Rianne de Heide

Faculty of EEMCS
University of Twente
r.deheide@utwente.nl

Column   Rianne grijpt haar kans

Kindness and Excellence in Academia

Rianne de Heide zal op regelmatige basis in dit blad een column schrijven over een actueel statistisch onderwerp.

A year ago, I learned about an initiative in Denmark, led by medical academics, who want to promote kindness in PhD supervision. Around the same time, national newspapers were publishing about a professor and her partner in Leiden: the university newspaper Mare's headline was "Devastating report: how archaeologist couple got away with misconduct, intimidation, alcohol abuse and theft". UToday wrote[1] (in Dutch; translation mine): "Because of her stardom, a professor from Leiden could cross the line for years." Something was hugely bothering me about the articles in the media: the implicit or explicit connection that was made (not only in this case, but in similar cases too), between being a star scientist and all this misconduct; as if being top of your field would condone any of that. It should be different. Not only for sake of everyone having a safe and working environment, but also for sake of excellent science itself! Half a year later I found an enthusiastic group of fellow academics who endorse this view, and together we created a platform: Kindness and Excellence in Academia.

Kindness and excellence are two sides of the same coin. Having a working environment where everyone feels valued and can be themselves brings out the best in people. If we all propagate kindness, everyone in academia, from PhD students to full professors, can thrive and contribute to excellent scientific discoveries, teaching, leadership, and more. There is a lot of scientific research on how happy staff leads to better results in the workplace.

What is kindness, actually? There is a great blog post by Ben Orlin (maths with bad drawings[2]) about this (and the difference between "kind" and "nice"), but if I would try to define it, I'd say:

Kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. By being kind, we respect ourselves and others. Therefore, being kind does not mean letting others walk all over you. Setting healthy boundaries while still approaching interactions with empathy and compassion is important.

What is excellence? That is an even more difficult question, together we came up with the following. Excellence means being outstanding or extremely good, a term that is so vague and yet so defining in the academic context. In academia we all strive for excellence, and this is closely related to the recent developments in Dutch academia towards Recognition and Rewards. Excellence should not merely be about being the best. We all have different talents: research, teaching, leadership, patient care, administration, and more. We believe that true excellence lies in the diversity of these contributions and the way they enrich our academic community. It is not about being a jack of all trades, but rather embracing and nurturing the varied talents that each individual brings to the table. If everyone is excellent on one aspect and good enough on the rest, and we make sure we hire a diverse team that can give priority to their respective strengths, we can cover full breadth of academic activities not just optimally, but also providing opportunity for everybody to grow, while keeping the individual workload in check.

There are many aspects to the job of an academic in which one can be kind. On our website[3] we want to collect opinion pieces and research on those, accounts of kindness in academia, and offer inspiration and the possibility to contribute and endorse our views for a change to a more open and welcoming environment. Have a look and join the movement!

Referenties

1   https://www.utoday.nl/news/74185/sterrenstatus-en-wangedrag-in-leiden-wetenschap-heeft-zelfde-probleem-als-npo

2   https://mathwithbaddrawings.com/2024/07/09/kind-vs-nice/

3   https://sites.google.com/view/kindness-and-excellence