



# Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam - Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam - 2024-2025

## Exchange

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam offers many English-taught courses in a variety of subjects, ranging from arts & culture and social sciences, neurosciences and computer science, to economics and business administration.

The International Office is responsible for course approval and course registration for exchange students. For details about course registration, requirements, credits, semesters and so on, please [visit the exchange programmes webpages](#).

# Organizational Culture and Change

Course Code	S_OCC
Credits	6
Period	P2
Course Level	300
Language Of Tuition	English
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Course Coordinator	dr. R.A. van der Lee
Examiner	dr. R.A. van der Lee
Teaching Staff	A.K. Odabasi, J. Hansen, Z. Essanhaji
Teaching method(s)	Lecture

## Course Objective

By participating in the course, students should be enabled to:

- Develop a theoretical understanding of different perspectives on organizational culture and change
- Apply different theoretical concepts and perspectives in the analysis of organizational culture
- Reflect upon the advantages and limitations of the different approaches and methodologies for studying organizational culture and change
- Critically engage with the complexity of organizational culture and reflect upon their own learnings

## Course Content

According to Alvesson (2013), the exploration of organizational culture offers significant insights for understanding organizational life in all its richness and variations. But what do we actually mean when we speak of 'organizational culture'? How can we capture, theorize and study it?

And why bother about organizational culture in the first place? These and other questions will be addressed in the course Organizational Culture and Change.

Rather than providing students with clear answers, definitions and categories to work with, though, this course sets out to explore organizational culture in all its ambiguity, complexity and messiness. It bluntly admits that culture is a fuzzy concept with a plethora of competing definitions deriving from a broad range of different disciplines. This does not mean however, that studying organizational culture is necessarily a chaotic endeavour. Instead, the course tries to sensitize students – in a pretty structured way – to different perspectives and approaches for studying organizational culture, each coming with different interests and framings of the phenomenon.

While most studies on organizational culture are driven by an interest to improve the efficiency of organizational performance, other studies take a more neutral interest ("knowledge for the sake of knowledge"), or even a critical view, framing culture as a potential tool for manipulating employees by controlling their 'hearts and minds' (Kenny et al., 2011). Each of these different perspectives comes with different assumptions about how to best study and analyze organizational culture and to what end.

What most framings of organizational culture have in common, though, is an understanding that culture is not (only) what we see at the surface. Organizational culture is broadly recognized as deeply and often historically rooted in the shared experiences, meanings and values of organizational members. It is frequently expressed and reproduced in symbolic form, indicating the underlying values and basic assumptions of taken-for-granted behavioural patterns. Based on these deep roots, organizational culture is mostly perceived as being difficult to change. This raises new questions – again with different answers – on how cultural change comes about and whether or how it can deliberately be attained.

The course underlines how culture or a system of sub-cultures permeates entire organizations, namely by guiding the interpretations of organizational members in their everyday work life. In this way, culture is closely intertwined with other aspects of organizing, such as leadership, strategy or business ethics. With a particular interest in new work cultures of the 21st century – embracing flatter hierarchies, post-heroic leadership or 'cultures of fun' which lead to a stronger work-life fusion (Fleming, 2005), the course invites students to critically reflect upon the world of work which they are soon about to enter.

While students usually have a common sense grasp of organizational culture already, this course aspires to sharpen their analytic and critical thinking skills, and to provide them with a conceptual language for describing and interpreting the complex cultural dynamics which they will encounter along their work and career lives.

## References

- Alvesson, M. (2013). *Understanding Organizational Culture* (2nd edition). London: Sage -Publications.
- Fleming, P. (2005). Workers' Playtime? Boundaries and Cynicism in a "Culture of Fun" Program. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(3), 285-303.
- Kenny, K., Whittle, A. & Willmott, H. (2011). *Understanding Identity and Organizations*. London: Sage.

## Course structure

The course will be structured along the following agenda:

- Exploring questions around organizational culture
- Understanding the link between organizational culture, identity and control
- Engaging critically with new work cultures in the 21st century
- Addressing the complexity, ambiguity and ethics of culture

## Additional Information Teaching Methods

The teaching approach will consist of lectures, including facilitated text discussions and in-class learning exercises based on the analysis of case studies. The course will ask students to reflect upon their own assumptions and learnings and to be actively present during the course sessions. Next to attending the lectures, the main activity during this course will be reading. It is highly recommended that students complete the assigned course readings prior to attending the lectures. Reading the literature will provide the in-depth knowledge required for following the course contents and it will enable students to apply theoretical insights to the analysis of empirical cases.

## Method of Assessment

### Examination

At the end of the course, there will be a closed-book examination in Testvision with open-ended questions. Details on the exam will be provided during the lectures. The result of the exam should be 5.5 or up.

Estimated study load

Lectures: 28 hours

Reading literature: 84 hours

Exam preparation + Exam: 56 hours

Total: 168 hours

## Literature

### Required reading:

The required course reading will be announced a few weeks prior to the start of the course. Below you can find a list of recommended readings

### Book

Alvesson, M. (2013). *Understanding Organizational Culture* (2nd edition). London: Sage Publications.

### Articles/ book chapters

- Bell, E. (2008). Reading Management and Organization in Film. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (Introduction, p. 1-12) [Available on Canvas]
- Fleming, P. (2005). Workers' Playtime? Boundaries and Cynicism in a "Culture of Fun" Program. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(3), 285-303.
- Kaptein, M. (2011). From Inaction to External Whistleblowing: The Influence of the Ethical Culture of Organizations on Employee Responses to Observed Wrongdoing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98(3), 513-530.
- Kärreman, D. & Alvesson, M. (2004). Cages in Tandem: Management Control, Social Identity, and Identification in a Knowledge-Intensive Firm. *Organization*, 11(1), 149-175.
- Picard, H., & Islam, G. (2018). 'Free to Do What I Want'? Exploring the Ambivalent Effects of Liberating Leadership. *Organization Studies*, 0170840618814554.

## Additional Information Target Audience

Second year Bachelor's students in Bestuur & Organisatie, Exchange students, and students in the Minor Organisatiewetenschap

## Explanation Canvas

Students are expected to check Canvas regularly as this will be the main communication facility for the course. All relevant course materials will be made available on Canvas.