let's do diversity

Summary report
University of Amsterdam
Diversity Commission

diversity
commission

Let's do diversity

Between March and September 2016, the Diversity Commission studied diversity at the University of Amsterdam. Recognizing that the challenge to enhance **social justice** at the University requires active engagement with diversity, the Commission approached the topic along two lines: diversity of people and diversity in knowledge.

Diversity of people is concerned with the challenge of having a diverse academic environment, including people with different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, religions, (dis-)abilities, genders, skin colors, sexual preferences, ages, and other characteristics that shape their position in society. We envision a university that strives toward equal opportunities for all, where people are free from discrimination and feel that they belong. To assess this type of diversity, we asked questions such as: What are the gendered and ethnic characteristics of the people who occupy important positions at the University? Which power pyramids are structural, despite the variety in the archipelago of islands that make up the University?

Diversity in knowledge refers to the challenge to broaden academic traditions and mainstream canons which are solely centered on Europe and the US, by adopting other academic perspectives and approaches to teaching and learning. We envision a university community that is conscious of how academic knowledge is influenced by its historical conditions, and of its social and environmental impact. To assess this type of diversity, we asked questions such as: What epistemic frameworks are favored in a particular discipline? Who are the subjects that 'know' and are taken seriously; in other words: who gets to speak in relation to curricula, in the classroom, in textbooks, and on what grounds?

Diversity presents an opportunity to enrich the University community. Diverse and inclusive environments where a diversity of perspectives is valued breed **academic excellence** (*Nature*, 2014). The University will profit from diversity in ideas to advance scientific thinking and reflections on human cultures and material worlds.

The Commission used a variety of methods to study diversity, from the study of the relevant international, national and University-specific reports, to policy papers, studies and other data, as well as a survey, interviews, discussion circles and the taking and analyzing of photographs. Here we make various recommendations aimed to enhance social justice and diversity at the University, which we present under six main goals.

"We have a blindness that concerns everyone who does not conform to the blueprint of the secular, mostly white middle class."

Strong anchoring of 'social justice and diversity'

1

Scattered across the University of Amsterdam, employees and students actively contribute to the University as a diverse and inclusive environment. There are diversity-rich courses in which students are invited to compare various perspectives, silent rooms have been realized here and there, and over the years several initiatives aimed to improve the position of women have seen the light. However, most of these initiatives have been incidental, uncoordinated and ad hoc, with the University lacking consistent, agreed upon and well-resourced policies to advance diversity.

Fortunately, our survey shows that there is broad support for a diversity policy, or at least such support could be readily mobilized. A majority of the respondents in our survey would appreciate the University becoming more diverse in terms of backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles and schools of thought (62% of the employees and 67% of the

"One of the students made a joke about monkeys and related it to me. I tried to act like I didn't hear it, but sometimes I still get angry when I think about it."

student respondents), and attention to diversity is welcomed by many (61%, respectively 68%). Among those who are seen as members of minority groups, the support is even broader.

Opening the university to the diversity in society

2

In 2015/2016, 14% of all students registered at the University of Amsterdam had a non-Western background, understood in the sense that at least one of their parents was born in a 'non-Western' country (*1cijferHO* database). When we exclude international students, this share is 13%. Although this roughly equals the national average (12% of university students in the Netherlands have a non-Western background) this 13% is relatively low when compared with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (21%) and Erasmus University Rotterdam (22%), which find themselves in cities with comparably high shares of youth of non-Western

descent. Of the employees who filled in the survey, 11% have a non-Western background, which drops to a mere 4% when we exclude the international professionals. For a university that presents itself as firmly rooted in the city of Amsterdam — which has recently become a majority-minority city — this is unsatisfactory.

This lack of diversity affects people at the University. Many of the students and employees with minority backgrounds who participated in our research reported that they lack role models and feel unrepresented at various levels.

1. Recommendations to anchor social justice and diversity

Make the enhancement of social justice and diversity a central focus point of the University, laid down in a Diversity Policy and Action Plan with long-term and short-term goals. Diversity:
- Should have central and vocal support at the very top and be anchored in decentralized practices and initiatives.
- Goals are transparent: on both centralized and decentralized levels people are held accountable and follow-up occurs.
- Encourage and protect participation of all members of the University community, students and staff, particularly those who are systematically underrepresented.

Establish a Diversity Unit as a linchpin responsible for coordination of diversity policies and the implementation and monitoring of the action plan. The Unit should monitor progress toward an inclusive University in numerical terms and research the desirability and implementation of quota with respect to gender and race/ethnicity if those goals are not met within the period set. The Unit should:
- Directly report to the Executive Board.
- Have decentralized branches, as bottom-up support and ownership contribute to its success.
- Have the means to support bottom-up student and staff initiatives.

Establish — connected with the Diversity Unit — a specific, dedicated UvA Meldpunt Discrim-inatie (Discrimination Office) or Ombudsperson for tackling problems, registering complaints, promoting a culture of diversity awareness and offering support from specifically trained and dedicated counselors and mediators. Its authority should go beyond that of the confidential advisers, and — unlike these advisers — representatives of this Unit should not be positioned within departmental hierarchies. This should result in safe and efficient procedures for dealing with discrimination; procedures that are currently lacking.

Cooperate with national and international universities to stimulate this process, determine best practices and make comparisons, and bring these issues to the attention of supra-institutional bodies such as NWO, KNAW, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and the National Accreditation Organization NVAO. Closely engage in networks such as the LNVH, the National Network of Diversity Officers, the Platform Diversity in Science, the Alliance for Equal Chances in Higher Education and the European Network for Ombudsmen in Higher Education.

In collaboration with other Dutch universities, develop a Dutch Diversity Charter for Higher Education and a central expertise unit which develops criteria for institutional excellence that include measures of diversity and social justice.

2. Recommendations for a more diverse staff and student body

Attract, retain, support and promote more people with minority backgrounds in order to increase their presence, particularly in visible positions and positions of power, and in representative bodies. For example, by:
- Making staff application procedures more diversity-informed.
- Increasing student recruitment at Amsterdam and regional schools with large populations of pupils with minority backgrounds.
- Maintaining the schakelcursussen (bridging programs) that allow for the transition of students from HBO to the University.

Anchor these goals in concrete obligatory objectives with explicit support from the Executive Board. Make results transparent, hold actors accountable and ensure follow up. When objectives are not met voluntarily within a determined time frame make them binding (quotas).

Register ethnic backgrounds on aggregate levels solely for the purpose of monitoring and enhancing social justice.

Toward a socially just university

3 Exclusion is widely experienced at the University of Amsterdam. Of the employee respondents, 41% have observed exclusionary practices, while 15% have personally experienced discrimination. For the student respondents, these figures are 33% and 8%, respectively. Of employee respondents who are strongly hindered by an illness or disability, 27% have experienced discrimination. Of international employees with non-Western backgrounds, a staggering 42% have experienced discrimination. Women experience more discrimination than men, and older women more than younger women. Clearly, **the experience of working and studying at the University of Amsterdam is not the same for everyone.**

People are set apart from the mainstream — are excluded from the 'norm' — when they are placed in the position of outsider (or other) or when they are addressed as representatives of a certain group, which often occurs. Micro-aggressions, such as being ignored or facing insults disguised as jokes, can be extremely hurtful and have a profound impact on people's university experience. Mechanisms are lacking to safely address discrimination, intimidation and violence. Participants in the study explained that they were not taken seriously when they raised issues of discrimination.

People who are seen as belonging to minorities not only suffer from exclusion in everyday interactions, but are also disadvantaged in more structural respects. On average, students with ethnic minority backgrounds have lower study results. Women in general, and men and women with ethnic/racial minority backgrounds, are underrepresented in higher positions, which is at least partly indicative of discrimination. For people with physical disabilities, life at the University is challenging, as many buildings are still ill-equipped for people who use wheelchairs, or who have problems with hearing or sight, or other disabilities.

From egalitarian thinking to 'diversity literacy'

4 Crucial to enhancing social justice and diversity is having a language in which these themes can be sensitively addressed. Unfortunately, in many places at the University such 'diversity-informed' language is lacking. Our research shows that many people are confident in speaking about gender and internationalization, but are uncomfortable in speaking about race and ethnicity. The fear that addressing differences — and diversity policy — contributes to stigmatization and exclusion is understandable, as much of the Dutch terminology is used in stigmatizing and polarizing ways (such as 'allochtonen' and 'autochtonen').

Furthermore, several widespread ideas hamper the implementation of diversity policy and need to be explicitly challenged. Fear that enhancement of diversity threatens academic excellence is widespread, especially with regard to race/ethnicity.

1. "Our meritocracy or egalitarianism ensures equality"

There is tension between the egalitarian, meritocratic view and the acknowledgement of differences. This egalitarian view is based on the assumptions that "everybody is the same" and that "only talent matters, so failure and success can exclusively be attributed to the individual." Research has proven that these ideas are ideals rather than facts. Attention to social inequality

along various axes of difference — gender, race/ethnicity, educational status of parents, etc. — is indispensable.

2. "Targeted measures jeopardize excellence"

If societies were entirely meritocratic and talent was an objective measure, then perhaps all talent would indeed be equally free to access the University, and targeted measures would only reduce the quality. However, what is commonly seen as success, talent, leadership and excellence is not neutral, but is primarily based on masculine, Western and middle-class socio-economic characteristics. In addition, people tend to favor those who are similar to themselves, and with whom they feel a connection, which affects selection procedures and evaluations. Furthermore, not everybody enjoys equally favorable conditions regarding economic, social and human capital. Is and should everyone then be treated the same? This view needs to be challenged.

3. "Science is independent from actors and power structures"

It is important to acknowledge that science is produced in geo-political and historical contexts and is thus linked to power hierarchies. A science that is conscious of this position, or 'positionality', is a science that can better understand its implications and possible impact on social and environmental processes. This explains why a diversity of perspectives and a diverse body of students, teaching staff and researchers is important.

4. "The canon leads the way"

The existence of disciplinary canons or mainstream perspectives should not mean that we exclusively use and teach the canon, nor that we should ignore its positionality.

5. "Good scientists are nonreligious"

Unfortunately, these assumptions result in the exclusion of people who are religious. Secularism is too often confused with atheism, which not only spreads the unproven claim that only non-religious individuals can do good science, this also ignores personal religious needs in everyday life (which for some people include spaces for prayer).

The lack of diversity-informed language is a crucial issue, which is difficult to resolve overnight. Before 'diversity literacy' can be promoted, it first needs to be developed by means of awareness-raising courses and conversations. International examples offer sources of inspiration. We recommend the avoidance of terminology that is dated, polarizing, exclusionary and pejorative, such as the n-word, which still circulates at the University of Amsterdam. We also recommend refraining from the use of terms such as 'Surinamese' or 'Turks,' when Surinamese-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch people are meant. Frameworks of decoloniality and intersectionality should be central to this diversity-informed language (see explanations at the end of the summary).

It is more important to open spaces for respectful dialogue rather than avoid all dialogue for fear of speaking incorrectly or offensively. However, this does not mean that everything may be said in the name of 'frankness'.

> "It was very uncomfortable to be put in a position where all of a sudden I felt like I had a different role than the rest of the students in the class."

From 'closed' knowledge to 'open' knowledge

5 Too often, curricula only present the dominant scientific perspective and ignore or even disqualify alternative or critical voices. Not all researchers and teaching staff realize or teach how knowledge is shaped by the context in which it is produced and evaluated. However, the fact is that knowledge is created by specific people (historically these were usually white men); is enabled by specific funds (industries, governments, funding agencies); emerges from specific political and commercial agendas (colonialism, slavery, religion, war, 'third-world development,' democracy, integration, commercialization of medicines and healthcare, capitalism, neoliberalism); and is inspired by specific worldviews and norms (currently in the Netherlands: secularism and the emancipation of women and the LGBT community). Obviously, people who evaluate and use this knowledge are also embedded in such contexts, as is the University of Amsterdam itself. In other words, knowledge is 'positioned'.

Recognizing that all knowledge and every scientist has a distinct position — recognizing their 'positionality' and the underlying power arrangements — creates space for alternative and critical perspectives and experiences. This enriches academic work as it stimulates dialogue, critical thinking, and the exploration of new angles. Furthermore, it challenges power inequalities and allows legitimacy to the thoughts and experiences of people with different positionalities.

Ignoring this positionality does not do justice to history and the present, nor to the variety of experiences and views. The proud celebration of the VOC period, for example, as is evident in the unproblematic use of the Heeren XVII (Lords Seventeen) meeting room in the Oost-Indisch Huis, is a painful example of how the University ignores its positionality. For people who trace their descent from formerly colonized peoples, this uncritical celebration is hurtful and ignores their views about this room and this part of Dutch history. As the students and employees who participated in our study strongly articulated: having space for multiple perspectives is motivating and enriching. Fortunately, such diversity-rich courses do exist, but these are often not core courses.

"I have now dissociated my personal opinions from University work. Now, I hate the results of my own research because I am reinforcing the dominant one-sided view. However, my grades are good now..."

3. Recommendations to enhance social justice

Take discrimination and racism more seriously, and more explicitly denounce acts of exclusion.

Increase awareness of the impact of certain phrases, jokes and attitudes through a more visible and more explicit code of conduct.

Create safe mechanisms to address and tackle instances of discrimination (see Point I. about the Ombudsperson).

Consider the creation of small-scale teaching environments, with more guidance from the start, and smaller distance between teaching staff and students.

Proceed with improving the accessibility of University buildings. Make accessibility for differently-abled people into a permanent focus.

4. Recommendations to develop and enhance 'diversity literacy'

Develop a non-threatening, non-stigmatizing vocabulary, through:
- Organizing, promoting and supporting ongoing conversations among students and staff.
- Learning from international best practices.
- Drawing on external (national/international) expertise.
- Using frameworks such as decoloniality and intersectionality.

Use diversity-informed language in formal and informal communication.

Disseminate this language through voluntary courses included in academic skills courses and BKOs.

5. Recommendations to increase the openness of knowledge

Give institutional value and visibility to practices enriching diversity, through including diversity as an important element in training, in teaching evaluations, in course evaluations, in research evaluations and promotion criteria.

Make researchers, teaching staff and students more aware of the positionality of knowledge, **and create space for divergent perspectives.**

Use 'curricula scans' to monitor and stimulate the development of diversity-rich courses given by experienced teaching staff and trained professionals, who can also act as a sounding-board for teaching staff in developing their courses.

Ensure institutional protection for researchers and teaching staff who engage with non-mainstream perspectives in their disciplines.

Develop — as in U.S. Ivy League universities — **courses** in every faculty that reflect on issues such as the genealogy of the discipline, positionality and the roles that gender, race/ethnicity, class and (dis-)ability play in this particular field of studies.

Further develop and stimulate **participatory teaching methods.**

Enhance awareness of the historical role of the University of Amsterdam, for example, in colonial times.

Moving forward

6 This report has mapped some main contours of diversity at the University of Amsterdam, revealing its strengths and weaknesses in this domain. The Commission is aware that the changes required will not occur overnight. Nonetheless, in the words of the poet Adrienne Rich, "a wild patience" will take us far.

6. Recommendation to move forward

In order to begin to address the multifaceted challenges of diversity, it is necessary that the Executive Board of the University institutes **a new Commission to inaugurate the next stage.** This Commission, Div-II, will consist of a delegation of relevant groups who first formed the Pre-Commission for Diversity, of university functionaries preparing the way for a Diversity Unit and of a representation of the faculties.

It will have as its main tasks:
- **To draft a concrete Diversity Policy and Work Plan** for the coming three years on the basis of the present report, including the establishment of the Diversity Unit.
- **To engage the faculties in a discussion** of the present report and to map the possibilities for the enhancement of diversity in their own spheres.

Underlying frameworks

As noted above, the broad frameworks of decoloniality and intersectionality should be central to dealing with social justice and diversity at the University.

Decoloniality is a perspective that allows us to see how the dynamics of power differences, social exclusion and discrimination (along the axes of race, gender and geographical and economic inequality) are connected to the ongoing legacy of our colonial history. Decoloniality also helps us understand the role of the University as a modern/colonial institution in the reinforcement of Western perspectives at the expense of the plurality of knowledges of the world. A decolonized university has open forms of expertise, and is open to intercultural and plural approaches to knowledge.

Intersectionality is a perspective that allows us to see how various forms of discrimination cannot be seen as separate, but need to be understood in relation to each other. Being a woman influences how someone experiences being white; being LGBT and from a working-class background means one encounters different situations than a white middle-class gay man.

Practicing intersectionality means that we avoid the tendency to separate the axes of difference that shape society, institutions and ourselves. This separation, for example, makes us consider gender discrimination and racial discrimination as two entirely unconnected phenomena, which is why gender policies tend to only target white women. Race simply disappears from the agenda when the focus is on gender, and vice versa. The idea of intersectionality allows us to see why distinct social positions of individual students and staff determine how they experience the University. Intersectionality urges us to be sensitive to the variety of trajectories, experiences and perspectives among students and staff.