the Minister of Education, and the next I was sitting down with my teaching colleagues trying to figure out the exam system. Education is all about students and teachers, I will always believe that, but I needed focus instead of constantly having to switch between those big themes and operational questions. So I tentatively inquired about the possibilities of transferring from my school to the Learning and Innovation Centre (LIC). I was a bit anxious about it, but I really want to urge anyone who reads this piece: if you have a good idea, go out and pitch it, because you can make a difference! When you stick your neck out like that, someone might still say, 'That's not such a good idea' or 'Have you thought of this?', but if you don't talk about your plans, your ambitions will never be rewarded or recognized. The response to my question was very positive. My supervisors understood that I wanted to take that next step.

The LIC is a large unit within Avans, functioning as a partner and strategic director when it comes to education and research. I first went to work as a policy advisor in the field of blended education and, after a little less than a year, became coordinator of the team of education experts that helps teachers and the directors of our schools create good education. For a while, I was actually fulfilling two roles in that position, which proved to be too much. A few months ago, I handed over my responsibilities as team lead, and now I focus on the content-strategic side of the innovations we're working on.'

### *Higher education in transition*

'Avans – like many higher education institutions – has big ambitions. We want to offer flexible, modular education that is well aligned with the field and supported by digital applications. We are moving towards curricula in which students no longer go from point A to point B and then get their degree, but instead take different routes while being allowed to take longer to complete their studies. They're getting more freedom of choice in putting together their course programme and tailoring it to their level. This requires a new educational design, and teachers will have to start viewing education differently. If you're teaching a second-year course, you won't be able to assume that every student in your class has already taken subject X or Y in the first year. I'm trying to help organize that transition. Which steps do you take first, and which steps do you take after that? How do you make sure the quality is good? What's our definition of high-quality education anyway?

I don't want to become one of those managers who's still going 'I also spent three years in front of the classroom' two decades from now. That's why I find it important to keep venturing outside the policy bubble.'

### *The plant has to keep running*

'A friend of mine works in the chemical industry. Once every few years, they do a turnaround at her plant: they shut everything down and do maintenance on all the pipes, motors, gears, plugs – everything. Sometimes it takes months before they restart. I said to her, 'We're also doing a turnaround, but our plant has to keep running.' Educational transitions are quite tough. There's not a lot of room for manoeuvre in teachers' daily schedules, so you can only make incremental adjustments, and that requires vision and strategy. But that's really the only way to do it. You can't design education on a drawing board, you have to try out small adjustments to see what works. That sometimes puts teachers in a position where they feel insecure, but in my experience they're professional enough to handle that.'

### *Fountains of change and clear standards*

'I see our transition as a fascinating interplay of top-down directing on the one hand and letting innovations emerge on a small scale on the other. Mario Kieft, an expert in organizational change at the Open University, calls the latter 'small fountains of change'. In an organization, you need groups of people who will just go and *do* something new. You set the course top-down, but those small fountains are what drives change. As a bridge builder, I'd say the real trick is bringing those two things together – to make sure those fountains can flow freely and be of use to other people as well. Because they shouldn't just benefit the happy few. It's important that we set standards together during implementation: if a student takes module A in programme X or module B in programme Y, there must be a certain uniformity. This means, for example, that we use the same terminology, follow the same educational principles and bring consistency to the provision of information. To keep people on board during a transition, you also need to be persuasive. That's the political side of the process, which I find very interesting as well.

We want to achieve our current ambitions at Avans before 2025. There was a slight delay because of Covid, but all in all it's a manageable timeframe. Still, the goals you set and the path you take will always change along the way. I love that dynamic! (*Laughs.*) I would find it much harder if someone said, 'Here's our plan for the next five years – it's set in stone.'



#### *Profile*

**Name**

Marian Kat-de Jong

I was already 'circling' higher education before')

**Position**

'My formal title is senior policy director, but I'm also on the management team at the Learning and Innovation Centre, and I call myself an educational innovator'

**Total appointment**

1.0 FTE, 50 % of which is spent on guiding organizational transition and 50 % on embedding changes in educational policy, 'but it's all fairly fluid'

**Institution**

Avans University of Applied Sciences

**Relationship with the ComeniusNetwork**

Received a Teaching Fellow grant in 2018 to develop and implement a writing curriculum in Avans' laboratory programmes; set up the Anchoring Change circle together with Jessica Zweers.

**Department**

Learning and Innovation Centre

**Work experience in higher education**

years at Avans – to the day – on 1 June ('but

## Youssef's law: education plus personal passion lights a flame



*Lecturer-entrepreneur (or entrepreneurial lecturer) Youssef El Bouhassani teaches a whole range of science subjects at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA). A double winner of Lecturer of the Year, Youssef is passionate about his teaching. He is co-founder of LeerLevels, an app designed to make education more efficient for teachers and more personal for students.*

'Plutarch once said "Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel." I keep that in mind when I teach. Students see me for one hour and are then expected to work independently on the same subject for another four hours. Unless they leave my class thinking "Yes, I want to know more about this!" there is no way they are going to do that with conviction.'

### ***Lighting your own fire (to kindle a flame in your students)***

'As a teacher, it's always worth asking yourself "What lights my fire?" I think the answer lies in what interests you outside of teaching. That could be anything from current affairs to music to stand-up comedy. For me, it's programming. The interface between education and technology – especially artificial intelligence – is where my own development takes place. That's where I learn things that I can't learn anywhere else. After all, there's no school that trains teachers in advanced programming. So I try to apply my own personal interest to solving the problems I experience in education. That's another tip I'd like to give my fellow teachers: get stuck into a real-life situation. Try to gain a clear view of the core of the issue and explore possible solutions. That way you can learn so much more than you would by taking a course for a day.'

### *Education is hugely important*

'I became a teacher because I enjoy standing in front of a group of people and telling a story. But social commitment is another motivator. Many of my opportunities in life stem from a good education. The Netherlands is still a great place to live, but there are negative trends: student results are down, inequality is on the rise, the tutoring industry is expanding, and the teacher shortage is worsening, especially in the sciences. If no one opts to be a teacher anymore, the problem will only get worse. I am grateful for the solid education I received and I want the same for my children. Besides, education is what drives our knowledge economy. That's why six years ago I took the decision to at least give teaching a try and fortunately I'm still here today.'

Innovative tech companies give their employees one day a week of free play. Educational institutions should really be doing the same.

### *Words and the silences between them*

'In my classes, I ask a lot of questions.' *Youssef gives a broad grin.* 'To the discomfort of many of my students, I keep quiet until someone says something. As soon as an answer comes, I respond encouragingly and look for more answers, more perspectives. It's not my style to make things harder than they already are. When we start on a new topic, my first move is to get students to stop and think about what the words actually mean. For example, I am currently developing a project on the particle accelerator in Geneva. That thing is called the Large Hadron Collider and we know that it accelerates protons so that they bump into each other at high speed. But what does the name mean? Large: so it's a big thing. It is a collider, so things bump into each other. And what on earth is a hadron? It's another name for a proton. It all makes sense! Going back to the names of things and thinking about what they mean makes a subject less intimidating. The next time students come across a new word, they will hopefully have developed the reflex to do the same themselves.'

### *Stepping back*

'For a while I kept track of what I spent my time on at HvA. Around sixty percent was taken up with preparing and giving lectures, a smaller proportion was spent on lab work and projects, and somewhere at the bottom of the list, with less than five percent, was my own learning! All through school and university I devoted my time to absorbing knowledge but as soon as I started teaching my personal development practically ground to a halt. Innovative tech companies give their employees one day a week of free play. Educational institutions should really be doing the same. There are budgets for this kind of thing, but they are rarely used up. Most of us are so busy on a daily basis that we simply don't have the time. That figure of five percent got me thinking: if I can't find ways to develop in my work setting, then I'll just have to do it outside work. I was already working on a practical project, the LeerLevels app, with Jonas Voorzanger, a friend who teaches at a secondary school. We both decided to step back from teaching at least one day a week so that we could focus more on the app. That's been our approach for the past four or five years.'

### *Learning levels*

'Jonas and I noticed that our classes involve a great deal of repetition and don't offer much opportunity for personalization. Vast differences can exist within a class of thirty students: some have no trouble getting to grips with the material, while for others it is too challenging or not challenging enough. We wondered if we could find a way to automate some of the more repetitive elements, to give a student explanations and exercises that reflect their understanding at any given moment. We discovered that it can be done, as long as your system meets two criteria. First, you need to structure the teaching material differently. Not in a linear fashion, as in a book, but as a network. A network like that becomes very large very quickly, so the second thing you need is a navigation system that can tell a student: "You're getting stuck at point x because you haven't mastered principles b and c yet, so practise those first." Those two things enable each student to absorb the knowledge they need by taking a different route. Jonas and I built the first prototypes of the tool ourselves. We started with physics classes and expanded step by step, adding content, new subject areas and functionalities. It is now a working app that is used in several schools.'

### *1.2 million*

'After a number of pilots at HvA, the Executive Board nominated the app for the Higher Education Premium, launched for the first time last year. We were thrilled, not least because it was a great opportunity to spread the word about the phil-



osophy behind the app, regardless of whether we won. Amazingly, we came first! The prize will enable us to accelerate the development of the app and expand the team. Over the next three or four years, our plan is to offer open access to even more modular material so that every teacher can incorporate it in their own approach. And we aim to make the software smarter. Of course, we also want to know what works and what doesn't. For example, we are curious to know what kind of impact a system like LeerLevels has on how teachers approach their classes. How will they structure their fifty or one hundred minutes of class time once their students start finding their own route through the material? For that research, I am looking for people with a critical outlook who are not afraid to point out the flaws in the system.' *(Youssef laughs.)* 'As one of the proud co-creators, I'm not the right person for that job.'



### Profile

#### Name

Youssef El Bouhassani

#### Time devoted to teaching

80-90%

#### Position

Lecturer and entrepreneur

#### Other activities

Co-founder of LeerLevels, an app that uses artificial intelligence to enable large-scale personalized learning ('that's what takes up my free time')

#### Institution

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

#### Programme

Applied Physics

#### Relationship with the ComeniusNetwork

Became a member after winning 2018 Lecturer of the Year and was awarded the top Higher Education Premium last year for his LeerLevels app.

#### Employed in higher education

Almost 6 years

#### Total appointment

0.8 FTEs

## For Ilja, learning is the most fun thing there is



*As curriculum developer, STQ trainer and programme manager of a large-scale innovation project on learning trajectories, Ilja Boor knows every corner of the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Her ambition is to help equip all students with the necessary skills to tackle society's transitions.*

'Ten years ago I stood at a cross-roads: should I continue in research or dedicate myself to teaching? The combination wasn't working any more. *(With twinkling eyes)* What I'm going to say now is super nerdy, but my favourite brain cells are astrocytes, and that was also my field of research. I became hyper specialized. But after a while, it made me feel trapped. The world is a lot bigger than this, I kept thinking. On top of that, there was the academic rat-race: the time and energy it costs you to apply for research grants, without getting enough back. Another influence was the hassle with contracts, which meant I never knew whether I would be able to build a scientific career with job security. I will always have a place in my heart for scientific endeavour, but you can't focus on everything at the same time and I made a conscious decision for university teaching. I like the university environment, I like teaching and personally I think learning is the most fun thing you can do.'

### **Catalyst**

'My background is in molecular science and initially I gave practical classes, and designed the practical part of courses on cell biology. I was quickly asked whether I wanted to set up a whole course. Then that became a learning trajectory. From innovating one study programme I was given the opportunity to get involved in multiple study programmes and so I became less of a lecturer and more of a curriculum designer. In 2018 I was awarded the Senior Fellow grant from the Comenius programme for the project 'Towards the self-directed student'. That was a

real catalyst. Being awarded the grant brought me recognition and appreciation for the innovations that I had developed up to that point. You get a kind of external stamp of approval that says: that's OK, what she's doing. It led to me being asked to take on some new tasks and I was given access to positions that are relevant but rather scarce. I'm now working as curriculum developer at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies (IIS) and at the UvA Teaching & Learning Centre (TLC) as Senior Teaching Qualification (STQ) trainer and co-programme manager of the Visible Learning Trajectories Programme.

### *Self-direction and visible learning lines*

'I'm a great advocate of self-direction in education, of problem-driven learning, and letting more come from students rather than only spoon-feeding them information. That's the golden thread running through all the innovation that I've developed. In many subjects, knowledge becomes obsolete quite quickly, so we have to set up educational programmes such that students learn to be pro-active learners, while developing and monitoring their own progress. This demands metacognitive skills and insight into what is expected of them and where they stand. Lecturers are also assigned a different role. That's why we're developing the Visible Learning Trajectories Tool. It gives programme management, lecturers and students a good overview of the attainment goals and learning objectives of the programme, and which courses contribute to which goals. This makes the curriculum more coherent. We used the Senior Fellow grant to expand the project so that students can monitor their progress and, in consultation with their instructors, learn to adjust their strategies. Since then, we've been busy at the TLC with the teaching teams mapping out the learning lines for all our 83 Bachelor's programmes. It's fantastic to be working on innovation on such a large scale.'

### *Teaching transitions*

'The IIS will be devoting itself in the next four years to designing (part of) programmes that train students to make a meaningful contribution to society's transitions. I'm talking about the energy transition and tackling social inequality. The terms that we use to talk about this are impact learning, challenge-based learning and transdisciplinary education. (*With amusement.*) People get irritated if you use those terms interchangeably, but generally speaking they're all based on the same idea: we have to teach students more than just monodisciplinary knowledge. For example, they have to learn to listen (deep listening), entertain different points of view and work with others. We want to train people who can connect and build bridges. One of the electives that we've designed is Building Bridges for Global-Local Challenges. In the course, students from four European

universities work together on sustainability goals. One of the learning objectives is intercultural communication; the students find it quite difficult to work together. Another learning objective is social entrepreneurship, meaning they really have to create something, for example an app for sorting waste.

### *Teamwork and more time*

'How can a university facilitate educational development? *(With satisfaction.)* If I could have my way, I would make more time available and really partner up with the teaching teams so that we could decide together: what do we want to achieve with this curriculum and how will we get there? I would also schedule set times to work together with all the course coordinators on the entire curriculum. If, for example, your objective is to help students become self-directed, you can't do that all by yourself in one stand-alone training or course. Collaboration is like killing two birds with one stone: professionalization (because you learn from and with each other), plus renewal of your curriculum. *(Laughs.)* But anyway, it's not up to me. Mind you, this is not a utopia, it's already happening on a small scale.'

I'm seldom the first in a group to give my opinion, because I already know what's in my own head. I'm much more curious about what other people think.

### *Co-*

'What particularly typifies my style of working is that I'm goal oriented and there's "co" in everything that I do. I'm co-programme manager of the TLC's big learning trajectory project; I was co-founder of the ComeniusNetwork and thereafter co-chair. I love co-creation, because I'm convinced that you achieve much more when you work with the right team. I'm seldom the first in a group to give my opinion, because I already know what's in my own head. I'm much more curious about what other people think. By working together, you can make enormous qualitative leaps. I get inspiration from my work at the UvA, but the ComeniusNetwork is also an excellent source. The members are all so energetic and completely open for collaboration. I can't think of any other network that brings together so many people from different educational institutions. It's a great place to recharge and get new ideas.'

## Future

'I want to develop high-quality educational materials for open source. Right now I'm working on the project Toolbox for Transition Makers for IIS, together with the alliance TU/e, WUR, UU, UMC Utrecht (EWUU). This collaborative project arose from the ComeniusNetwerk. In co-creation with lecturers we're developing a toolbox for teaching transition, which will supply ready-to-go teaching and assessment formats to lecturers. I would like to eventually link up the toolbox with international developments. Otherwise, I'm studying like crazy to learn about designing transitions. I've been spending a lot of time listening to podcasts, reading books on leadership and change management. Also I'm trying to become current on what's going on in the world today, about geo-politics. I want to keep going along the road that I've been travelling on to make education future-proof. And my most sincere wish is that every student will be given access to that high-quality education.'



### Profile

**Name**  
Ilja Boor

**Total appointment**  
1.0 FTE

#### Positions

Senior interdisciplinary curriculum developer (60%); Senior Teaching Qualification trainer (20%); co-programme manager of the university-wide educational innovation project Visible Learning Trajectory Programme (20%).

#### Time devoted to teaching

100% ('even though my three roles are intertwined')

#### Other activities

Evaluator of teaching grant applications for NRO and regularly invited as a speaker

#### Institution

University of Amsterdam

#### Relationship with the ComeniusNetwerk

In 2018 I received a Senior Fellow grant for the project 'Towards a self-directed student', was co-founder of the network and member of the board of directors until February 2022.

#### Departments

Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies (IIS) and Teaching & Learning Centre (TLC)

#### Work experience in higher education

For 10 years with full focus on education ('when I got my doctorate and was doing my post-doc I was also teaching education, but on a completely different scale')

## Annoesjka sets the tone with her career in education



*Annoesjka Cabo works at Delft University of Technology as Director of Education in the faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science, and as Academic Director of the Teaching Academy. She also still finds time for teaching and doing a bit of research. Everything she does is devoted to sending enthusiastic, independent-thinking people out into the world.*

'After I finished my doctorate in mathematics at TU Delft in 1994, I first devoted myself to my other great love – music. For eighteen years I played the violin in different orchestras, taught violin and conducted. Once in a while I thought, I would like to teach math again because there are so few teachers, especially good teachers. Just before our three daughters left home, TU Delft sent out a job ad for a lecturer that fit my profile. Teaching at a university sounded even more enjoyable to me than teaching at a secondary school, so I decided to apply.'

### ***Mathematics for non-math specialists***

'Mathematics is important for all future engineers, so two years after I started at TU Delft, I went to work on the PRogramme of Innovation in Mathematics Education (PRIME), an innovation project for teaching mathematics in engineering programmes. Along with lecturers and students, we introduced blended learning, developed active learning activities and modified teaching material to fit these modes of instruction. It's interesting to teach math to non-math specialists because many students would never have chosen to take such a course. They enrol in the TU in order to learn how to construct bridges and then all of a sudden they have to learn all these abstract concepts. I enjoy the challenge of showing them why it is useful for their topic of study, too. Since I became Director of Edu-

cation I'm less directly involved in the project, but I still do some teaching in order to keep connected to the practical side. I also do some of the research into the effectiveness of PRIME. For example, we investigate whether students understand the material better if we use augmented reality, which lets them experience things in three dimensions.'

### *Teaching Academy*

*(With amusement.)* It's not in my character to just do whatever I'm told. I'm always thinking about how things can be done better. This led to me being given more and more responsibilities, which helped me develop my vision on education. As a lecturer, as Director of Education and as Director of our Teaching Academy, I'm always trying to push our teaching up to a higher level. The Teaching Academy is a community for everyone at our university who is involved with teaching. We're closely connected with the Teaching and Learning Services, which provides teaching support. We organise events that put the spotlight on teaching and learning, such as lunchtime lectures, a journal club, education conversations and a big Education Day event. We also award Education Fellowships to academic staff who are really engaged in teaching. They can submit a proposal for a two-year innovation project. We are currently trying to create the next step: an innovation in Delft engineering education initiative (we're not allowed to call it an institute). The main concept is to conduct research on educational themes that are relevant to our study programmes. For example, reflection is very common in medical programmes, but has not yet taken off in engineering. Subjects like sustainability and assessment are also important for our students. A member of faculty can select such a theme and will receive research assistance from a doctoral candidate and postdoc with a background in educational psychology. This allows him or her to compile a dossier and continue to grow. I'm one of the first at TU Delft who furthered my career through teaching and education, and there are others who want to do that too. They have something similar in Utrecht that has also been another source of inspiration. We're waiting for final approval of the Executive Board, but it would be really cool if it got the go-ahead.'

### *Always in motion*

'How do I manage everything? To start with, I'm good at listening. I try to find out what's going on, why people want something or don't want something. There's a kernel of truth in almost everything. Others also tell me that I'm good at bringing people together. It's not effective if ten people each in isolation discover something, so in the Teaching Academy I try to get people to team up on their initiatives so that the eight faculties are not working in silos, but can

learn from each other. This kind of culture of exchange needs some further development at our institution. Another thing is that I don't give up easily. I believe in what I'm doing, but without becoming inflexible. I have a lot of enthusiasm, I don't tire quickly or become negative, which means I can put a lot of energy into the things I do. Maybe other people find me tiring sometimes, because I always have new ideas, I'm always in motion. Another development is that I have just been appointed as a full professor. That's a real honour and also gives me a chance to reach the highest level of teaching, as a Teaching Academy. *(With an infectious laugh.)* But how I'm going to combine it with my other tasks is still a mystery to me.'

Change doesn't always run into obstacles;  
you can create something that people will  
want to stand behind.

### *Dream university*

'If I could have things my way, students who come to study at TU Delft in the future would be given the task of setting up their own learning pathway, while receiving good guidance on how to do this. In that pathway they would work intensively with other students on large integrated projects, while also having plenty of time for play and for philosophising. This all contributes to academic thinking. In parallel, there could be a continuous assessment of basic skills in such things as math. Hurdling from exam to exam, as we do it now, wouldn't exist any more. Obviously there would have to be less time pressure in such a learning pathway. *(Sighs deeply.)* Well. As a university we should become more aware of the fact that every generation of students has grown up in a slightly different world and may also have different needs. Our lecturers would convey their love for their subject, stimulate enthusiasm in their students and also be valued for those things. Not only in words, but in time and professional opportunities, too. Teaching would no longer be seen as a burden. And the university would be a safe place for everyone, students and teachers, without injustice, unfairness or abuse of power.



How much of this dream could become reality within ten years? Ten years isn't that long, because all the structures would have to be changed. Maybe five percent. If you move things five or ten percent in one direction, the movement becomes visible and can create a snowball effect. I'm quite optimistic about what you can achieve and about the people who want to join that effort. Change doesn't always run into obstacles; you can create something that people will want to stand behind. That's why it's important to keep dreaming.'



## Profile

### Name

Annoesjka Cabo

### Work experience in higher education

10 years (but also taught during her doctorate).

### Positions

Director of Education in the faculty of Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science (50%), Academic Director of the Teaching Academy (40), lecturer and researcher (10%)

### Total appointment

1.0 FTE ('although everything doesn't fit in that')

### Institution

Delft University of Technology

### Time devoted to teaching

'Everything I do is devoted to education, but I use about 5% for classroom teaching in order to stay connected with teaching.'

### Faculty

Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Computer Science

### Relationship with the ComeniusNetwork

Since 2021 part of the first cohort of lecturers and educational innovators who became members based on their motivation and demonstrable experience with educational innovation.

### Department

Teaching Academy

# Final word

Are you inspired by the portraits of these ten engaged university teachers and would you also like to get to work on your teaching identity? By thinking through the questions below, and discussing them with others, you can clarify and strengthen your own teaching identity. These questions have been adapted from the article by Van Lankveld et al. (2021). You can use these questions to reflect on yourself as a teacher, both in the past and in the future. This will make you more aware of what motivates you as a teacher. It will also help you to get more grip on, and confidence in, the choices that you make in your educational career.

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## *How do you see your experience as a teacher?*

- Why did you become a teacher? Was it a conscious decision?
  - When you look back at your development as a teacher, what changes do you see in your teaching?
  - What experiences have formed you as a teacher?
  - What helped you to grow as a teacher?
- 

## *How do you connect your teaching role with your other roles?*

- How important is education to you in comparison with your other roles, such as researcher, manager or policy maker?
  - Can you give a practical example of a time when you successfully integrated the different roles?
  - How to devote your time over the different roles and tasks – do you reserve special days for teaching and others for research, or is it all mixed together? Are you satisfied with this division?
  - If you could decide how to delegate your duties yourself, how much of your appointment would you ideally devote to teaching? To what extent is that different from the way it is now?
-

***What characterises a good teacher? Do you see and value this in yourself?***

- What are your qualities as a teacher?
  - What do you find important in your contact with students?
  - What do you consider to be an ideal teacher in higher education?
  - Do you have a role model in higher education? Why does this person inspire you?
- 

***How do you see yourself in relation to others?***

- How would you like to be seen by others?
  - To what extent do you feel part of a community of teachers?
  - What characterises you as a teacher in comparison to other teachers?
- 

***What are your dreams for the future and what do you need to make them reality?***

- What kind of teacher would you like to be in the future? What do you need to achieve that?
  - What are your goals and desires for the future in the field of education?
  - How do you see your future career path?
-

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