

Strategy plan Diversity Office 2021-2024

A. Introduction and Background

Diversity has been an important dimension of VU policies for many years. In the VU strategy-plan 2015-2020 it was listed as one of the central strategic themes and this has been continued in the strategy plan 2020-2024. To implement this, one of the deans was appointed as Chief Diversity Officer. Near the end of the Strategic planning period, the Diversity Office had reached its full size with four (part time) Diversity Officers (Education; Research; Campus and Community; Human Resources and Communications), one secretary / coordinator, and several student diversity officers. With the appointment of a new CDO, the Diversity Office now presents its plans for the new strategic planning period.

This strategic plan has been written under exceptional circumstances that are highly relevant for the work of the DO. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected not only campus life and opportunities for encounters and activities, but also exacerbated the risk of segregation and the obstacles that less privileged students and staff may encounter. The polarised cultural conflicts in the USA resulted in intensified debates in the Netherlands about (in)equality and (in)equity, which in turn led to increased awareness in faculties and other parts of the organisation. The Diversity Office played a key role in supporting the university in addressing these challenges, speaking out publicly, and developing suitable policies. In this document we reflect on the current situation and present the Diversity Office's plans for 2021-2024.

B. Assessment

It seems right to conclude that the Diversity Office has acquired a solid position and that the responsibility for diversity and inclusion is increasingly felt and articulated across the board in central and decentral university leadership. VU is seen by other universities, politicians, and organisations as a positive example of implementation of D&I policies. In the past few years VU has achieved the following:

- Establish a fully functional Diversity Office with strong internal links to diversity officers and diversity committees in faculties, a variety of staff and student organisations, and the committee for diversity, inclusion, and accessibility of the university student and staff representative council.
- Develop and implement the Mixed Classroom model, including training of individual teachers and establishing programs for international students.
- Develop evidence-based policies through solid research into study success and migration backgrounds, staff composition, support base for diversity policies, experiences of inclusion among students.
- Develop and implement HR-policies for gender and cultural diversity, together with faculties and HR-department, resulting in the targeted percentage of female professorships.
- Develop and offer training programmes for social safety, including MeToo-Academia and Social Bystander trainings.
- Develop and implement empowerment programs for Highschool students and first generation freshman students (Be Prepared and Better Prepared)
- Establish an international cooperation program focussed on diversity with the University of California Los Angeles and the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein, South-Africa)

- Support or initiate the development of student and staff organisations like VU-pride and VU-Family.
- Encourage awareness about various dimensions of diversity and inclusion through conversations with faculty and service unit leadership and through working directly with policy makers in HR, Communication, Student Affairs, and other units.
- Organise and participate in awareness raising activities and publications through 3D, AdValvas, and other outlets, for example in the Courageous Conversations following the Black Lives Matter-protests.
- Develop a consistent, clear, and connective voice in debates regarding diversity on campus and beyond.
- Have visible diversity in the Executive Board.
- Establish an external network in relation to D&I, which includes national and international higher education institutions like the Aurora-network, expertise centre ECHO, LANDO, the Amsterdam municipality, and VSNU.

At the same time we see several risks and challenges that need to be addressed

- Cultural diversity among academic staff is remarkably low; many teams are culturally rather homogenous. Exit teams with staff leaving the university are not common, which makes it difficult to monitor motives and possible D&I issues involved.
- Students from various minority groups experience lower level of belonging / inclusion and higher levels of discrimination. Talented students with non-western migration background in general don't embark on academic career paths.
- On the level of deans and directors, cultural diversity is not visible.
- Although in many parts of the university diversity is increasingly seen as important, in other parts the relevance of attention for D&I is insufficiently acknowledged. Furthermore, 'colour-blind' and deficit-oriented thinking are still present, as is the myth that there is a trade-off between diversity and academic quality.
- Among 'traditional Dutch' students there seems to be a decreasing support base for diversity themes and policy
- Because of privacy regulations and conceptual complexities, it is at present almost impossible to monitor quantitative developments in student and staff diversity (e.g., in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, or political and religious identity).
- Apart from some scattered initiatives, there is no structural attention for potential bias in curricula, including hegemonic approaches to knowledge. The debate about the potential need to decolonise the university is still in its infancy.
- The attention for staff and students with functional limitations is not always an integral part of VU policies and practices.
- The COVID-19 regulations have medium and long term impact on inclusion, equal opportunities, and so on, requiring extra attention from D&I perspective.
- D&I-related change can lead to possible frictions and resistance that should not be ignored but addressed.
- Pressure on the university's resources can lead to deprioritisation of diversity and inclusion.
- It is unclear what D&I-policies are applied by VU's suppliers with personnel working on the VU-campus.

C. Fundamental perspectives and positioning

Inspired by these developments, resources, and assessment, the VU D&I policy presented here is grounded in the following fundamental perspectives:

- Diversity is at the same time a reality to be reckoned with, a rich resource, and a sometimes challenging condition. Many D&I issues are dilemmas to be taken seriously, not problems one can resolve quickly. Our D&I policy therefore should be optimistic about the possibilities, but not naïve, and willing to address the complications.
- D&I policy aims to create a more inclusive and just environment for all. The aim is to widen the horizon of insights and broaden the group that can fully participate. This involves a critical examination of the unintended bias of the hegemonic groups and norms, also when this bias shapes the standards for talent and assessment and defines excellence and career opportunities. This does not mean that those who are more privileged because of background or context are blamed, but that those with less privileges enjoy the same opportunities. Instead of equal treatment (equality), a just environment is about equality of opportunities (equity).
- Quality and academic excellence are central to all university policies. Diversity of teams and leadership fosters excellence if (and only if) differences of perspectives, insights, opinions, and ways of working are invited, exchanged, and constructively evaluated. Diversity in terms of academic (and political) opinions is therefore self-evident in the university. D&I-policies are intended to increase staff and student participation and communication and raise standards of academic excellence.
- Underrepresentation of certain backgrounds among staff or students is a reality that can have many different causes. It at least implies a loss of valuable perspectives. Because it can also be an indication of systemic barriers that preclude these groups to join and/or stay, critical analysis is needed to assess whether this is the case and – if so – remedy these causes where possible.
- The focus on demographic categories when focusing on systemic inequality should be balanced by nuance and caution, as it easily reinforces stereotypes and oversimplification. Individuals are not simply a representation of a group. Attention to groups is useful to monitor indicators of systemic barriers to individuals. Taking an intersectional approach, we acknowledge that each student or staff member may belong to a number of groups and be excluded from others, experiencing privilege in one dimension of diversity and marginalisation in another. Dimensions relevant to D&I-policy are at least: gender; ethnicity and cultural background; religious identity and worldview; language; sexual orientation; physical and mental (dis)abilities.

While responsibility for developing and implementing D&I policies lies with the individual faculties and supporting services, the Diversity Office's task is to stimulate these policies and their implementation, raise awareness, offer expertise, generate knowledge, and initiate critical debate. In the annual plan 2020 the DO decided upon three working principles:

- Diversity policies are embedded in the organisation. DO is a flywheel for change and does not take over responsibilities from others in the university.
- Diversity policies are evidence based where possible. By monitoring data and processes we can identify best practices and pitfalls, stimulate a sense of urgency, and assess impact.
- Diversity policies are shared and exchanged with other organisations, locally, nationally and internationally.

The DO does so by focusing on five interlocking dimensions (campus and community, education, research, HR, and communication) and on three levels:

1. *Diversity and representation of staff and students:* How diverse is the staff (WP & OBP) and student population of the faculty or other unit, including decision-making bodies? On what dimensions is more diversity desirable (ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, able-bodiedness, class background, and intersections of these)? How inclusive are the recruitment processes for staff & students? Which dimensions of diversity are represented in textual and visual presentations of the university or the units?
2. *Inclusion of staff and students:* Do all staff members and students have equal opportunities (study success, subsidies, promotion), experience the environment as safe and inclusive, and experience a sense of belonging? How does the environment allow for, invite, and utilize nonmainstream, marginalized views, perspectives, opinions and styles? Is everybody aware of mechanisms of exclusion, privilege and the power of social and academic norms, like the definition of 'excellence', 'talent', 'leadership'? How can we unmask hidden power mechanisms in an attractive, nudging way, leading to change?
3. *Content and Critique in research and education:* How do research projects make use of and contribute to diverse and inclusive knowledge and/or do they only strengthen dominant scientific ideas and existing academic and societal hierarchies? Which groups benefit from the research we do? How does our education allow students to develop into all-round, diversity-sensitive professionals, who know the strength of diversity and inclusion, and know how to tap into this potential and address its challenges? How do curricula help broaden perspectives and avoid bias? How do we avoid the bias of privilege and engage critically with the distortions of inequities in history and in the present, including inequities in global relations?

This leads to the following matrix for the Diversity Office strategic plan 2021-2024:

| | <i>Diversity / representation</i> | <i>Inclusion</i> | <i>Content and Critique</i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Campus and Community | ... | ... | ... |
| Education | ... | ... | ... |
| Research | ... | ... | ... |
| Human Resources | ... | ... | ... |
| Communication and marketing | ... | ... | ... |

In the next section, the strategic plans for each of these dimensions will be elaborated with reference to the three levels.

D. Building blocks

The current D&I policy builds on many resources including the National Action Plan, the VU Strategic Plan, and Diversity policy plan for 2020.

The National action plan Diversity and Inclusion (September 2020) includes several approaches that can be applied on the institutional level:

- Embedding D&I in existing instruments, like quality control, assessment, research funding, HR-policy, and training.

- Monitoring intake and outflow of staff and students for longitudinal developments, success rate, and experienced safety and inclusion.
- Benchmark our D&I-policy to national standards and international peer comparison (for example in the Aurora-network).
- Formulate ambitious target percentages for female professors as well as for other function groups and for other diversity dimensions.
- Connect the D&I policy to policies and facilities on prevention of intimidation and misbehavior.
- Follow the example of NWO with programmes stimulating Dutch researchers with a non-western background, refugee researchers, and female researchers in science and technology.

Diversity is central to the *VU Strategic Plan 2020-2024*, embedded the core values responsible, open, and personal. The priority area ‘Diversity’ is directly connected to “A Broader Mind”. Diversity contributes to quality of education and research because of the utilization of a wider array of perspectives, approaches and talents. Concrete examples of D&I policies mentioned in the VU Strategic Plan include the Mixed Classroom model and Community Service Learning, but the plan doesn’t contain a concrete D&I vision.

The *Diversity Office Year Plan 2020* identified the following five broad targets:

- Increasing staff diversity in all layers of the organisation.
- Stimulate intake, flow, and success of students with migration background, first generation students, “stackers” (students coming to university from vocational education programmes), and refugee students.
- Materialising an inclusive learning and working environment for students and staff.
- Increasing diversity sensitivity and intercultural competencies of students and staff and the support base among both staff and students.
- Development of expertise on diversity in Higher Education, sharing good practices and expertise in international collaboration programs (Aurora, UCLA/UFS).

E. Targets and plans 2021-2024

1. Campus and Community

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| Diversity / representation | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revitalise the Bridging Success program for interaction between and collaboration of the different student groups of the VU 2. Increase student participation in diversity networks and activities |
| Inclusion | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Participate in the community libraries project of the University Library and other community building initiatives for a diverse university 4. Contribute to the sustainability of VU Pride, VU Family and other inclusion networks and initiatives 5. Revise and stimulate the use of codes of conduct enhancing social safety and dialogical attitudes |
| Content and Critique | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Initiate debates in 3D about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and other themes relevant for our diversity policy 7. Organise Courageous Conversations about aspects of the Decolonizing the curriculum and decolonizing the university theme and Black Lives Matter |

2. Targets and plans Education

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| Diversity / representation | 8. Continue Be/Better Prepared (Pre-University College, SOZ) 9. Evaluate student recruitment and selection processes with Faculties to become more inclusive |
| Inclusion | 10. Implement and further develop the Mixed Classroom model, including student initiatives that foster social integration, aligned with A Broader Mind and Community Service Learning 11. Develop an Inclusive Education Toolkit 12. Increase diversity among teachers (HRM) |
| Content and Critique | 13. Develop and implement a process for curriculum scans and potential curriculum revisions to become more diverse and inclusive by reducing bias and by including non-canonical knowledge |

3. Targets and plans Research

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| Diversity / representation | 14. Together with HRMAM, DO will request (aggregated) data about ethnic composition of VU staff through the "Cultural Barometer". These data will provide quantitative insight needed to monitor interventions 15. Produce a second edition of the diversity faculty factsheets (2023) based on first edition (2020) |
| Inclusion | 16. Investigate negative attitudes toward diversity (2020-2021) 17. Monitor VU family interventions (2021) 18. Repeat I belong @ VU survey (2022) 19. Develop student success monitoring tool with D&I dimensions |
| Content and Critique | 20. Monitor how VU research gives attention to marginalised voices and contributes to just and equitable societies 21. Initiate discussions about inclusive research environments, and about diverse and inclusive knowledge production 22. Inventory, support and initiate research about decolonisation |

4. Targets and plans Human Resources

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| Diversity / representation | 23. Increase cultural diversity among academic staff 24. Implement and monitor exit interview protocols for staff |
| Inclusion | 25. Integrate attention for diversity and inclusion in leadership training programmes; train leaders and managers to increase diversity sensitivity 26. Develop D&I toolkit with concrete HR-interventions (including soft landing, social safety, and annual consultation) |
| Content and Critique | 27. Critically evaluate assessment criteria in order to allow for more individual differences |

5. Targets and plans Communication and Marketing

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| Diversity / representation | 28. Increase representation of cultural diversity in corporate events |
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| | <p>29. Increase representation of diversity in textual and visual VU-presentations</p> <p>30. Diversify target groups for communication</p> |
| Inclusion | <p>31. Facilitate 'bonding and bridging' relations</p> <p>32. Develop inclusive communication strategy with 3D, Advalvas, and other outlets to address D&I issues</p> |
| Content and Critique | <p>33. Critically assess implicit bias in recruitment texts, images and procedures, both for job postings and for educational programmes</p> <p>34. Critically assess the image toolbox to avoid bias and stereotypes</p> <p>35. Challenge national and international student recruitment processes for bias</p> |

6. Targets and plans DO General

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|------------------------|---|
| Other / organisational | <p>36. Strengthen role of faculty diversity officers and 'diversity champions' in service units</p> <p>37. Offer inspiration for faculties, services, networks (for example with guidelines like the Document about Corona & Inequality and the Diversity Policy Toolkit, and the dialogues with faculty boards)</p> <p>38. Develop student leadership with regard to D&I</p> <p>39. Organise an accessible regular walk-in hours for employee's and students to share and evaluate ideas and/or struggles in a safe environment</p> <p>40. Further develop DO through teambuilding, expertise, intervision. Revision the composition of the team and the role of student diversity officers.</p> |
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Annual Plan 2021

Based on the strategic plan 2021-2024, the Diversity Office will focus on the following DOTs for 2021 (starting fall 2020):

1. *Monitor Staff Diversity*: Together with HRMAM, DO will request (aggregated) data about ethnic composition of VU staff through the “Cultural Barometer”. These data will be the baseline measurement to monitor future interventions.
2. *Mixed Classroom*: (Further) development and VU-wide implementation of Mixed Classroom
3. *Develop and implement Curriculum Scans*. Based on existing formats and together with students and lecturers, we will develop a framework for curriculum scans regarding D&I, with attention to representation, critical approach to knowledge, and inclusive perspectives.
4. *Staff diversity plan*: DO and HR, together with stakeholders in the university will develop an integrated approach to diversify the staff, culminating in a toolkit that faculties and service units can use.
5. *Decolonising University*: Together with VU Family and other stakeholders in and beyond the university, we will develop a roadmap to decolonising the university. The aim is “to change the game and the players and therefore the outcomes”. This will include critical review of our colonial history (and VU’s role in the aftermath) as well as unjust structures and processes that keep (neo)colonial effects in place.
6. *Awareness D&I*: Develop initiatives to increase awareness on all levels: deans and directors, lecturers and researchers, students.