

Writing your senior teaching application (SKO): tips and tricks

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At Utrecht University (UU), academics applying for a senior qualification in teaching (SKO) have very different experiences and CV's. Academics make their own choices in their personal development and specialise in different aspects of Teaching and Learning. Some choose tasks (or are asked to perform tasks) in organisation and management, while others show a special interest in developing their teaching and take colleagues along in educational innovation. If these tasks are performed at "senior" level, all these academics are eligible to apply for an SKO. Their different and unique experiences will result in a very personal portfolio. It is, amongst others, for this reason that (for most departments and Faculties) no examples of, or structured guidelines for, SKO portfolios are provided.

This document is aimed at academics working towards their SKO application. It provides ideas and tips to clarify what is expected for an SKO and to ease the process of writing a portfolio. As a basis, we use the categories of competences in the [UU framework for teaching qualifications](#), and our experience since 2014 as consultants, mentors and assessors for colleagues working on their SKO portfolio.

Portfolio for an SKO application

In short, an SKO application consists of your CV, a self-reflective text, your vision about education, and several attachments. The CV provides an overview of your experience as a senior teacher/academic. The self-reflective text addresses the competences that you must possess at a senior level. The education vision describes your view on good education, considered at course transcending level. The attachments provide evidence of the statements you make about yourself, e.g. feedback from colleagues, students, reports you have written or examples or illustrations of your work at senior level.

Assessment criteria and senior level

The five categories of competences of an SKO to be addressed in the portfolio can be found in Appendix A of the regulations: competences in the areas of professional development, teaching, feedback and assessment, designing education, and impact. When in doubt whether your experience is sufficient to start writing your portfolio, or whether one or more of your competences are still insufficiently developed, we recommend to start with writing a development document or an annotated CV. Relate in the development document to? your experience regarding all competences, and add ideas for gaining more experience at SKO level. It is a good idea to ask for feedback of your manager or by contacting your departmental or faculty BKO-SKO assessment committee. Some assessment committees even have an obligation or strong recommendation for handing in such a development

document. Information about specific faculty requirements can be found via the above mentioned intranet page.

The two most important indicators for obtaining an SKO are that you have participated in activities that exceed course level and that you have shown a form of leadership in education. You need to show that you can be entrusted with leading or innovating (part of) the curriculum.

- Exceeding course level means that you have been involved in course exceeding activities, for example as coordinator of a bachelor- or master programme, member of committees such as the examination committee or programme committee ('OAC'), coordinator of a 'through-line' (leerlijn). Other course transcending activities could include involvement in curriculum development, in educational innovation projects (e.g. USO-projects), and/or educational research.
- Leadership in education means that you have shown leadership in education, for example as chair of a project (group), educational team, and/or educational committee. Coaching of other teachers is also an aspect of leadership and seniority in teaching.

Tips and tricks: advice for writers of an SKO application

1. The start

- Use the specific regulations and procedures for your faculty, or sometimes even department, that can be found at [intranet](#). The Centre of Academic Teaching and Learning lists links to faculty specific aspects on their [website](#).
- Start with making an overview of all your activities related to education and teaching. This can be in the form of an '**Annotated CV**'. Write down all the activities you can think of and add to this some remarks in how you believe these activities contribute to your seniority as a teacher. Ask yourself the question to which competence(s) the activities contribute and why. Don't underestimate yourself. Often activities are forgotten or considered of less importance for obtaining an SKO, while if you think further, they definitely contribute to one or more aspects of seniority in teaching.

For the 'Annotated CV' you can use different formats. We have seen, for example:

- A Curriculum Vitae with a more elaborate description of your work;
 - Or: A Table with projects/experiences in the first column. In the next columns you describe for each project aspects such as when did it take place, size of the project, what was your task, what made this project/task senior, for which categories of competence do you think this is an excellent example?
 - Or: A Table with (in the rows) your main responsibilities and (in the columns) the five categories of competences;
 - Or: A series of stories about relevant (learning) experiences in recent years
 - Or: A number of *critical incidents* important for how you have developed as a senior teacher
 - Or: ... (make your own format).
- Have a critical look at your 'Annotated CV'. To what extent do you in your opinion already own the competences? If so, you can start writing your portfolio. One option

could be to write, following the overview, a chapter of five sections in which you show that you have these competences, illustrated with examples from the overview.

- If you think you don't own the competences yet, what actions do you have to take? What aspects are missing or are not yet sufficient? How can you solve this? Make a plan, and talk to your manager, supervisor or colleagues about possibilities. Can you be involved in certain activities? Can you take some initiatives of your own? If you start an initiative, how can you involve others and create support? How does this initiative contribute to the quality of teaching within your department or programme? And how does it contribute to your seniority? Make a development plan to work out these ideas, and (if mandatory or strongly recommended) hand it in with your BKO-SKO committee for feedback (see also above).
- Find a mentor/tutor. It can be stimulating and inspiring to talk with someone who can support you, give feedback on your portfolio, and discuss development possibilities with you. The mentor does not have to be someone from your own department, you can choose anyone you like.
- Find colleagues and form a peer-group. Working together, reading each other's portfolio and giving feedback to each other can be stimulating, inspiring and motivating. It relieves you from the feeling that you have to do it all on your own.

2. Write your SKO application: outline and reflection

- When you start writing your SKO application you can take the competences as a lead and have sections, one for each category, and a section with your educational vision.
- Describe in each section what makes you a senior teacher and provide examples. That could mean that you use a specific activity as illustration for two or even more of the categories. For example, suppose you are coordinating a master programme. This activity could be used to demonstrate several of your competences, for example your expertise: you have to have in-depth knowledge of your subject to be able to make decisions about the content of the programme and align the different courses of the programme. It can also be used to demonstrate your leadership or your teaching qualities, because to be able to coordinate a programme you have to show leadership (e.g. leading teachers involved) and teaching qualities (e.g. teaching methods in the programme). Your annotated CV will help you decide how and where to refer to which tasks.
- To make a start with your reflection, or in addition to your main sections, you can look in-depth at one or two of your main activities at senior level and write about them explaining what this activity means for your seniority. So, in the previous example of the master programme you could write a case description in which you describe the activity (being responsible for a master programme), your role and responsibilities, your actions and how and what you learned from them. Did you get feedback on your role? Would you do things differently the next time (and why)? Be honest, ask feedback, look deeply to your own role, and decide afterwards if and how you want this text to be part of the portfolio. Some texts can be too personal to include, but certainly help with writing the self-reflective part of the portfolio.

- Be creative. Make your SKO application your own, by choosing what works best for you. Sometimes that could even mean that you choose a whole different set-up, maybe even digital or a video. As long as it shows that you are senior in teaching most of the time there are no real rules. To be sure, if you want to approach it in a completely different manner, check this with the assessment committee of your faculty or department beforehand.

3. Write your SKO application: education vision

- A vision about education and/or teaching and learning should be well-considered and as much as possible, underpinned with educational literature. The vision can be about higher education in general, but also a specific aspect of higher education, like discipline related education, on-line learning, student-activating learning, or educational policy. Choose a topic of your own interest. For example, if you are coordinator of a master programme, you most likely have a vision about your master regarding teaching methods you find relevant for your students or maybe the position of the subject within society.
- Do show why your ideas and your education vision are worthwhile. Using literature to underpin the statements you make is important, although a vision is not a literature review. Your vision should be *research-informed*.
- Leading questions that have been helpful to others are: How would the programme (or part of it) look like if you had a free hand to change the current programme? What do you value in the programmes/courses that you teach, and why? Which developments do you see currently in society or the labour market, now or in the near future, and related to education (of course), and how should your department deal with these?
- It can help to find a slogan, a short sentence that formulates what in your view quality education is. What are the main points you consider if you are asked to look at the educational quality of a change or innovation proposed by colleagues? For example, a slogan could be: Good education makes people think.

4. Write your SKO application: attachments, feedback on your role

- Collect evidence of your seniority by gathering feedback and illustrations about the statements you make. Think about asking colleagues and/or students to write feedback about how you function as a teacher or leader within education. It is helpful if you ask them specifically what you want to have feedback about (e.g. your didactic skills, your role as a chair of a committee, your part in a course, how you solved an educational problem). What are you most interested in to get feedback on? Use the feedback to learn something about yourself, your role as senior in education, and find out about possible blind spots.

5. Practical matters

- How many pages? Be kind to the assessors and restrict the length of your portfolio to 10-15 pages, plus a few attachments.

- Start with an introduction of yourself to the assessors: in half a page something about e.g. your background and previous jobs, main topics of research, main roles in teaching/the department.
- Structure? Additional to the tips above: it doesn't matter too much which chapter structure you choose. Help the assessors by making sure that they can easily find the relevant information about the five categories of competences, in the chapter structure or perhaps in a summarizing table somewhere in the portfolio.
- It also doesn't matter much where you place the section with your education vision. For some it works to start the portfolio with the vision – easy to refer to in the rest of the text. For others it works better to place it at the end, as a summary.
- For most colleagues, the process of writing has at least two rounds. First gather all information (using e.g. the annotated CV) and start writing in a structure that seems to work for you. Then let someone read along, talk about it, reflect on the text and the structure and start a second round of writing in a structure that fits (even) better.

6. Support

Specifically for the process of writing an SKO application, [support](#) is available at Educational Development & Training:

- From BKO to SKO: A half day meeting, in which the meaning of “seniority in education” is explored by looking at role models and the SKO competences. Activities and experiences are examined that are typically part of an SKO application. After the introductory meeting you can discuss your next step(s) with the course leaders.
- SKO-portfolio track: A series of meetings in which we discuss inspiring topics which will help you expand the content of your portfolio. Literature will be provided and related to your own experience. Participants value the exchange of ideas and examples, and find it useful in compiling their application.
- SKO-writing retreat: Two days in peace to concentrate on writing your application. The course leaders are available to read your texts and provide you with feedback and to support you, for example with finding suitable literature or a style of writing.
- Sometimes a short consultation and some feedback is all you need to start or finish your SKO application. Teachers with questions about their SKO can ask for a [Professional Consult](#) at Educational Development & Training.