

[Live&Learn]

A botched experiment, a rejected paper: such things are soon labelled as failures in academia. As for talking about them – not the done thing! But that is just what WUR scientists do in this column. Because failure has its uses. This time, we hear from Vincent Blok, personal professor of Philosophy.

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‘Two years ago, I applied for a full professorship, the last step on tenure track. I had created a portfolio and written a paper setting out my vision, and my professor had submitted a letter of recommendation. The assessment was good – that’s a matter of measurable achievements. Then came the interview with a committee. Contrary to all expectations, their recommendation was negative. Initially, I was furious. What were they doing to me now? I met all the criteria – except a course on PhD supervision, but I could catch up on that easily. But their feedback wasn’t about the formal criteria: I wasn’t a ‘figurehead’ for the university yet, and I wasn’t prominent enough internally. I wasn’t aware of those requirements. Tenure track already felt as if I’d had to jump through 100 hoops, and now they were adding a few more hoops. Forget it, I thought at first – I’m done with this farce. But at some point, understanding got the upper hand, and I saw the upside of their feedback. It’s reasonable to expect a professor to contribute to the institution,

and not just promote themselves as an individual on the market. So I embarked on a coaching programme. The experience of working on myself was more important than the ideas in question. Tenure track focuses

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on the person, and that is quite lonely. If you fail, it’s on you, even if people offer help.

In a coaching process like that, you approach the setback constructively: okay, so I’ve got to work on myself, and someone’s going to help me do that. Thanks to the rejection, I became aware of my learning points, and I started actively looking for ways to work on OneWUR. We got a big Research Council project for collaboration between social and technical departments at WUR. But don’t overestimate the role of planning in that. The success of those plans is partly a matter of luck.’

