

## On the vulnerability of Public Engagement

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Thank you so much for this moving laudatio. I'm overwhelmed by these kind words and grateful for the recognition of my work: to receive this award is an immense honour. I'd like to thank the people who nominated me, the OIKOS committee, and especially my line managers Kristoffel Demoen and Koen De Temmerman for providing me with the support to do public engagement work at Ghent University. Receiving this award after an academic career of almost 25 years has compelled me to reflect on what it is I've actually been doing with my working life, especially since I'll be taking unpaid leave at Ghent starting September. So as one major chapter of my life is coming to a close, I want to take this time to reflect, together with you all, about the place of public engagement in the academic system and why it matters, now more than ever.

I started my academic career twenty-four years ago, but it was only fifteen years ago that I first became aware that there was more to academic life than research and teaching. I was organizing a summer school in ancient languages in the UK, and was asked to submit a funding application for 'widening participation'. When I heard that term for the first time, I thought, what's this horrible management speak! Yet I quickly realized the genuine need to 'widen participation' to Classics, as many social groups have limited access to our subject. And so that summer school sparked my commitment to broaden access to Classics both in general and also specifically among so-called 'non-traditional' target groups: those traditionally excluded from the cultural capital which Classical knowledge still represents.

In theory, academia considers public engagement – or whichever term they use for it – to be the third pillar of its academic activity, alongside research and teaching. In reality, however, the academic system may be more accurately described as an upside down pyramid: resources and

support overwhelmingly go to research, then teaching. Public engagement often depends on individuals' commitment, despite it being required in certain grant applications.

The most straightforward type of public engagement is outreach. You as a researcher reach *out* to audiences as I've done with secondary school pupils, teachers, policymakers, and cultural organizations, and you share your research with them. Even these activities carry risks. People mightn't like your work, and make their opinions known. Yet these activities are safe inasmuch as they target a predominantly white, middle-class demographic not dissimilar to academia.

Once we leave these traditional target audiences behind, however, public engagement becomes genuinely vulnerable work. For the past fourteen years, first in the UK and then in Belgium, I have worked with thousands of disadvantaged primary and secondary school pupils unlikely to study Latin or Greek formally at any point, and I've trained hundreds of teachers and students to do the same. In the UK, this led to my being asked to provide policy advice to two Welsh education ministers, and in Belgium, to my first book, *Classics at primary school*. There was a reason I wanted to go beyond standard academic work. When I finished my PhD in 2010, I fell into a deep existential crisis about the value of my academic work in these uncertain times, and doing public engagement work basically saved me. I had no teaching degree or school experience when I started – I was a single mum who loved doing creative activities with my son. I'd heard of a project in Oxford teaching Latin in primary schools, and thought that sounded fun. So I asked my students in the UK if they'd like to get involved. Eight students said yes in that first year, and the rest is history. But I'll let you in on a little secret: I made it up as we went along, and the learning curve was immensely steep.

Because the process of putting ourselves out there, of going beyond traditional academic skills, is vulnerable work. Every year, I get bruised and battered, both intellectually and emotionally, for three reasons I'd like to discuss briefly. First, public engagement work is impossible to do perfectly. I made and still make lots of mistakes. Chapter 3 of my first book is called 'six steps to

transformative learning through classics at primary school', but it may as well have been called 'all the stuff I messed up'. I hate making mistakes and find getting criticism really painful. I tend to sulk before I'm able to reflect and think: 'OK, that was not good enough. How can I do better?'. Even today, criticism still stings, though I recover faster than I used to. I've come to realize not everything is personal: people in your target group may simply be tired or hungry. I've learned to let go of the need to be in full control and for everything to go perfectly.

Secondly, public engagement work pushes us out of our comfort zone. Writing my second book, for example, about the meaning of myth in uncertain times, caused severe anxiety very recently, because I deliberately wrote it to include readers from different places on the political spectrum than myself. It took a gargantuan effort to let go of that anxiety: I was grateful for what last year's wonderful winner of this award, Patrick De Rynck, told me, which was that the perfect book is yet to be written. Doing a radio interview about the book for the programme Voorproevers on Flemish Radio 1 caused further anxiety, as I'd done brief radio interviews before and I'd never felt they'd gone well. I had a light bulb moment when I realized I needed to treat radio speaking as a new skill to master. I practiced the entire weekend before the interview, and this time it finally went fine. Public engagement, in other words, is a lifelong learning process. For some academics it seems to come more naturally. For me it never does, but that doesn't mean you can't practice and get better at learning new skills and putting yourself in a vulnerable position.

The final form of vulnerability is systemic.<sup>1</sup> While universities in theory want academics to do public engagement, they rarely provide adequate logistical support when we take those vulnerable steps, though they do simultaneously tokenize public engagement work whenever

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<sup>1</sup> See Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham NC. Mahony, N., Stephansen, H. (2017). Engaging with the public in public engagement with research. *Research for All*, 1, 35–51. Memorial University's Office of Public Engagement (2024). [The academic impact of public engagement](#). Memorial University. Michener J. (2024). Ethical and transformative scholarly Public Engagement: Pitfalls, possibilities and promises. *Healthcare Policy*, 20(SP), 94-102. Scott, M. e.a. (2018). Widening Access in the UK. How the Impact, Public Engagement, Outreach and Knowledge Exchange agenda has helped. In A. Holmes-Henderson, S. Hunt, M. Musié (eds.), *Forward with Classics*. Bloomsbury.

they need to demonstrate societal value. When budgets are cut or programmes changed, public engagement tends to be the first to go. I've been frustrated about all of these systemic issues, but I've come to the conclusion there is little you can do about them, other than just to go ahead anyway and demonstrate the value of the work by doing it, wherever you are, however you're able to.

If we have to take up such a vulnerable position both personally and systemically, why is public engagement worth it? I have seen the difference it makes in individuals' lives. I can tell you so many stories of pupils, students, teachers, and adult participants that told me my projects made them see things differently, or even changed their lives – and that makes this work so very meaningful for me. However, I want to discuss a second, systemic reason for the need for public engagement. Because the stakes are higher than they were ten years ago. While the US shows a more aggressive ideologically motivated erosion of academia than Europe, we are not immune. Here too the Overton window has shifted to the extent that democratic discourse is under threat. Both in Belgium and the Netherlands, we're witnessing defunding of universities and the rise of academic corporate culture, coupled with decreased student numbers in the Humanities. 'Corporate culture indeed trumps human dignity, healthy relationships and civic engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century university. The result is an entrenched bureaucracy, diminished collegiality and the abuse of vulnerable academics.'<sup>2</sup> All of these external pressures on academia together have led to increased stress and mental health issues – among academics, support staff, and students. It's important we push back, and I believe one way of doing this is by telling a more constructive narrative about human dignity and civic engagement from within academia.

We as researchers of classical antiquity have more power than we think. Classics, as we all know, is not a neutral space. Our discipline has long been abused to uphold colonial and

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<sup>2</sup> Oleksiyenko, A., Tierney, W.G. (2018). Higher Education and human vulnerability: Global failures of corporate design. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 24(3), 187-92.

authoritarian ideologies, and today, antidemocratic groups enact the revival of their version of ‘western civilization’ by returning among other things to a classical antiquity which they perceive as a golden age of cultural purity, masculine strength, and tradition. Our education systems may not align with these antidemocratic ideologies, but that does not mean they are neutral. In 2005, Laure Uwase, a girl who had fled Rwanda with her parents, started secondary school in Flanders. As an adult, she recollects:

‘I was the only Black girl enrolled in Latin at school and was confronted with teachers who seemed astonished that a Black girl was studying Latin... I had to deal with adults who repeated stereotypes and reinforced inequalities... Later I realized that many of my friends were often pushed to pursue technical or vocational education for invalid reasons, and that others had become so demotivated that they eventually dropped out.’<sup>3</sup>

Laure’s experience is confirmed by recent research,<sup>4</sup> and remains relevant today: not much has changed systemically. Not enough – has changed. Of course none of us want children like Laure – or indeed anyone else – *not* to have access to Classics. We’re not responsible for educational structures that were set up in the past, nor for the complicated role classics has played in the centuries of European history. Yet while we’re not to blame for the past, we **are** responsible for what happens next. If we continue considering Classics as a neutral space and continue with business as usual, we’re essentially giving up, and our subject area is bound to die a slow death due to external and internal pressures, and decreasing student numbers. However, since

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<sup>3</sup> Laure Uwase in: Belgische kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers, Bijzondere commissie belast met het onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) en het Belgisch koloniaal verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda en Burundi (1919-1962), de impact hiervan en de gevolgen die hieraan dienen gegeven te worden. Verslag van de deskundigen. *Kamer, vierde zitting van de 55<sup>e</sup> zittingsperiode* (Brussel 2021), p. 556. Zie Bracke, E. (2025). Klassieke talen en mythen in Belgisch Congo: een conversatiestarter. Deel 1. *Hermeneus*, 97(1), 24-30.

<sup>4</sup> Bracke, E. (2022). *Classics at Primary School*, Routledge, chapter 2. Flemish Department of Education. (2011). *Sociale ongelijkheid bij de overgang van basis- naar secundair onderwijs: Een onderzoek naar de oriënteringspraktijk*. Gerhards, J., Kohler, U., Sawert, T. (2021). Educational Expansion, Social Class, and Choosing Latin as a Strategy of Distinction. *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, 50(5), 306–321. Merry, M., Boterman, W. (2020). Educational inequality and state-sponsored elite education: The case of the Dutch gymnasium. *Comparative Education*, 56(4), 522–46.

Classics is not an ideologically neutral space, it also bears the potential to enact positive social change, as I've been trying to do with my public engagement work.

So I would invite each and every one of you here today to reflect on the following question. What part of your academic work would you love to share with the world, and how? Because taking constructive action on the basis of our expertise can 1) support less privileged social groups while 2) providing meaning and resilience in our own lives and 3) bolstering and enriching our academic field in uncertain times. For me, it's a win-win-win situation.

You don't need to work with school children or launch big projects. I can't tell you which people you may want to talk to, but for anyone interested in taking steps, I'm happy to sit down together and have a think. The key is to have a go, listen to people's needs, work in partnership not hierarchically, and learn from your inevitable mistakes. In this way, public engagement can be transformative for *all* those involved. Yet I also think it's time to start acting collectively, cos it takes an academic community to raise a new narrative about Classics. How can we come together to make a positive change?

I recently spoke at the book launch of Jacqueline Klooster's *Medusa in de Spiegel*. In it she discusses the lifestyle trend of dark academia, a melancholy romanticization of creaking old university buildings, idiosyncratic professors worshipped by overly passionate students, and classical literature. Dark academia seems like a harmless trend, but the worrying aspect of this aesthetic is that it fetishizes university education exactly *because* it is perceived as elitist and exclusionary.<sup>5</sup> I see unsettling parallels between dark academia and the current academic system in which we're working – minus the murders. Time to move on, from dark to fair academia of which I think btw Jacqueline's book is a beautiful example. Let this fair academia be rooted in our individual and collective intention to, day by day, work on inclusion, collaboration,

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<sup>5</sup> T.F. Lee (2024). The haunting of classics in the Dark Academia aesthetic. *Classical Receptions Journal*, 16(4), 419-36.

and social engagement. Within the existing academic system, that means extending a ladder downward for those people with less privilege or power, even when we think we're on the lowest rung of the ladder ourselves – whether that's for junior colleagues or students within academia, or for non-traditional target groups outside it. We can offer a safe space for those with less privilege than us to speak up, by prioritizing listening over being right, putting wellbeing ahead of academic profit, and not taking systemic criticism personally. However, alongside this hierarchical system, let's also start working towards a more equitable system, by creating a collaborative space which opens a door to those who have very different lived experiences from us. This can only be to the benefit of all, not in the least the future of our field. None of this is easy by the way. Collaborating genuinely requires us to have 'courageous conversations':<sup>6</sup> it requires us to stay engaged and speak our truth from a place of respect even when the conversation is painful, it requires us not to ignore the discomfort when we disagree with someone, and to expect and accept non-closure. To me, that's the essence of democracy – the essence of the same democratic structures that are currently under threat. By practising this partnership approach with both our non-academic associates *and* with each other – even when content-wise we're discussing literature, ancient history, archaeology, or philosophy – we can start building a fairer academia, one step at a time. This requires vulnerability and courage from all of us. But that is the future of Classics that I can see. It's a future worth putting ourselves in a vulnerable position for, as I've just done with this speech. It's a future worth fighting for. Thank you to the OIKOS committee for this immense honour, and thank you all for listening.

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<sup>6</sup> Singleton, G.E. 2014 [2005]. *Courageous Conversations about Race*. Farmington Hills.