

1. VISION TEXT – RESPECTING BOUNDARIES AT THE RCA 2019-2020

Our campus: learning together, working together, living together

As a stimulating and ground-breaking learning environment, The Royal Conservatoire Antwerp of the AP University College offers a safe context where there is room to meet challenges. It educates resilient artists and forms a breeding ground for the talent of today and tomorrow at an international level. It is a people-oriented organization, in which students, teachers and staff members come first. A place in which everyone is given equal opportunities and where respect for the value, individuality and background of every person is a priority. A place with clear rules for getting on with each other. A place where staff members, teachers, and students share responsibility for the functioning of the learning environment, and together take bold action when personal safety is at stake. Where people care for each other and together discover and protect boundaries. A place where we can all learn from each other. Participation, empowerment, passion, and diversity are our core values.

Shifting boundaries – searching together for boundaries in context

Art often relies on exploring and shifting boundaries. Arts education does that, too. But the line between pioneering and overstepping the mark is not always robustly defined. Inappropriate behaviour and improper power relationships are sometimes the undesirable results of this. We believe that the safe and productive learning environment which we envisage can only be achieved by respectful treatment of each other and our surroundings. For this reason, we emphasize a clear communication. We recognise the uniqueness of every situation. We choose straightforward interaction between people over vague principles. It is important that we (learn to) engage in an open communication in which students, teachers and staff members have the courage to indicate when they feel uneasy about something and/or have doubts about how far one could go. Within the institution, we encourage and facilitate these open talks. In this way, we create an open and safe learning and working environment which is the ideal breeding ground to explore and push boundaries.

When a boundary has been crossed

The Conservatoire does not stand above society. Inappropriate behaviour is a general theme of everyday life, and not just relevant for arts education. All organizations, including businesses but also educational institutions such as universities and colleges, are susceptible to forms of inappropriate behaviour. As a guiding principle for dealing with inappropriate behaviour in higher education, all relevant institutions have signed the *Charter Grensoverschrijdend Gedrag Hoger Onderwijs* (The Charter for Inappropriate Behaviour in Higher Education). This charter forms the basis of all our initiatives. The charter uses a definition of inappropriate behaviour which is broader than sexually inappropriate behaviour only and we adopt this, too. In the Charter, sexually inappropriate behaviour is defined by every form of verbal, non-verbal, or physical behaviour with a sexual connotation that aims to/results in affecting the dignity of an individual or creates a hostile, offensive or degrading context. The Charter states that inappropriate behaviour cannot always be assessed by objective and/or legal criteria. For this reason, the subjective experience of the complainant must be considered as the underlying benchmark: if a person experiences behaviour as inappropriate, then this must be taken seriously.

In order to put the values of this charter into practice on our campus, we make use of three tools alongside this vision text (1), namely an internal code of conduct (2), a step-by-step plan (3) and an action plan (4).

In the internal code of conduct (2), we make clear what we stand for and in which manner we wish to work together. In general, we focus on the shared responsibility of everyone on our arts campus in situations involving inappropriate behaviour, and also the responsibility of those who witness it. Everyone has a role to play in the realization and monitoring of the safe learning environment which we strive for. Open and appropriate communication plays a very important role in this. For this, we also want to engage in strengthening communication skills, which is part of the action plan (4). In the action plan, clear initiatives are formulated to put our vision into practice. These initiatives range from strengthening skills, over publicising the counsellor and group contact person and finding the right ways to communicate our strategy.

When someone senses that a boundary has been crossed, they must know who to turn to. It must be clear for everyone (the victim, the accused, the witness) where and how the incident can be reported in confidence, and what happens next. This is clearly set out in the step-by-step plan (3). We take a solution-oriented approach to every reported incident of inappropriate behaviour. Searching for suitable and appropriate solutions is our priority. We look for and initiate fitting solutions and measures. This can range from mediation, taking protective measures, starting and pursuing a disciplinary procedure, to the official reporting of a crime. We acknowledge the rights of all relevant parties. Both for the complainant and the accused, stigmatisation and exclusion must be avoided. We carry this process out with respect for complainants and the accused, also in the press and on social media. Although transparency is crucial, we must likewise avoid the escalation of problems, in everyone's interest.

Conclusion

This vision text is intended to inform and support the entire community on the arts campus about dealing with boundaries. It has been created as a result of consultations between students, teachers, staff members and management. The text is therefore expressed in broad terms and commits everyone to continue working on achieving a safe learning and work environment. Freedom of conduct, judgement and learning are the starting points, but this freedom carries with it the responsibility for respectful behaviour and integrity.

The goal of the vision text, the code of conduct, the step-by-step plan, and the action plan is to help everyone to discuss inappropriate behaviour. The code of conduct is considered as a supplement to the educational-, exam-, and work regulations. We must, moreover, encourage everyone to make their best efforts to bring this vision to the attention of others and to make it a matter for discussion, to put it into practice, to link it to a clear step-by-step plan and to constantly let it evolve and be updated.

We are committed to continually refining these initiatives and reviewing them each year because our belief is that they are crucial to how we function.