

**BELONGING@VU**

**DIVERSITY OFFICE  
VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT AMSTERDAM**

**ENGLISH VERSION**



**VRIJE  
UNIVERSITEIT  
AMSTERDAM**

# Belonging@VU

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# Introduction

Do students at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (hereinafter VU Amsterdam) feel that they belong at their university? To what extent is the feeling that you belong related to academic success? What are the similarities and differences between groups of students and, for example, between faculties?

With these research questions in mind, in spring 2019 the Diversity Office of VU Amsterdam drew up the 'Belonging@VU' survey and distributed it to everyone studying there. This survey asked students about the atmosphere of their learning environment, sensitive topics such as exclusion and discrimination, and whether they felt that they belonged at VU Amsterdam, their faculty and their study programme. Around 2,000 students filled in the survey, providing a range of both quantitative and qualitative data that will be discussed in detail in this report.

Belonging is a topic that is discussed by academics from a wide range of disciplines in a variety of ways.<sup>1</sup> Various studies have been conducted into feelings of belonging in the education system. They usually examine the extent to which pupils or students feel at home, feel themselves to be similar to their fellow students and have the feeling that they fit into the general atmosphere or environment.<sup>2</sup> These studies explore belonging via a cluster of questions that describe the personal, intimate sense of feeling at home somewhere.<sup>3</sup> In this context, 'home' not only refers to a physical space or location, such as a university building, canteen or classroom, but also symbolizes feelings of comfort, safety and familiarity.<sup>4</sup> A sense of belonging, therefore, goes deeper than just feeling at home somewhere, which is why this term does justice to the data and to students' experiences.

The following chapters reveal that students' experiences with regard to VU Amsterdam, their study programme, fellow students and teachers are extremely diverse in many aspects. The factors responsible for such divergent experiences include differences in gender, health, sexual orientation, nationality, culture, perspective and religion<sup>5</sup>. The Diversity Office has therefore developed a data infrastructure over the past three years to advise policy makers at VU Amsterdam on themes such as diversity, inequality and inclusion.

VU Amsterdam sees diversity as an invaluable resource. The importance that it attaches to diversity is anchored in the university's three core values:

- Open: VU Amsterdam works to promote connections between perspectives, opinions and world views, as we believe that exposure to differences leads to new insights and innovations, a sharpening of our focus, and excellence. This requires that we acknowledge, accommodate, appreciate, and above all actively utilize, differences within education, research and other social interactions.
- Personal: the added value that difference entails not only concerns space for group identities but is primarily about space for individuals. VU Amsterdam wants everyone to feel part of our community as a unique individual, regardless of their background, orientation or worldview, and for each person to express and develop their unique talents in their own way. This means that every student at VU Amsterdam must be given an equal opportunity to complete their studies successfully.
- Responsible: VU Amsterdam aims to train academics to become citizens who feel at home in a diverse society and are able to contribute to society in a constructive manner. One of our basic premises is that students learn to recognize the value of diversity and how to harness its potential. This also means that VU wishes to be alert and responsive to the various forms of discrimination and exclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhimji, 2008; Bromley, 2000; Croucher, 2004; Duruz, 2002; Hartnell, 2006; Johnston, 2005; Malone, 2007; Marshall & Foster, 2002; Nagel & Staeheli, 2005; Schueth & O'Loughlin, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Johnston et al., 2007; Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007; Master et al. 2016; Meeuwisse et al., 2010

<sup>3</sup> Labeab, A. (2019). Diversity, belonging and study progress at VU University.

<sup>4</sup> Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. (no date -a). Diversity - Profile and mission - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Consulted on 11 November 2019, at <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/profiel-en-missie/diversiteit/index.aspx>

In brief, VU Amsterdam sees diversity as a resource that enhances both creativity and talent development in education and research and, as such, it is a factor from which students benefit.<sup>6</sup> It is also important to VU Amsterdam that everyone studying here feels welcome, and that it provides an inclusive learning environment where students have equal opportunities for personal development and making a contribution to academic and societal developments.<sup>7</sup> This report was drawn up on the basis of the 'Belonging@VU' survey in order to formulate specific objectives and to evaluate and adjust both policy and current endeavours. The survey contains information on a range of topics that are closely connected to VU Amsterdam's core values and policy objectives, including feelings of belonging and acceptance, group formation, support provided by the university, and student involvement.

Scores for these topics give us an indication of the atmosphere at VU Amsterdam. It is important to note that this is the first time that this survey has been distributed here. It is unfortunately not possible, therefore, to compare score averages with earlier results at a university-wide level. At university-wide level the sample is an important indication of what is going on among students at VU Amsterdam (see the Methodology chapter, page 7). It also enables us to compare the results per faculty in order to describe the various atmospheres and make comparisons at faculty level.

An important part of this report focuses on how various groups of students at VU Amsterdam perceive inclusion and diversity. Previous studies have shown that there are differences between groups of students with regard to academic success, social integration and acceptance.<sup>8</sup> For example, the 1CijferHO-bestand<sup>9</sup> shows that students with a non-Western migration background take longer to graduate than students without a migration background, whether their previous education was abroad or in the Netherlands. It also shows that women take less time to complete their study than men. A study of diversity at the University of Amsterdam has shown that LGBTQ+-students encounter discrimination and exclusion more frequently than heterosexual students. A similar pattern has been found for students with disabilities as compared to students without disabilities, and for Muslim students as compared to students with other religious beliefs.<sup>10</sup> The literature shows that academic success and experiences of inclusion and diversity influence each other.<sup>11</sup> This report provides a basis for further research into the relationships between the various topics and between different groups of students at VU Amsterdam.

## Reader's guide

In this report we will discuss the outcomes of the 'Belonging@VU' survey. We will start with the methodology chapter, in which we describe the design, execution and analysis of the survey. We will then look at feelings of belonging among students, both at university level and per faculty (Chapter 1). After this, we will discuss respondents' experiences with group formation (Chapter 2), exclusion and discrimination (Chapter 3) and with being able to recognize themselves in follow students, teachers and visual materials (Chapter 4). The final three substantive chapters examine student involvement (Chapter 5), support offered by VU Amsterdam (Chapter 6) and study progress (Chapter 7).

In these chapters, the data has been split according to the personal characteristics and background information of the respondents. We have organized the data on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, disability, migration

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<sup>6</sup> Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. (no date.-a). Diversity - Profile and mission - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Consulted on 11 November 2019, at <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/profiel-en-missie/diversiteit/index.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Sloodman, M., & Wolff, R. (2017). Diversity Monitor 2017; Meeuwisse, Marieke, Sabine E. Severiens, and Marise Ph Born. "Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups." *Research in Higher Education* 51.6 (2010): 528-545.

<sup>9</sup> The '1 Cijfer HO bestand' is a file drawn up by the Education Executive Agency (DUO), containing study data of students enrolled in higher education.

<sup>10</sup> Wekker, G., Sloodman, M. W., Icaza, R., & Vazquez, R. (2016). Diversiteit is een werkwoord. Report issued by Commissie Diversiteit Universiteit van Amsterdam

<sup>11</sup> Meeuwisse, Marieke, Sabine E. Severiens, and Marise Ph Born. "Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups". *Research in Higher Education* 51.6 (2010): 528-545.; Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.

background and religion in order to gain insight into the differences and similarities between groups. If differences are found between groups of students on the basis of demographic characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, or migration background, it does not necessarily mean that they can be explained by these characteristics; these differences do, however, call for further exploration of the causes and mechanisms that may provide an explanation for them.<sup>12</sup> The open answers given by the respondents usually provide a good explanation of how the differences can be interpreted, and have been used to illustrate the statistics. Each chapter also examines how feelings of belonging stand in relation to the specific topic addressed in that chapter, e.g. group formation or support provided by VU Amsterdam. We conclude this report with a final chapter in which we summarize our findings.

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<sup>12</sup> Categorizing students can potentially contribute to stereotyping, profiling and essentializing difference. Although we are aware of this, it is necessary to use categories when conducting quantitative research into inequality. In order to connect with societal Dutch research and discourse, we have used categories that are in line with the categories used by Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek): (1) Students without a migration background (grandparents, parents and students born in the Netherlands), (2) first generation non-Western students (students born in a non-Western country and pre-educated in the Netherlands), (3) first generation Western students (students born in a Western country and pre-educated in the Netherlands), (4) second generation non-Western students (students born in the Netherlands, but with at least one parent born in a non-Western country), (5) second generation Western students (students born in the Netherlands, but with at least one parent born in a Western country), (6) international students (students with a foreign educational background).

# Methodology

In spring 2019, the 'Belonging@VU' survey was distributed to every student then enrolled at VU Amsterdam. Students were asked about their personal characteristics (gender, age, parental education, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, migration status, religion) and their study progress (ECTS, number of subjects they had passed, workload, time spent on their study). They were also asked about belonging, group formation, discrimination and exclusion, recognition, support and student involvement. In this chapter, we will look at:

- how we approached students and asked them to participate in the survey
- how the survey was structured, and ethical questions such as respondents' anonymity and informed consent
- the response
- why we chose to ask about specific personal characteristics
- how we went about analyzing the data.

## Approaching VU students

We approached VU students to ask them to participate in the 'Belonging@VU' survey in a variety of ways. First of all, students received an invitation in their VU-mail containing a link to the survey. In this mail we explained the importance of the survey, in addition to the fact that filling it in gave them the chance to win one of 100 bol.com gift vouchers worth €20. Students could enter the draw by stating their email address in a separate form that was not linked to the survey.

We also used VU Amsterdam's intranet (VUnet) to encourage students to fill in the survey through announcements containing web links to the survey. In addition, posters and flyers with a QR code were distributed on VU Amsterdam's campus to encourage students to participate, and we drew attention to the research through VU's news ticker. We also tried to encourage VU students to participate in the survey by means of an interview with two of the researchers in *Ad Valvas*, VU Amsterdam's independent news platform. Finally, we asked every lecturer who had taught a subject in spring 2019 to announce the survey in one of their lectures, using a PowerPoint slide with a QR code.

## Structure, anonymity and informed consent

The survey was made available in both Dutch and English. Students at VU Amsterdam could fill in the survey using *Qualtrics* web software. For reasons of privacy, it was decided not to send individualized links connected to an individual email addresses, but to distribute a general link that everyone could use. Unfortunately, this means that we cannot be entirely sure that the survey was not filled in by people from outside VU Amsterdam or filled in several times by the same person; however, we consider that the likelihood of this occurring is small. *Qualtrics* uses cookies to prevent respondents from being able to fill in the survey twice (and to ensure that students filling in the survey can pause it to continue later). Respondents could, however, circumvent this by using a different browser or deleting their cache. To prevent individuals from outside VU Amsterdam completing the questionnaire it was only distributed on VU Amsterdam intranet, not on VU internet pages.

Owing to the sensitivity of the subject matter, students could fill in the questionnaire anonymously and no personal information was requested that would make it possible to trace answers back to the respondents. We also did not collect identification data, such as the student's student number, name or email address. *Qualtrics* also adheres to the ethical code of the *American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)*<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Qualtrics. (2009, 19 March). *Ethical Issues in Surveys*. Consulted on 13 January 2020, at <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/ethical-issues-for-online-surveys>

Before filling in the survey, students were informed of the topics it covered, such as ‘to what extent do students feel they belong at VU Amsterdam?’, ‘What characteristics and circumstances are related to greater/lesser feelings of belonging?’, ‘How does feeling that you belong relate to academic success?’ and ‘What facilities are needed?’. Students were informed that they could pause the survey and continue it later, provided they used the same computer. They were also informed that they could stop at any time and skip any questions they did not wish to answer. Finally, they were told that incomplete surveys would also be used for research and research reporting. Before starting the survey, respondents had to tick a box to indicate that they agreed to all this.

## Response

All or part of the survey was filled in by 2,204 respondents. Due to missing values, the report was based on 1,950 completed surveys. Table 1 on page 10 gives an overview of the numbers of respondents per faculty and per student category. The response was 9% of the total number of VU Amsterdam students. However, the response varied per faculty; for instance the Science and Social Sciences faculties had a relatively high response rate (17% and 11% respectively). Women were slightly overrepresented (67% in the survey and 58% of the student population).<sup>14</sup> The distribution between bachelor and master students in the survey reflects the actual student population: 55% of respondents were on a bachelor programme, while the percentage of bachelor students at VU Amsterdam is 58%; 45% of respondents were on a master programme, while this percentage of the student population at VU Amsterdam is 42%.<sup>15</sup>

As is the case with any survey, and particularly surveys distributed by email, this is probably not entirely representative of the university as a whole, and it is probable that people with a greater affinity with diversity and inclusivity are overrepresented. Given the large number of respondents, however, the survey still sketches a picture of the circumstances and opinions of a substantial part of the university population. In addition, this large number enables us to identify trends and to investigate, for example, whether certain experiences and opinions are more common among certain groups of respondents than others.

When it is broken down, however, the groups become smaller. For example, at faculty level, findings are sometimes based on a relatively small number of respondents. Due to the smaller number of respondents in the faculties of Religion and Theology and Dentistry, these faculties were not included in descriptions at faculty level. Furthermore, only groups larger than ten were included as separate categories in the tables. For example, as fewer than ten students said they belonged to a Jewish religious denomination, they were not included separately in this study.

## Personal characteristics

As previously mentioned, the survey asked respondents about a number of personal characteristics. Because the questionnaire mainly contains closed questions and students could not always identify themselves in this study, the wording of these identifications has been taken into account. Every question in the study therefore contained an ‘other’ category.

In the survey, we asked about the student's own country of birth, as well as that of their father, mother and grandparents (in the case of students who were born in the Netherlands and both of whose parents were also born here). We used these questions to draw up categories concerning migration background. We are aware that categorizing students could contribute to stereotyping and essentializing identities, but when conducting research into inequality, it is necessary to map actual and potential social inequality, making it necessary to compare categories

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<sup>14</sup> This was in 2017, but the percentage did not fluctuate greatly in the period shown between 2012 and 2017. <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/profiel-en-missie/vu-in-cijfers/studenten/verdeling-mv/index.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> This was in 2017; it assumes that the pre-master students were counted among the bachelor students. <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/profiel-en-missie/vu-in-cijfers/studenten/bachelor-master/index.aspx>

(in quantitative research). This is not because we *assume* that students from different backgrounds are different, but because we *wonder* whether they differ, and if so, why. When reporting on the issue of inequality based on migration background, we use the same categories as Statistics Netherlands.<sup>16</sup> We also distinguish between students who followed pre-university education in the Netherlands and students who were educated abroad (in order to make a rough distinction between domestic students and international students). With regard to the migration background variable, we use the following categories: (1) Students without a migration background (grandparents, parents and students born in the Netherlands and who were educated in the Netherlands before attending university), (2) first-generation non-Western students (students born in a non-Western country and pre-educated in the Netherlands), (3) first-generation Western students (students born in a Western country and pre-educated in the Netherlands), (4) second-generation non-Western students (students born in the Netherlands, but with at least one parent born in a non-Western country and who attended school in the Netherlands), (5) second-generation Western students (students born in the Netherlands, but with at least one parent born in a Western country and who attended school in the Netherlands), (6) international students (students with a foreign educational background).

Due to the small numbers, first-generation and second-generation Western students have been grouped into one category in most analyzes. This also applies to first and second generation non-Western students.

## Data analysis

This report is based on descriptive analysis, not inferential statistics.<sup>17</sup> Results are shown in percentages using frequency distributions and histograms. These show at a glance whether there are differences and similarities within the dataset between, for example, faculties or groups of VU students. In addition, cross tables show possible connections between two or more variables.

The number of respondent answers to individual questions does not always add up to the overall total. This is because respondents were allowed to skip questions when filling in the survey and also sometimes due to rounding differences. All results were rounded to whole numbers.

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<sup>16</sup> Statistics Netherlands (CBS). (2016, 21 November). *Afbakening generaties met migratieachtergrond*. Consulted on 21 January 2020, at <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2016/47/afbakening-generaties-met-migratieachtergrond>

<sup>17</sup>Therefore, no conclusions will be drawn about a wider population.

Table 1 – Totals and numbers of VU students per faculty and per group who filled in the ‘Belonging@VU’ survey

	N	R%*	F%	Education				Gender			Sexual orientation		Disability		Parent's education		Migration status				Religion								
				BA	PM	MA	RM	M	W	O	H	O	N	Y	HE	nHE	WM	NW	W	Int	N	Cath	Prot	Mus	Jewish	Hin	Bud	Hum	O
N	1950	9%	2%	972	103	775	89	649	1282	21	1621	328	1853	351	1262	942	1146	269	169	259	1262	159	215	116	9	22	16	12	93
Sc.	547	17%	4%	293	12	210	32	203	338	-	438	107	430	91	365	182	321	76	52	68	386	38	42	34	-	-	-	-	22
FGB	243	7%	6%	150	12	60	20	51	189	-	197	45	190	45	157	86	142	21	21	48	158	14	37	-	-	-	-	-	15
FGW	139	11%	8%	76	-	37	14	39	96	-	96	43	114	17	101	38	78	15	-	26	88	15	18	-	-	-	-	-	-
FRT	34	3%	16%	17	-	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Law	147	5%	8%	72	-	73	-	34	112	-	117	30	118	21	74	73	78	29	18	13	93	12	12	13	-	-	-	-	-
FSW	207	9%	7%	79	33	93	-	65	141	-	175	31	158	42	129	78	135	31	13	14	133	24	19	11	-	-	-	-	-
Dent.	16	4%	24%	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Med.	181	8%	7%	78	-	93	-	39	141	-	150	31	155	21	140	41	124	29	13	12	115	13	26	16	-	-	-	-	-
SBE	269	7%	6%	114	25	117	-	131	134	-	237	32	217	35	167	102	135	41	24	55	170	34	23	17	-	-	-	-	-

N = Respondent numbers, R% = Response in %, F% = Error margin in % BA= Bachelor, MA = Master, M = Man, W = Woman, O = Other, H = Heterosexual, N = No, Y = Yes, HE = Higher education, nHE = No Higher Education, WM = Without migration background, NW = Non-Western, W = Western, Int = International, Cath = Catholic, Prot = Protestant, Mus = Muslim, Hin = Hindu, Bud = Buddhist, Hum = Humanist.

Sc. = Science Faculty, FGB = Behaviour and Movement Sciences, FGW = Humanities, FRT = Religion and Theology, Law = Law Faculty, FSW = Social Sciences, Dent. = Dentistry, Med = Medicine, SBE = School of Business and Economics.

\*Sample based on total number of VU students per faculty in 2017<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. (without date). *Total number of students*. Consulted on 21 January 2020, from <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/profiel-en-missie/vu-in-cijfers/studenten/totaal/index.aspx>

# 1. Belonging

This first chapter looks at the outcomes – including the open questions – of the survey concerning belonging, or ‘feeling at home’. We will specifically look at the questions asked in the survey about students’ feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam and in their study programme, but also the extent to which they recognize themselves in VU Amsterdam’s visual material, whether they enjoy attending lectures and if they experience a VU identity. The questions used a 4 point scale ranging from 1 (never or hardly ever) to 4 (always or almost always).

Figure 1.1 shows the results for a sense of belonging for VU students who answered always or almost always to the following statements:

- I feel that I belong at VU Amsterdam
- I feel that I belong on my study programme
- I enjoy attending lectures.

With regard to VU Amsterdam’s identity, students were asked whether they felt that there was a shared VU identity, and if so, whether they felt part of it, to which they could answer:

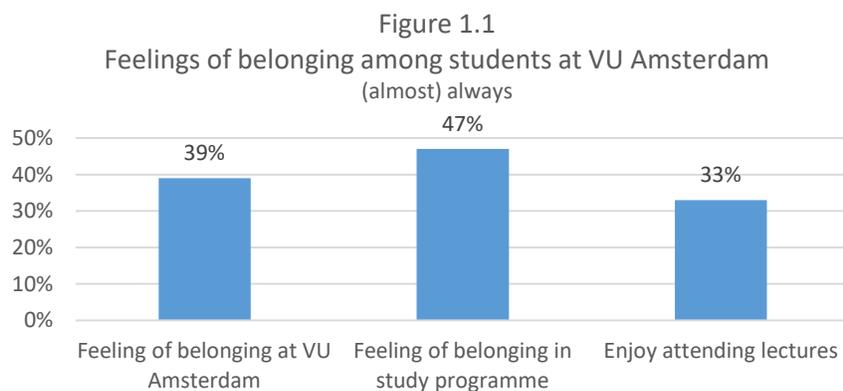
- Yes, I feel that there is a VU identity and I feel part of it
- Yes, I feel that there is a VU identity but I do not feel part of it
- No, I do not feel that there is a VU identity.

Figure 1.13 shows a comparison between respondents who answered ‘Yes, I feel that there is a VU identity and I feel part of it’ and ‘I always or nearly always feel that I belong at VU’. The survey also included open questions so that students could elaborate on their answers on the topic of belonging.

## 1.1 Feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam

*“VU is my second home, I feel at home here because I am always bumping into someone I know who I can have a chat with. I can find my way around and it is easily accessible.”*

When we make a visual representation of the results of the above statements about feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam, we see the following percentages as shown in Figure 1.1. A third of all respondents said that they always or almost always felt that they belong at VU Amsterdam. The feeling of belonging on the study programme was stronger. Almost half of the respondents always or almost always felt that they belonged at their university.



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

Students gave diverse reasons for feeling that they belonged at VU Amsterdam. Some students said that they felt at home thanks to the diverse student population and the attention that the university paid to the question of diversity. These students said that this openness to diversity creates a warm, pleasant and open atmosphere at VU Amsterdam which gives them the feeling that everyone is welcome and can be themselves:

*“As an international student, I am very happy being anywhere around campus. I can feel the warmth and welcome despite being from a different country and speaking a different language. The community within campus is also very engaging and attentive to any help and assistance needed. I feel very comfortable and included at all times.”*

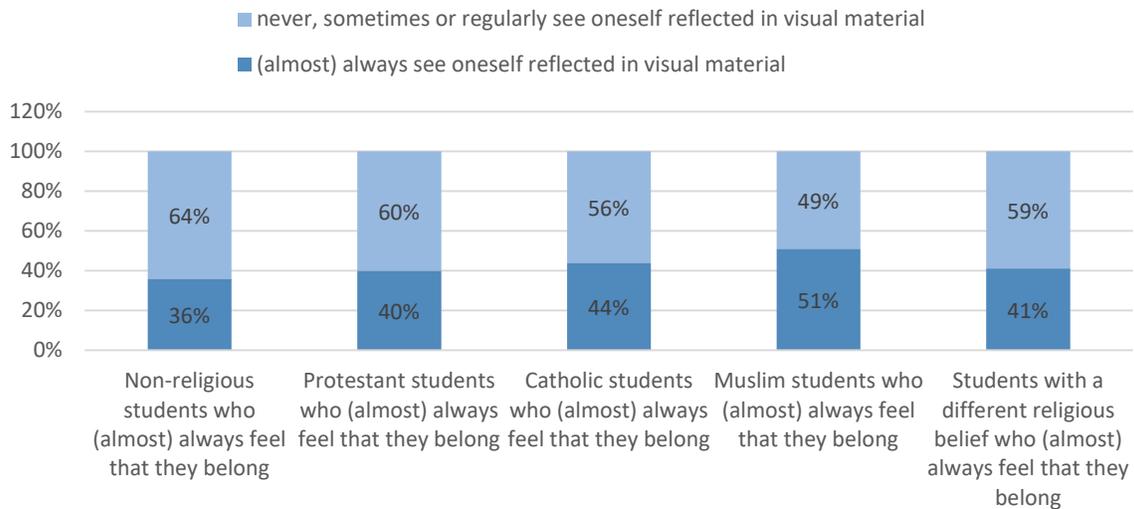
*“VU is a university with an extremely diverse group of students and teachers. I feel that it is accessible for students with both a migrant and non-migrant background. Posters, educational material, film material, etc. also often contain enough different ethnic groups.”*

*“I feel very much at home at VU Amsterdam. I have not experienced any exclusion or discrimination either during my bachelor or masters. The teachers are very open and professional in this area.”*

The diversity referred to in the above quotes relates to diversity of ethnic background, but there is also a great deal of diversity among students with regard to religion. With regard to feelings of belonging, Catholic and Muslim students reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam than students with a Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist or humanist religion or outlook. We cannot say precisely why Catholic and Muslim students experience greater feelings of belonging, but we do know that Muslim students recognize themselves in VU Amsterdam’s visual material 10 percentage points more often than Protestant students or students with no religious convictions. This could provide an explanation for the extent to which they feel they belong at VU Amsterdam (see figure 1.2<sup>19</sup>).

<sup>19</sup> In the survey we asked students which religious faith they considered they belonged to. The number of respondents who said that they adhered to Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Humanism or another religious faith was too small to show per group. These groups were combined in the category defined as ‘other’.

Figure 1.2.  
Ability to see oneself reflected in VU Amsterdam visual material among groups of religious students who (almost) always feel that they belong at VU Amsterdam



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

A similar connection can be seen for students with a non-Western migration background<sup>20</sup>. They recognize themselves in visual material more often than other groups of students (see figure 1.13). In section ‘1.3 Lack of feelings of belonging on a broader level’ we explore the connection between feelings of belonging and recognizing oneself in the university’s visual material.

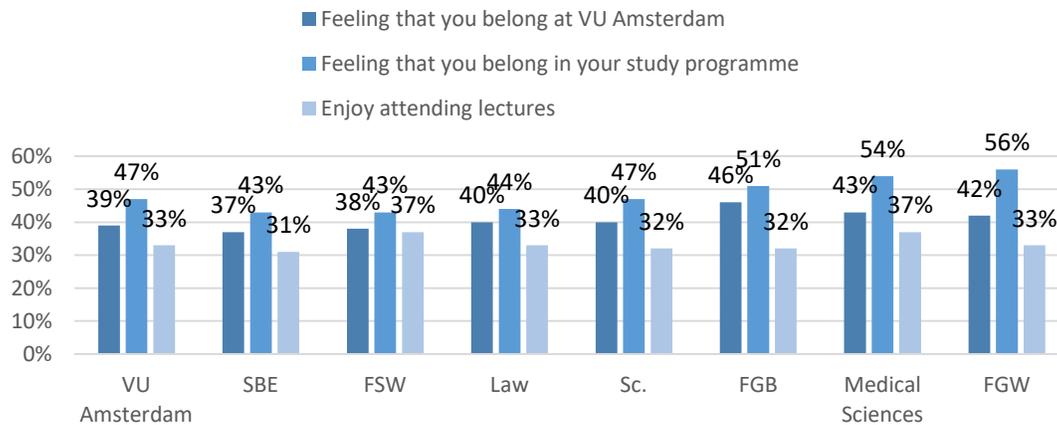
## 1.2 Feelings of belonging within the faculty and/or study programme

*No, VU is my university and I definitely feel I belong here. But I am also a student of earth sciences so I feel more of an earth scientist than someone with a VU identity.”*

The positive feelings of belonging that students experienced with regard to their study programme were even stronger than the positive feelings they had towards VU Amsterdam as a whole. Students from all faculties said that they felt a greater feeling of belonging in their study programme than at VU Amsterdam (see Figure 1.3).

<sup>20</sup> According to the definition used by Statistics Netherlands, (CBS) people have a migration background if they or one/both of their parents were born outside of the Netherlands: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/achtergrond/2016/47/afbakening-generaties-met-migratieachtergrond>. We also distinguish between Western and non-Western students according to Statistics Netherlands’ definition: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/faq/specifiek/wat-is-het-verschil-tussen-een-westerse-en-niet-westerse-allochtoon>. Students with a Western migration background were born or have at least one parent who was born in a country in Europe, (excluding Turkey) North America, Oceania, Indonesia and Japan. Students with a non-Western background were born in or have at least one parent who was born in a country in Africa, Latin America, Asia (excluding Indonesia and Japan) or Turkey. Furthermore, students with a Western or non-Western migration background have completed their pre-university education in the Netherlands.

Figure 1.3.  
Feelings of belonging per faculty  
(almost) always



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The strongest feelings of belonging were found among students from the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Humanities (FGW). The difference between feeling that you belong at VU Amsterdam and feeling that you belong in your study programme was the most pronounced in the Faculty of Humanities FGW and the least pronounced in the Faculty of Behaviour and Movement Sciences (FGB) and the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSW).

One possible reason why students feel a stronger sense of belonging within their study programme than at VU Amsterdam as a whole is the presence of a strong subject identity<sup>21</sup> within some faculties, such as Medicine:

*"My perception is that the medical faculty is quite apart from the rest of VU Amsterdam, and that rather than the "VU identity" it is the "VUmc identity"."*

But this strong sense of identity with one's study programme appears to provide only part of the explanation as to why students identify more with and feel a greater sense of belonging in their faculty rather than at VU Amsterdam in general:

*"Because I mainly had lectures in the Medical Faculty and hardly ever in the Main Building, I often felt like an outsider in the Main Building and therefore 'lesser'".*

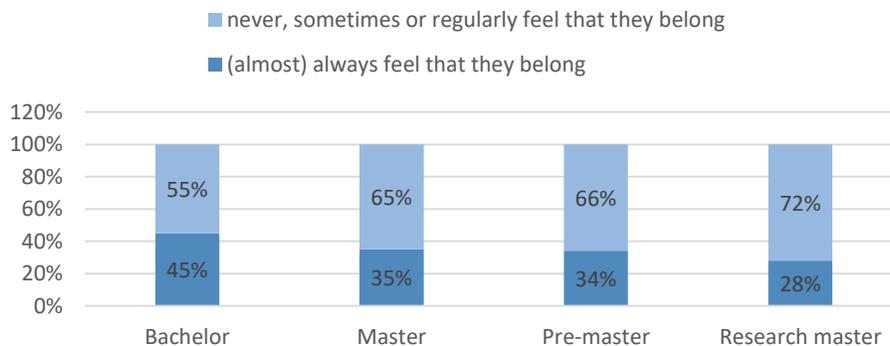
The feeling of being an 'outsider' or 'lesser' reduces feelings of belonging at VU compared to feelings of belonging in one's faculty. Even though there is just one campus, students may be less able to identify with VU because they do not attend lectures in the main building on de Boelelaan, but for example, in the Science Park, VUmc, ACTA or, if following a dual study, at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). In this

<sup>21</sup> Leyerzapf, H. 2019. *Doing Diversity: Unsettling the Self-Other binary. Cultural Diversity in Dutch academic health care*. Doctoral dissertation: VU University.

context, VU identity is seen as something that a student is more likely to experience if they study or attend lectures in the main building.

The study phase also seems to be decisive for feelings of belonging among students (see figure 1.4<sup>22</sup>). Bachelor students feel like they belong ten percentage points more often than master students.

Figure 1.4.  
Feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam among students in different study phases



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

If we look at the open answers, workload seems to be one reason for differences between bachelor and masters students with regard to feelings of belonging:

*“As a chaotic person, it is handy to keep both feet on the ground for a while. At the start of my first master I nearly had a burn-out (I had bitten off more than I could chew). This caused me to stop my study. Last school year, I started again, this time more calmly and this is working out fine. I get in my own way by trying to invent the wheel by myself and therefore I’m reluctant to ask for help.”*

*“Everything tested in the master involves reading the literature and writing papers. This is very time-consuming, and there is a lot of pressure to perform. Sometimes I find that I have not always fully understood the material.”*

*“Several depressions in recent years have meant that my study has had to be deferred. I had already dropped another masters for that reason. My current master programme is also taking longer than the year it was supposed to take.”*

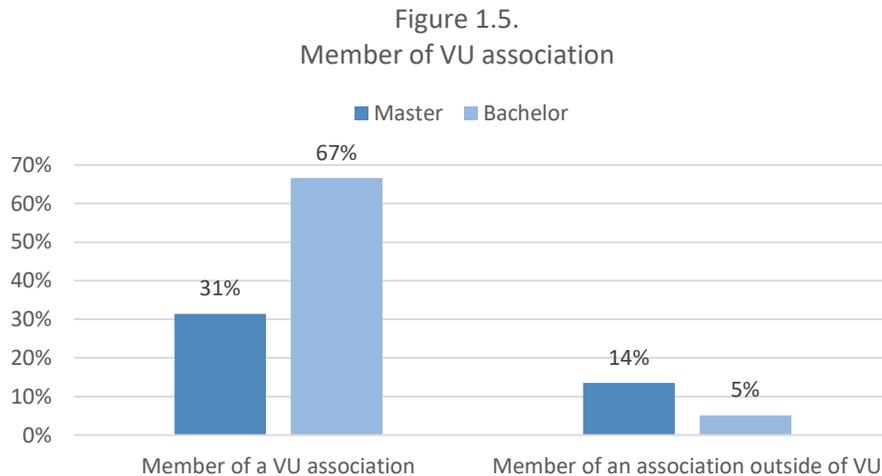
Master programmes often have a faster tempo than bachelor programmes. Students are expected to cover the course material in a short space of time, often a year. This can make it difficult for them to keep up with their study and often leads to complaints. Furthermore, VU Amsterdam seems to be a place with which students cannot always find a connection.

*“I am in a very small group for my master course (max 10), so this has led to some close comradeship and friendly relationships within our class as a result. However, outside of this I really don't think VU Amsterdam offers much in terms of social events, finding friends through university societies/other groups. [...] I've noticed hardly any of this at*

<sup>22</sup> The number of premaster and research master students who responded (89 and 101) is small in comparison to the number of respondents among bachelor and master students (966 and 765).

*VU - perhaps there are some societies but I'm either not aware of them being there, or they're too exclusive (e.g. sports groups / Dutch language only / sorority/fraternity type). So other than having friends on my course I have ended up feeling pretty disconnected from VU Amsterdam socially, and have looked for new friendships in a local church in the city, where I now have friends who are my age/stage of life and either work or go to universities across Amsterdam [...].”*

Master students have less time to engage with social activities offered by the universities or VU associations<sup>23</sup> as their study programme is shorter than a bachelor programme. This is shown in Figure 1.5.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Masters students are members of a VU society 36 percentage points less often than bachelor students, but are members of a society outside VU Amsterdam nine percentage points more often than bachelor students.

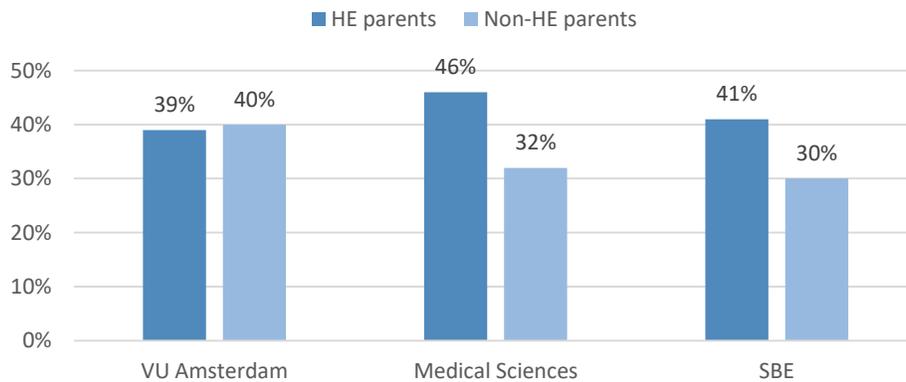
#### Who feels a greater or lesser sense of belonging within the faculties?

There are differences within faculties and study programmes regarding the extent to which groups of students feel they belong. For example, the feeling of belonging within the Medicine faculty is higher among first-generation students with highly-educated parents<sup>24</sup> than among students who do not come from such a family (see Figure 1.6). We see the same pattern in the School of Business and Economics (SBE).

<sup>23</sup> VU associations are understood as: VU sport associations, study associations, student societies with a specific signature or other VU organizations/student associations. This does not include VU participatory bodies. Chapter five examines student involvement in more detail.

<sup>24</sup> In this survey, highly-educated parents as defined as having completed higher professional or university education.

Figure 1.6.  
I (almost) always feel that I belong at VU Amsterdam

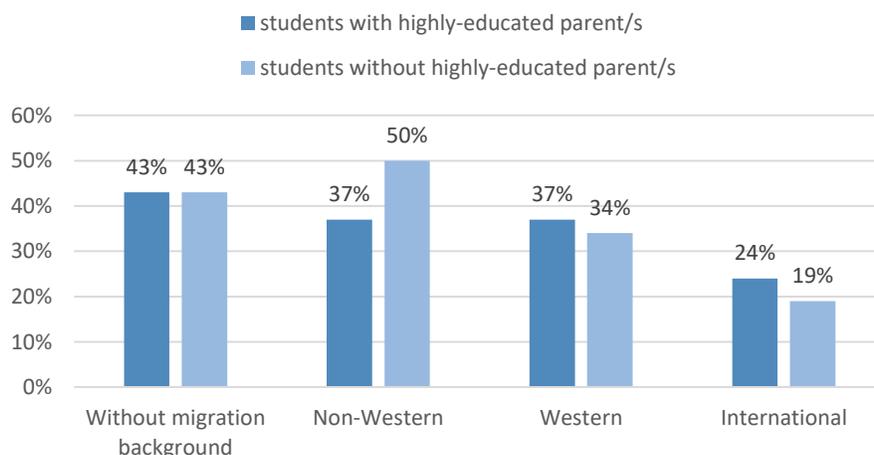


Source: Belonging@VU 2019

In addition, in the faculties of both Medicine and SBE we see that students with parents who have not completed higher professional (HBO) or university (WO) education not only feel less of a sense of belonging within the faculty than students with highly-educated parents, but they also feel a lesser sense of belonging compared to the university-wide average. In short, their parents' level of education seems to influence the extent to which students in the Medicine and SBE faculties feel that they belong.

This pattern, whereby the educational attainment of their parents influences the extent to which students in the Medicine and SBE faculties feel that they belong, is not reflected at VU-wide level. In other words: most VU students whose parents have followed higher professional or university education do not feel a greater sense of belonging at VU than VU students whose parents have not followed higher professional or university education. In fact, we see stronger feelings of belonging among students with a non-Western migration background whose parents did not follow a higher professional or university education than among students with a non-Western migration background whose parents did have a higher professional or university education.

Figure 1.7  
I (almost) always feel that I belong at VU Amsterdam



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

In the Science Faculty, feelings of belonging are influenced by gender and migration background: male students feel that they belong in their study programme more often (always or almost always) than female students (55% of men compared to 43% of women). We see a similar difference in the Science Faculty between students without a migration background and students with a non-Western migration background, whereby students with a non-Western migration background feel that they belong in their study programme 12 percentage points less than students without a migration background:

*“There seems to be less diversity among students in the science faculty than among students in the main building.”*

*“Few female lecturers.”*

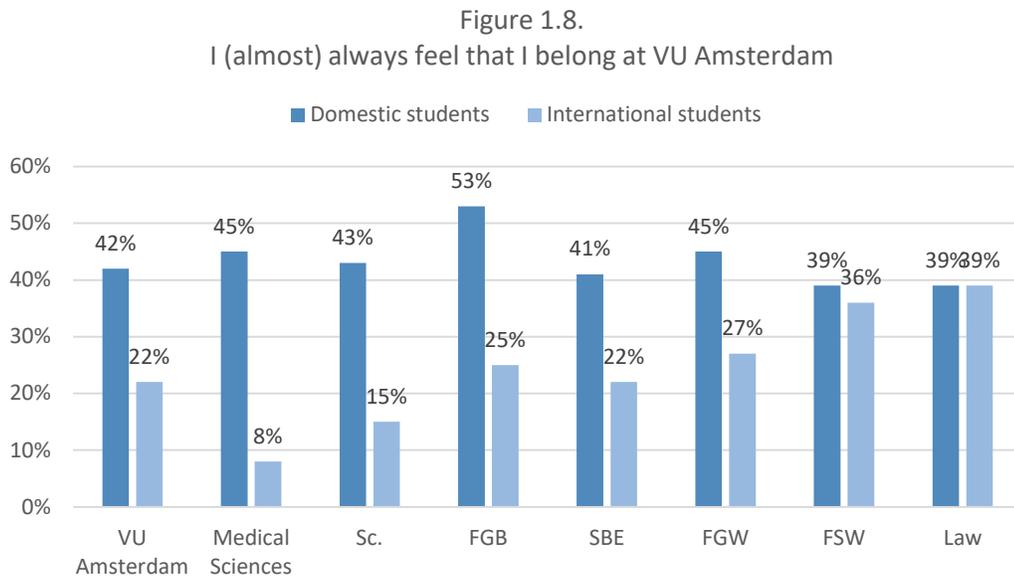
*“I think there is very little diversity on this course. First of all, it mainly seems to attract boys. I estimate that 80% of the students are male. Secondly, the study programme attracts few students from a non-Western background. This means that I don’t really feel at home on this course sometimes.”*

Students with a disability or a non-normative sexual orientation also reported feeling less of a sense of belonging in some faculties than students without a disability and with a normative sexual orientation.

*“I had always felt very much at home at the VU, but this feeling was seriously undermined when 4 employees of ‘my’ university signed the Nashville Statement. As far as I’m concerned, everyone is entitled to their opinion, but I don’t think that you should sign a statement like that and put your position and the name of VU below your signature. I study at a different faculty but I still feel uneasy with the idea that people with such a prominent position, both within the university and society, have signed the statement. If they had signed this as a private individual I think I would have felt that this was something separate from the VU/ faculty where they are working.*

*“I don’t feel that I am not accepted, but forgetting students with an auditory disability does not make me feel that I am really accepted there.”*

The students who feel by far the least sense of belonging within the faculty compared to all other groups of students are the international students. Figure 1.8 shows the differences in feelings of belonging between international students and domestic students<sup>25</sup>.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

International students at VU Amsterdam feel that they belong 20% less often than domestic students. This difference is even more pronounced within the Medicine and Science faculties: In the Medicine faculty, only 8% of the international students said that they always or almost always felt that they belonged at VU. This is 14 percentage points lower than the VU average for international students, and 37 percentage points lower than the feeling of belonging within the faculty reported by domestic medical students. These differences are slightly less pronounced within the Science faculty, but international students still feel at home in the faculty seven percentage points less than the VU average for international students, and their feeling of belonging in the faculty is 28 percentage points lower than that of domestic science students.

This lack of a sense of belonging among international students is not only in relation to their faculty but to several other aspects. There were a few positive stories, but approximately half of the international respondents indicated in the open answers that they did not feel at home at VU Amsterdam:

*“VU is trying to form an identity but there is no collective school spirit. I feel I don't belong to VU and that I'm only here to get my Masters.”*

*“I am a Dutch citizen and speak Dutch, and yet as an international student I still do not feel particularly included in the school at large, or even in my faculty. I can imagine that other international students, and particularly those from non-Western countries, feel alienated at the VU.”*

<sup>25</sup> In this report, international students are defined as students whose previous education was abroad and domestic students as students whose previous education was in the Netherlands.

International students gave a range of reasons for feeling such a weak sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam. The first reason they gave was that they found it annoying that Dutch students on international study programmes seemed unwilling to speak English. This was the case both during and outside lectures, and in workgroups and projects.

*"VU Amsterdam excludes international students. I have had it several times in my study that I was not able to sign up for the courses I need in order to complete my studies because they are not in English, while my study is supposed to be completely in English. [...] It makes me feel like I'm not even a part of the school. [...]"*

The different groups mix very little with each other, and it appears as if domestic students are reluctant to work with international students. In the open answers, the international students indicated that this made them feel excluded and had an extremely negative impact on their sense of belonging.

Secondly, the international students thought that it was a shame that their introduction day was organized separately from the introduction day for the Dutch students, especially as this was one of the few events that VU Amsterdam organizes for them. This had given them less opportunity to meet and establish contact with domestic students.

Finally, a number of students said that despite the fact that their study programme was taught in English, information and texts on Canvas or even entire subjects were only available in Dutch. Once more they were being excluded by the language barrier.

### 1.3 The lack of a feeling of belonging: recognition & VU identity

Not only were there differences regarding the extent to which students felt they belonged within their faculty, but also within the university as a whole. International students in particular reported feeling less of a sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam, but students with a disability or a non-normative sexual orientation also felt a weaker sense of belonging than other groups of students. A respondent with a disability expressed this as follows:

*"As a student with a disability, I do not feel a great enough sense of belonging. The most painful example of how VU Amsterdam has ignored people with disabilities in its diversity policy is, in my opinion, that they are not represented in the visual material; worse still is the way in which some buildings have been made accessible for people with physical disabilities. Examples include wheelchair lifts that are hidden far away from the normal entrances. For instance, the wheelchair entrance to the WN building is behind the rubbish containers for the Spar! It's insane!"*

Due to the lack of facilities and amenities and the fact that they do not see themselves reflected in VU Amsterdam's visual material, these students feel that they do not belong at VU Amsterdam. They are not alone in this: the importance of being able to recognize oneself in visual material was mentioned by other students at VU Amsterdam.

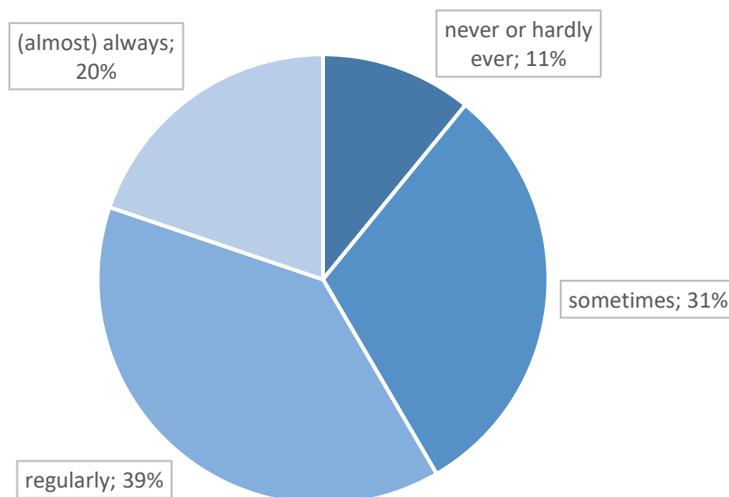
#### Recognizing oneself in VU Amsterdam's visual material

The majority of respondents (59%) recognized themselves regularly or almost always in the university's visual material (see figure 1.9<sup>26</sup>). The differences per faculty with regard recognizing oneself in VU Amsterdam's visual material was therefore relatively small.

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<sup>26</sup> There are small percentage deviations in the total due to rounding off to whole numbers.

Figure 1.9.  
Self-recognition in VU visual material



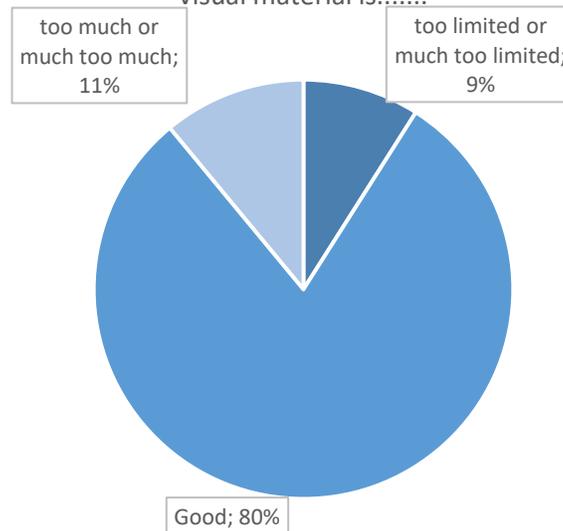
Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

Despite this, many of the respondents (42%) could only recognize themselves in VU Amsterdam's visual material occasionally or almost never. They were critical of the current online and offline visual material:

*"VU's visual material seems to place a strong emphasis on diversity; VU should use this visual material to show what it actually looks like, not how it wants to come across to the outside world."*

The discrepancy described here between what VU Amsterdam wants to look like and what it actually looks like was mentioned by other respondents. In particular, these students noted that diversity in VU Amsterdam's visual material only focuses on ethnic diversity, though most did not seem to find this a problem, as Figure 1.10 shows.

Figure 1.10.  
I think that the level of ethnic diversity in VU Amsterdam's visual material is.....



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

One-tenth of VU students who filled in the 'Belonging@VU' survey thought that there was still not enough diversity in the visual material. One student made the following comment:

*"I have a lot of white lecturers. The posters at VU still mainly depict white people, but the diversity in the visual material is improving."*

In contrast to this, 11% of the respondents said that there was too much ethnic diversity in the university's visual material, mainly because other forms of diversity were not highlighted. None of the students with a non-normative sexual orientation, for example, could recognize themselves in VU visual material always or almost always. In the open answers, they said the following:

*"Diversity at VU means ethnic diversity; that is shown on all the posters, communication tools and surveys. VU does not pay any attention to LHBT students (...)."*

*"I no longer feel represented on VU posters as it feels as if they only depict ethnic minorities. Not people with a different sexual diversity, different way of dressing, etc. It remains a rather one-sided picture (by only being diverse)."*

The open answers also revealed that some respondents think that VU Amsterdam is trying too hard to be diverse, also in its visual material. They said that this made it impossible for them to recognize themselves in the visual material, and some even described it as irritating. The excessive representation of ethnic diversity in visual material is seen as being limiting by domestic students both with and without a migration background:

*On every publication (poster, film, etc.) they make sure that each student portrayed is recognizably from a different background/origin. I don't have any objection to this, but the fact that I notice this indicates that it may be*

*somewhat excessive and therefore does not give an accurate representation of the student community. It feels as if they have set a quorum. I think that is a pity and also does not do justice to the individuality of the student depicted.*

*“The heavy-handed presence of ethnic diversity in visual material almost has an opposite effect. It’s as if you don’t belong at VU if you are less diverse.”*

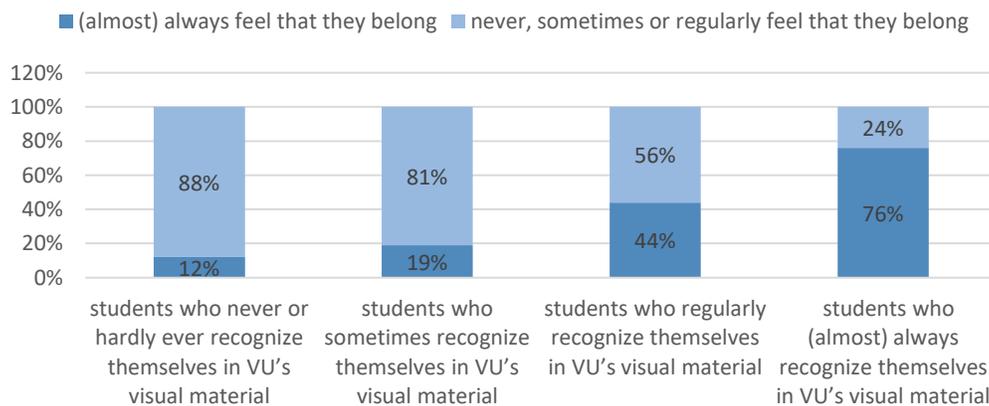
*“I am half-Dutch, Half-Moluccan. I often see posters in the lift or in the main building of foreigners or Dutch people with a migration background. I am all in favour of diversity in universities, but I think it’s possible to overdo it. In fact I think you are overshooting the mark (which is, I think, to highlight and promote contact between cultures) by displaying so much visual material that depicts other cultures; by over-emphasizing the presence of other cultures you are (in my opinion) HIGHLIGHTING the difference between students. [...]”.*

Another group that does not always see itself reflected in VU Amsterdam’s visual material consists of international students, mainly because of the language used. One international student observed:

*“Most of the posters around the University (toilets, invitation to events) are in Dutch and are for Dutch students which I believe discriminates against the internationals.”*

Earlier we saw that the extent to which respondents who said that they always or almost always felt they belonged were able to recognize themselves varied according to the group they belonged to. A lack of recognition also seems to be an important indicator of the extent to which VU students feel that they belong at VU Amsterdam (see Figure 1.11)

Figure 1.11  
Feelings of belonging at VU among students who recognize themselves in VU’s visual material



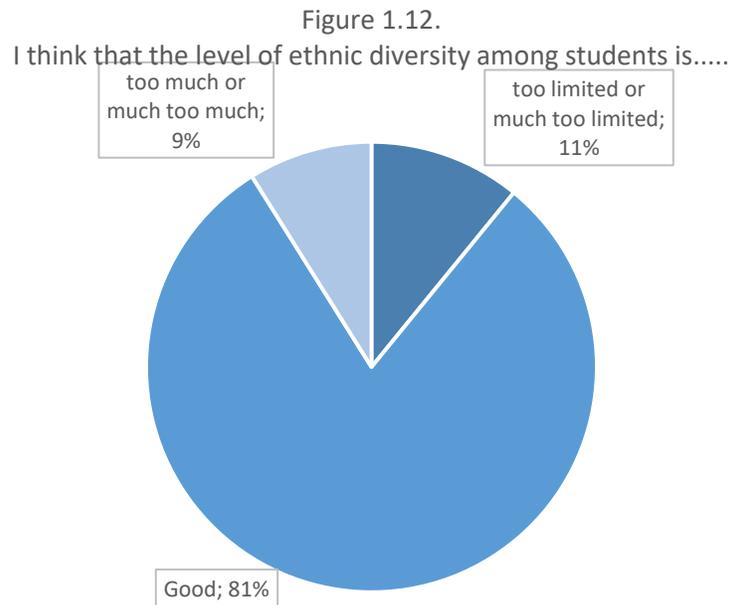
Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Respondents who reported that they never or hardly ever recognized themselves in VU’s visual material said that they always or almost always felt that they belonged at VU Amsterdam 64 percentage points less often than respondents who always or almost always recognized themselves in the visual material. This means that the visual material and the choices made by VU Amsterdam with regard to diversity has significant consequences for feelings of belonging among students.

Not only is the importance of recognition expressed in how students perceive VU Amsterdam's visual material, but also in the way this reflects the people they actually see around them, i.e. their fellow students on their study programme.

### Recognizing oneself in fellow students

Students at VU Amsterdam seem to be satisfied with the degree of ethnic diversity at the university (see Figure 1.12<sup>27</sup>). Eighty-one percent of students think that the level of ethnic diversity among students is good.



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

The open answers show that students have a positive attitude towards diversity and appreciate its added value:

*"My master was super diverse, with students from different backgrounds and international students. It was really great to work with [people from] so many different backgrounds.*

*"I think I have noticed a lot of ethnic diversity, mostly among students. This is a nice opportunity for students to experience new cultures, beliefs and opinions, as well as learn about other countries and cultures too."*

This positive attitude towards diversity was not shared by all respondents. Approximately 10% said that they thought that there was either too much or not enough diversity among VU students. One student who considered that there was too much diversity said:

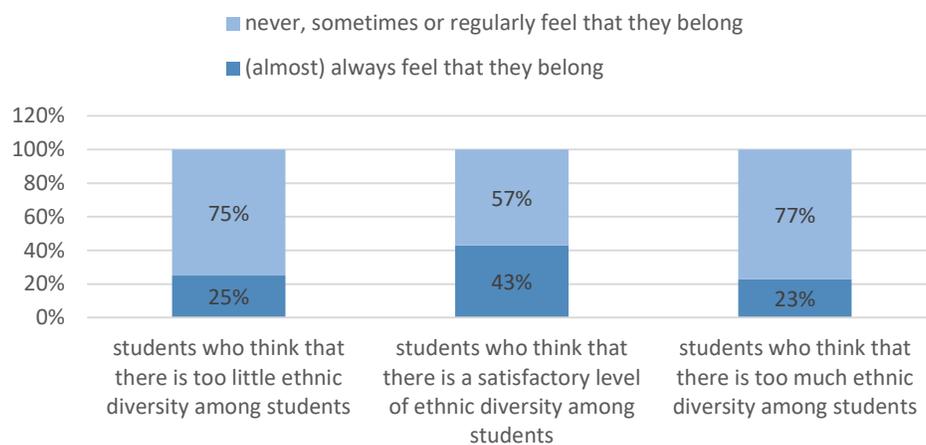
*"VU has become a migrant university. All you see is groups of Muslims walking around, speaking Arabic to each other, and as a normal Dutch girl, this is intimidating for me. Anatolia is blocking the way much too often in the*

<sup>27</sup> There are small percentage deviations in the total due to rounding off to whole numbers.

*main building. Turks and Moroccans in the work groups speak incredibly bad Dutch, which does not do the level of education any favours. The teacher has to explain Dutch words to them first, which means we do not get round to serious subject matter. It's a degradation of the Dutch language."*

This negative attitude towards diversity and open rejection of fellow students with an ethnic background other than Dutch described in the above quote was not observed often in the survey, but what we did observe more frequently was students who experienced a weaker sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam because they considered that the level of diversity among their fellow students was too high. This is shown in figure 1.13 below.

Figure 1.13  
Feeling of belonging among students who think that the level of diversity is too much, just right or too limited



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

While some VU students reported feeling less at home due to too much diversity, there were also students who felt less at home due to a lack of diversity.

In the open answers, respondents often attributed their weaker sense of belonging to a lack of recognition, because they could only see a few people similar to them within their faculty or study programme, or within VU Amsterdam in general. This lack of similarity is mainly connected to a shared ethnic origin, gender, religion, skin colour and/or opinion:

*"During my bachelor (G&L) we started off with 500 students, whereby you could count the students with a Moroccan background (including myself) on the fingers of one hand. I think that this is a big difference to, for example, the Law bachelor. When I look at how it is a reflection of society, I definitely feel that I belong at VU. But if I just look at my master then that's not always the case."*

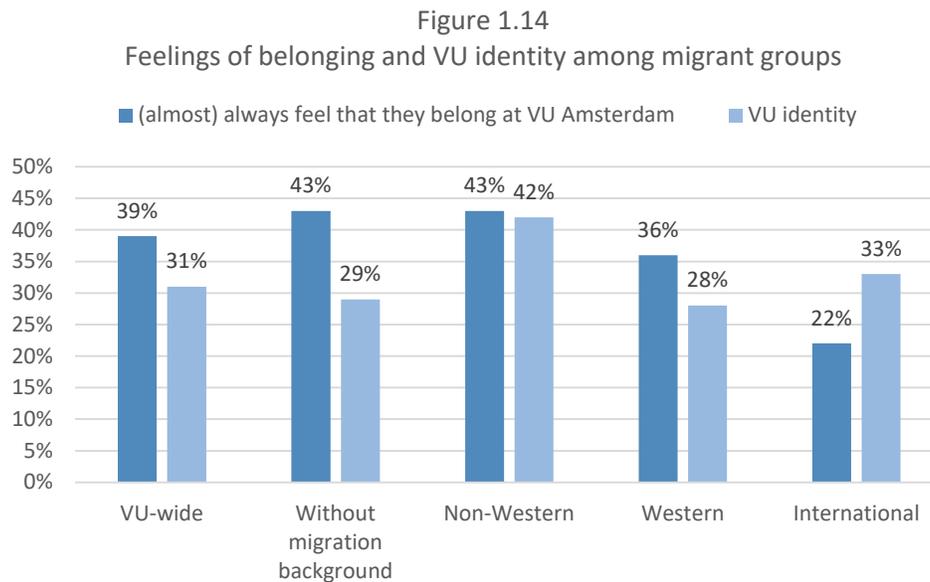
*"I like being able to see people who look like me on the campus. This gives me a greater sense of belonging, it confirms what I think and reassures me that I am actually accepted here. This feeling is completely reversed, however, when I attend a lecture on my course, where no one resembles me at all, either in terms of appearance or political views."*

Both quantitative and qualitative data show that respondents are less likely to develop a sense of belonging if they notice that they are the only ones in their study programme with a certain political point of view or belief. Although they can see themselves reflected in certain VU-wide societies or in other individual students they meet at VU Amsterdam, they are scarcely able – or even completely unable – to do so within their own study programme.

VU Amsterdam’s challenge is made even more difficult and complicated by the fact that some students are unable to recognize themselves due to a lack of diversity, while others report being unable to do so due to an excess of diversity. We can see a similar trend if we look at feelings of belonging in relation to VU identity.

## VU identity

Having a strong sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam in general, did not automatically translate into experiencing a strong VU identity. Figure 1.14 shows that students without a migration background have a strong sense of belonging at VU but do not experience a VU identity as often. This is in contrast to international students, whose perceived VU identity is stronger than their feelings of belonging at VU.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The open answers reveal that the perception of a VU identity is more divided than the feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam. Some respondents do not know what a shared VU identity entails and have never even heard of its existence. Others said that they felt they belonged precisely because they did not experience any VU identity, and yet others said that they thought it was impossible to experience a shared VU identity as VU Amsterdam and its students were too diverse:

*“I don’t really notice a strong VU identity, and actually I like that. It’s when there is a strong identity that some people will be unable to identify with it and feel they do not belong.”*

*“I don’t really have the feeling that I belong to a specific group of people because I study at VU. It is so big and diverse, I don’t even know if this is possible.”*

Most of the respondents who both experienced a VU identity and felt they belonged gave reasons such as 'being yourself', 'people are similar to you', 'being accepted' 'being part of it', 'good atmosphere', and 'pride':

*"I have the feeling that there are 'certain types of people' at VU (and especially on my course) that are not, for example, at other universities. I feel at home here. Many people on my course have the same way of thinking and behaving."*

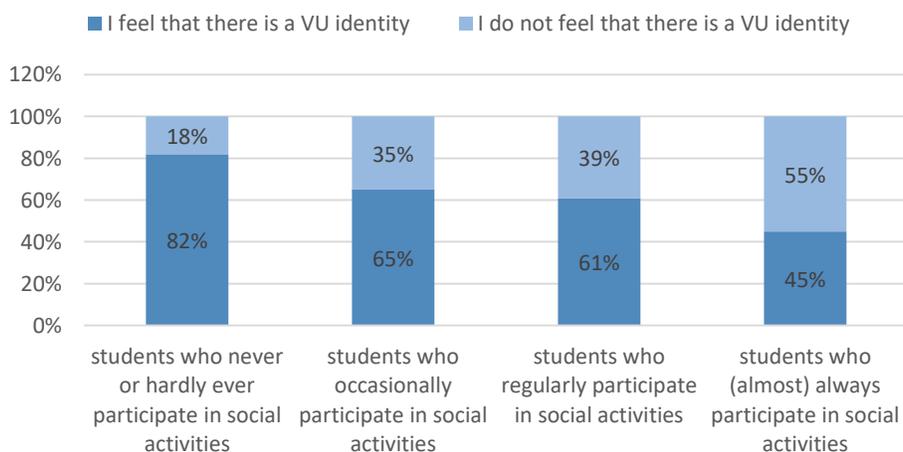
Students who did not feel at home usually expressed this by saying that they found VU "too big and cumbersome an organization", and that it is easier to feel at home and experience a shared VU identity if you are active within the university, for example, attending events or belonging to a student organization. Membership of and participation in student organizations foster a feeling of belonging and a shared VU identity among students:

*"Student societies ensure that a real campus feeling is created. Without the societies, I would never have felt as at home at VU as I do now."*

*"I have the impression that there is a shared VU identity among active students, but that non-active students do not feel a part of it. I did not have the idea that I was part of a VU identity until I came into contact with students from other courses and faculties by doing board work. Up until then, I only felt I was a student on a certain course, and not a VU student."*

For example, students experience a VU identity 37% more often if they always or almost always participate in social activities within the study programme than students who never or hardly ever participate in these social activities (see Figure 1.15).

Figure 1.15  
VU identity among students who participate in social activities organized by their study programme



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

This is largely due to the fact that the events and activities organized by societies enable these students to expand their networks and mean that they can almost always find someone to talk to:

*"I think that a large aspect of feeling at home at a university comes from the social cohesion that is created in the student societies. This means an awful lot to me and has helped me through difficult times, thanks to always having someone to talk to and lots of social activities.*

It is logical that these events are often only intended for members, and therefore non-members cannot participate in them. Students who are not a member of a student organization, therefore, also said more often that VU organizes few social activities and that the few that are organized mainly take place in the main building. Students studying in other buildings or locations tended to be less well informed about what was available by way of events where they could meet others, and so attended them less often, which may in turn have led to a weaker feeling of belonging. Chapter 5 on Student Involvement takes a more in-depth look at student involvement and participation in VU student organizations and events.

Students who are not members of a society think that their feelings of belonging and identification with VU could be increased if they became more actively involved. On the other hand, a number of respondents stated that student organizations also contribute to segregation and group formation. We will examine this in more detail in the next chapter.

## 2. Group formation

The previous chapter revealed that the students who filled in the survey had mixed feelings about student organizations and group formation at VU Amsterdam. On the one hand, they could see the added value of feeling that you belonged to a society; on the other hand, respondents indicated that societies could also be exclusionary. These mixed feelings with regard to group formation were also reflected more widely. Not only do societies lead to both inclusion and exclusion through group formation, but, as the respondents indicated in the open answers, group formation also occurs naturally: students feel attracted to some students more than others and therefore interact with them to a greater or lesser extent. Because of this attraction, some students stated in their open answers that group formation among students is a natural human process, which they do not feel is problematic. These respondents saw group formation as something pleasant, as they considered that it was often based on common interests and a shared background. It was emphasized that group formation should not mean that others are left out or excluded. As long as that does not happen, group formation is very normal:

*“It’s nice to associate with people who have approximately the same customs as yourself. You often have the same interests, etc., as these people. It is therefore easier to get on with them and you feel more at ease. For example, it is not nice if you are Muslim and the only thing the people in your social circle talk about are parties and getting drunk, while this is outside your scope of experience.”*

*“I notice that groups are forming at university. However, I don’t see this as a negative thing. I also socialize with people who have approximately the same thoughts, norms, values, culture and religion as me. This does not mean that I do not associate with people who do not think the same way as I do. However, it’s true that I don’t arrange to meet up with people who have a different outlook on life as often. That is because we don’t really have much in common, and our conversations are often superficial.”*

The ‘Belonging@VU’ survey asked the following questions about group formation:

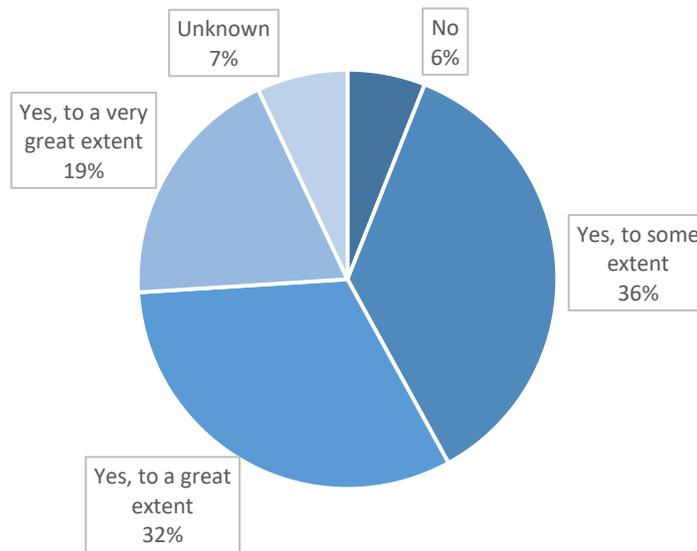
- Do you experience group formation among students at VU Amsterdam?
- On what basis does this group formation take place?
- What do you think about this group formation?

We also asked students to clarify their answers.

### 2.1 Group formation at VU Amsterdam

The survey shows that only 6% of respondents had not experienced group formation (see figure 2.1).

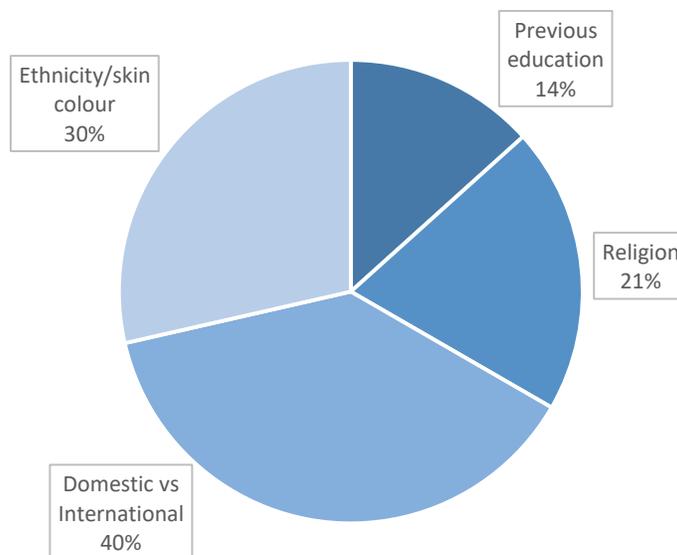
Figure 2.1.  
In your experience is there group formation among students at VU?



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

In the open answers, respondents gave some examples of the basis on which groups were formed. The most common reason mentioned was group formation between domestic students and international students (see figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2.  
Grounds for group formation

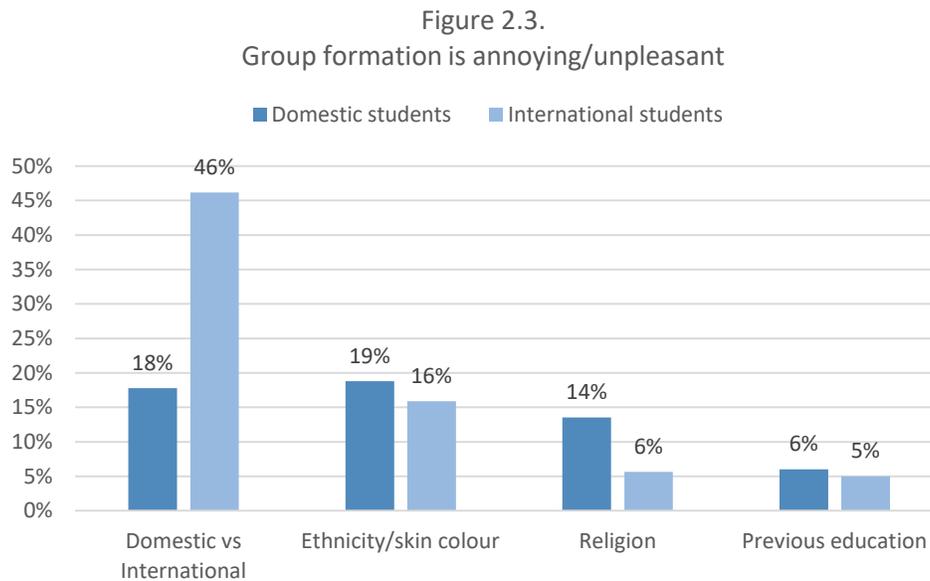


Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

Forty percent (40%) of respondents said that they had noticed group formation based on this distinction. This does not mean that students perceived this as unpleasant or annoying, but some groups of students had more problems with group formation than others.

## 2.2 Who experiences group formation at VU Amsterdam and on what grounds?

As figure 2.3 shows, 46% of international respondents found group formation between domestic or international students unpleasant or annoying.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

This is 28 percentage points more than domestic students. We also saw this in the open answers. They revealed that although international students want to make friends with domestic students, they are often unable to do so:

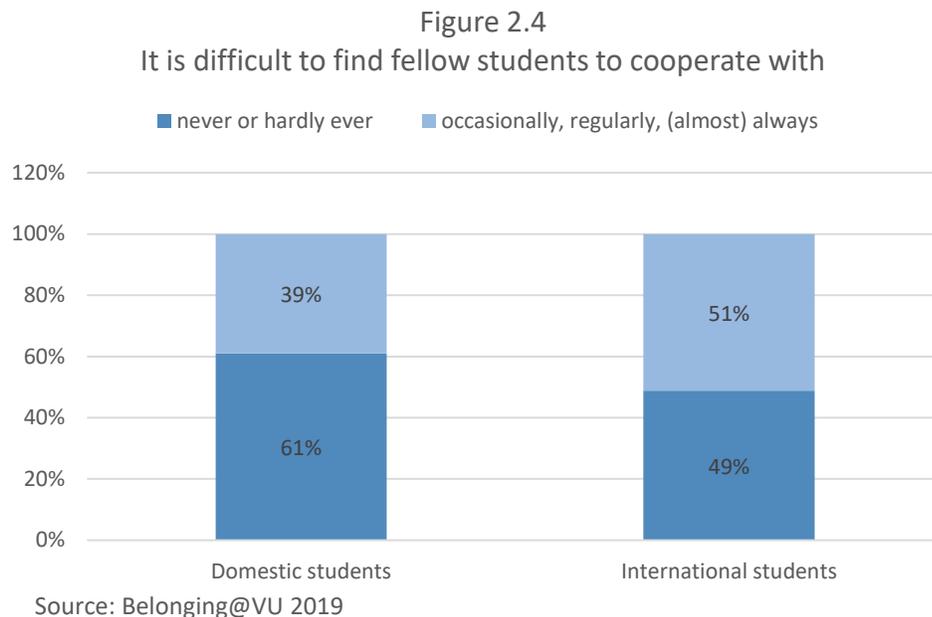
*“Educational experience would be improved both for international and national students if Dutch students were more accepting and open towards international students. On some occasions, Dutch students stick to their own group and ignore non-Dutch students in the class.”*

*“Sometimes I feel isolated by those people who change back to their own language to speak with other students or even to teachers. Not that it really matters, but if we are in an international course taught in, English, we all should speak English to each other, just as a matter of respect.”*

The domestic students mix little, show no interest in interacting or continue to speak Dutch. A number of international respondents thought that this was partly due to the fact that the two groups were kept

separate during the introduction weeks, and therefore had been given little opportunity to come into contact with each other from the very beginning. Others mentioned that, compared to themselves (17%), many domestic students (57%) live outside Amsterdam and have a busy working and social life there, which makes contact even more difficult.

International students also indicated in the open answers that even if courses are taught in English, domestic students continue to speak Dutch among themselves or with their tutors, and mainly prefer to work with each other. Figure 2.4 shows that international students indicated 12 percentage points more often than domestic students that they sometimes, regularly or always have difficulty finding other students to work with.



The experience of these international students is often at odds with the expectations they had when they enrolled on an international study programme at VU Amsterdam; one of these being that everyone would speak English:

*"International students take up an important part in school life but due to language problems (Dutch) it is not frequently seen that international students hang out with Dutch students."*

*"There are not many international students in my programme, most of them are Dutch. Although studying in an international programme, they tend to not communicate in English or team up with international students."*

It is striking that it was not only the international students who said that Dutch students do not mix much with them. Domestic students also stated in their open answers that they do not mix or work much with international students:

*"I notice very clearly that Dutch students work with each other and if there is a group assignment/subject, they group together immediately to avoid having to work with international students (once more, due to the low level of a large*

*number of international students). This is not good, as cooperation would be useful and beneficial for perspectives in group assignments, but if the difference in level is too large, people are simply not willing to do this. The same goes for me, as if I don't know what level the other person has or I know that it is too low, I also avoid that kind of group composition."*

*"Groups are often formed consisting only of international or only domestic students. I know many international students but do not want to work with everyone as I often notice a difference in level/other way of working. There is often not so much difference with German students, but there is, for example, with Eastern European students."*

In the open answers, domestic students explained why they prefer not to work with international students. They attributed this lack of interaction and collaboration to the level of the international students, which according to those cited above is lower than either the average level of a domestic student or the level expected for their study programme. In addition to this, a number of domestic students said that the international students mainly mixed and formed groups among themselves, and that they had found it difficult to make contact with them, despite several efforts on their part:

*"Among international students, students from the same county often only mix with people from their own country, particularly Germans (this is due to the large number of German students I think.)"*

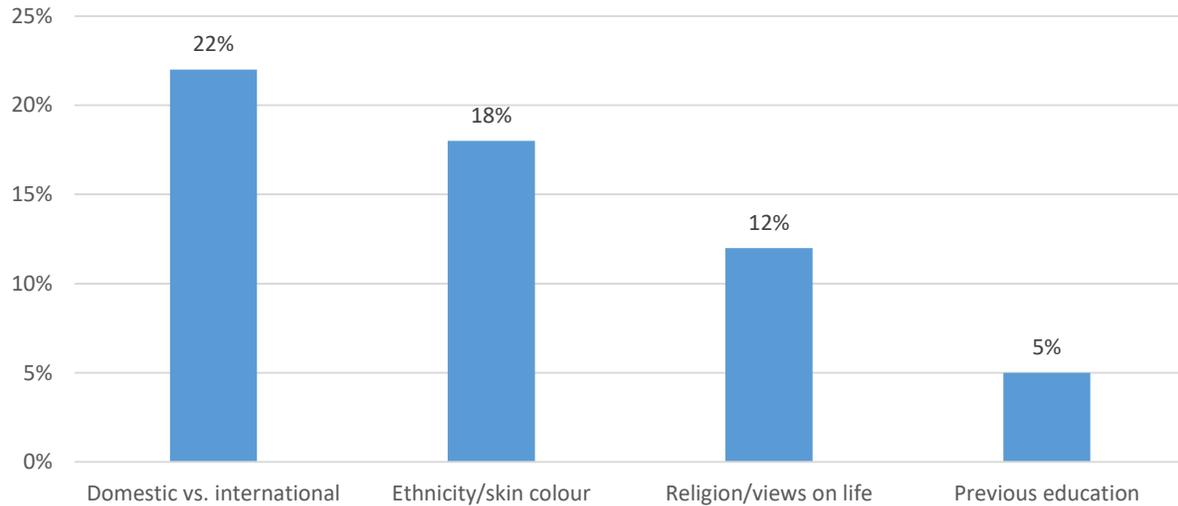
*"I would like to talk to international students, especially if they are following the same subject as me. I think it is interesting to hear where they come from, for example, and why they have come to VU, etc. You often don't get the opportunity to do so because people of the same nationality often tend to hang out together."*

Group formation based on the distinction between domestic and international students is clearly the most predominant type of group formation at VU Amsterdam. But the extent to which group formation based on ethnicity and skin colour is experienced by VU students also warrants a closer look.

### Group formation based on ethnicity or skin colour

The survey shows that another major aspect of experiences with group formation results from ethnicity or skin colour. Out of the 3% of respondents who experience group formation based on ethnicity or skin colour, 43% considered such group formation unpleasant or annoying. In total, 13% of students in this survey said that they found group formation based on ethnicity or skin colour unpleasant or annoying (see figure 2.5).

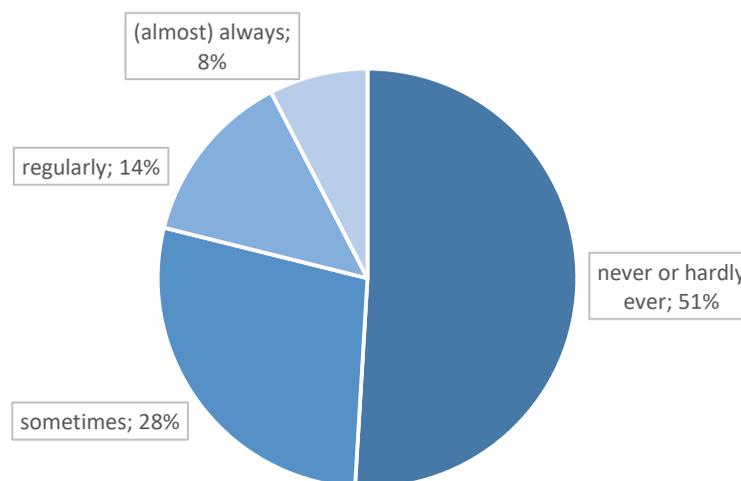
Figure 2.5  
Group formation is unpleasant or annoying



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

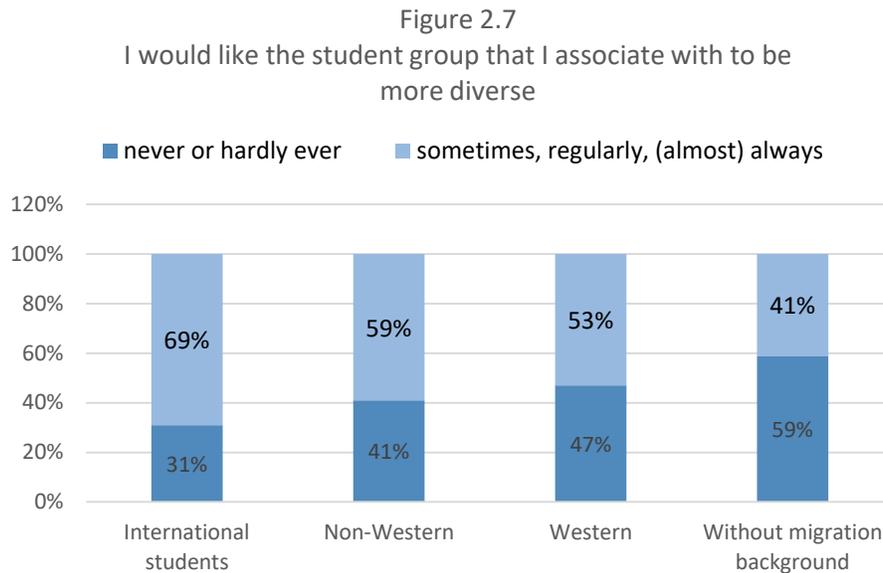
The fact that group formation is widely experienced at VU Amsterdam may also be partly due to the fact that a small majority of VU students do not necessarily feel the need for more diversity in their immediate circle. For example, we saw that half of the students who answered the statement 'I would like the student group that I associate with to be more diverse' indicated that this was not something they wanted. Half of them would like (occasionally, regularly or always) the group of students they associate with to be more diverse (see figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6  
I would like the student group that I associate with to be more diverse



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

There are, however, differences between groups of students (see figure 2.7). For example, international students and students with a non-Western migration background indicated that they would like greater diversity in the student group they associate with significantly more often than students without a migration background, or with a Western migration background.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Some respondents felt that students with a migration background stick together too much, while another group felt that students without a migration background mix too little with students who have a different background or skin colour:

*“Among medical students there are certain groups of friends and WhatsApp groups that are only accessible to people with a migration background. I think it's rather a pity that, as a Dutchman, I'm not allowed to participate in these informal groups.”*

*“On my course we work a lot in groups, whereby we have to choose a topic. I find that students from a different ethnic background cut themselves off from the whole group by only ever choosing subjects that are related to their religion and environment. I am interested in these topics, but not for every project.”*

*“It is always the same with workgroups; students who do not have a Dutch background end up in the same group. Once I made a deliberate effort to join a group that was ‘white’, but I noticed that I was ignored and that when the group was formed I wasn't included. I then joined a diverse work group. Of course it was fine, I still find it difficult why I couldn't get into the white group. I think that students here prefer to work together with people from their own culture so that they are automatically drawn to each other.”*

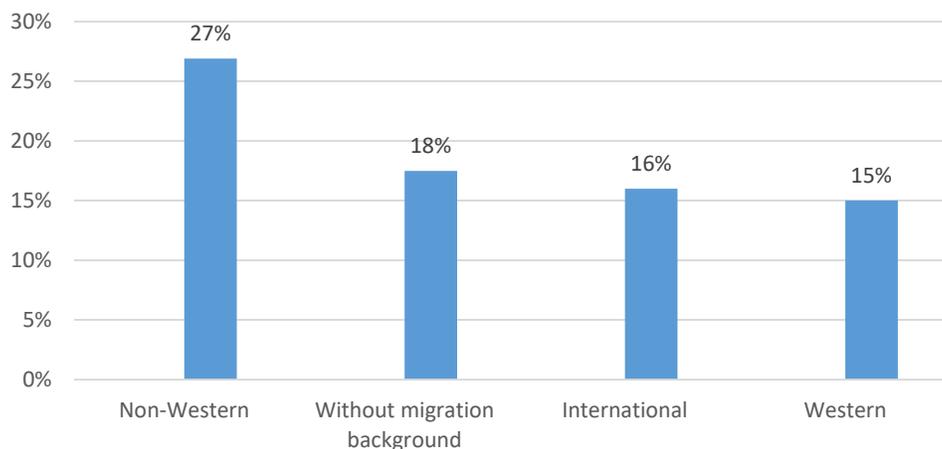
*“I see that many white students stick together and so do students of colour. I have the idea that students of colour would like to mix but that white students would rather stay within their own group. I am a student of colour and mix*

*more with white students. This is partly because I grew up in a white environment and often (unconsciously) move in white networks. I am breaking through this as it gives me a very one-sided view of the world.”*

Both groups describe the same kind of situation; one in which they want to interact with students with a different ethnicity or skin colour, but are unable to do so because the other group does not seem to be open to it. When looking at the open answers to a question asking VU students if they wanted to discuss whether or not they considered group formation regrettable, the answer patterns found were similar to those described above.

The fact that both VU students with and without a migration background regret not having contact and interacting with fellow students with a different ethnicity or skin colour indicates the need for more connection within the university. This connection is necessary, particularly considering that students with a non-Western migration background are the ones most likely to experience group formation based on skin colour or ethnicity as being unpleasant or annoying, nine percentage points more often than, for example, VU students without a migration background (see Figure 2.8).

Figure 2.8  
Group formation based on ethnicity or skin colour  
(unpleasant or annoying)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The degree to which respondents with a non-Western migration background experience group formation as unpleasant or annoying may be related to a number of other factors characteristic of these students. One of these may be that VU students with a non-Western background are often visibly 'different'. The fact that their ethnicity is visibly other than Dutch or that their skin colour is visibly other than white may make it more difficult for them to establish a connection with other VU students. Another visible characteristic that may be of influence is religion. VU students consider religion to be an important reason for group formation. It is precisely this intersection of ethnicity and skin colour on the one hand, and visible expressions of religious affinity on the other, that can have a detrimental effect on some students with a non-Western migration background, such as Muslim students at the VU.

## Group formation based on religion or beliefs

Twenty-one percent of respondents considered that group formation at VU Amsterdam is mainly based on religion or beliefs, and experiences with group formation on the basis of religion or beliefs mainly involved Muslim students. A number of respondents thought that this was due to pronounced differences between Muslim and other students with regard to lifestyle, hobbies and principles. Other students stated that Muslim students isolate themselves by speaking languages other than Dutch among themselves or by coming across as not being very welcoming to non-Muslims:

*There is a lot of group formation among Muslim students, who mostly interact with each other in situations like practicals and do not speak much [to people] outside their group; sometimes they don't even speak in a language that we have in common".*

*"It's noticeable that people from the same background, such as Muslims, interact a lot with each other. They often speak Moroccan at the VU. They are also more often at the VU in the weekend. This is a pity as it is difficult to get into their groups. Therefore I also stay in my own little [white] group."*

*"I would like to have more ethnically diverse contacts, but I really get the idea that students with a more Muslim background only interact with each other. Sometimes they do not even speak Dutch together and this makes me feel excluded. It is difficult to break through the segregation within the university."*

It was also noted that group formation by Muslim students is more conspicuous than when students from other religions group together, because Muslims tend to express their faith visually, for example by wearing the headscarf. The presence of religious associations, which VU students seem to associate with Muslim associations in particular, also reinforces the strong impression of Muslim group formation at the VU:

*"I would like to belong to a diverse group of students but as far as I know VU does not have one single society that all students could join. You have Anatolia for Turkish students, Muslim students have ISA, but I miss having a society that everyone can join."*

*"I think that societies for Muslim/Turkish students are not a good way to increase diversity. They only cause even more segregation."*

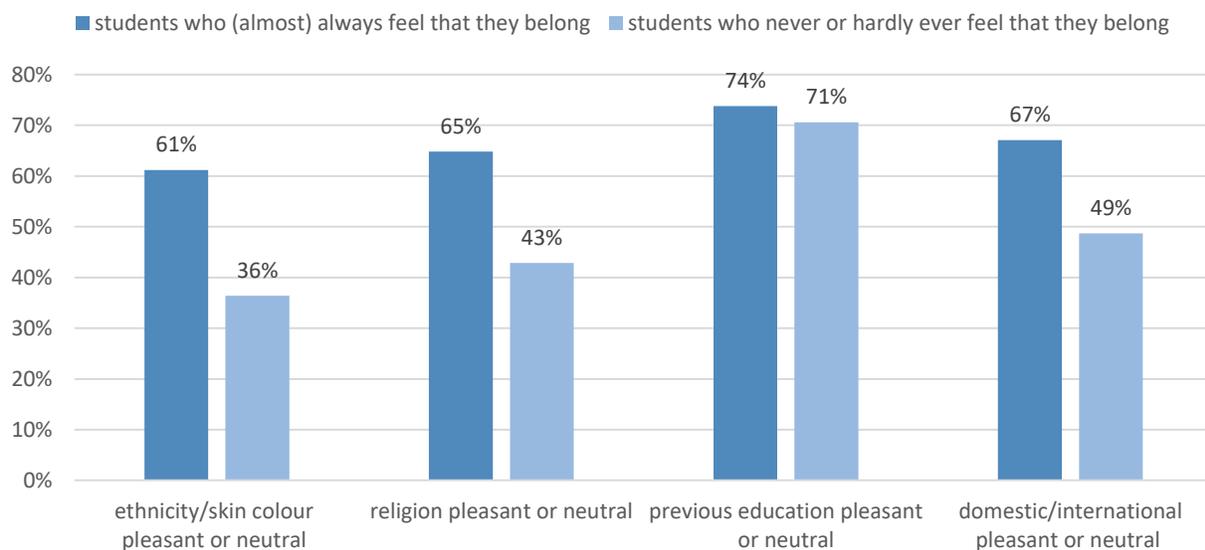
A number of VU students also took a more critical look at their own ideas about group formation among Islamic students at VU and their own willingness – or lack thereof – to find out more about the "other":

*"On the one hand, it's a pity. For example, I see that Muslims form a segregated group in comparison to the rest of the population. On the other hand, I think that non-Muslims and the secular population in general have contributed to this situation in no small measure. To what extent are they prepared to understand anything about Islam or religion in general? [...]. It is good to have a better understanding of mutual views so that we know where everyone stands on societal issues."*

## 2.3 Group formation and belonging

The perception of group formation at VU Amsterdam is strong among all VU students. We have seen that some students find group formation more unpleasant and annoying than others, but how does it relate to feelings of belonging? What we do know is that students who express greater feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam said that they find group formation, for example on the basis of religion, less unsettling than students who do not feel that they belong (see figure 2.9).

Figure 2.9  
Group formation pleasant or neutral among students who (almost) always or never feel that they belong at VU Amsterdam



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

We also see this for other types of group formation. Students who always or almost always feel that they belong find group formation based on ethnicity and/or skin colour 25 percentage points more pleasant or neutral than students who never or hardly ever feel that they belong at VU Amsterdam. They also find group formation based on whether you are a domestic or international student 18 percentage points more pleasant or neutral than students who never or hardly ever feel that they belong at the VU. These differences do not seem to apply when related to the previous education students at VU Amsterdam have gone through.

It is possible that a positive feeling of belonging at VU Amsterdam might serve as a buffer in situations in which students feel insecure or excluded.

### 3. Exclusion and discrimination

Chapter 2 on group formation revealed that the students who responded to the 'Belonging@VU' survey were not necessarily troubled by group formation, provided that it does not lead to exclusion or discrimination. In this chapter we will examine the survey's outcomes to obtain a more detailed picture of these issues. We asked the students to respond to the following statements:

- 'I see practices which I consider exclusionary or discriminatory against myself or others';
- 'Jokes are made which make me feel uncomfortable';
- 'I feel that I have to debunk stereotypes';
- 'I sometimes feel uncomfortable when I interact with other students who are different from me in terms of background, culture or lifestyle';
- 'I feel uncomfortable with the dominant behavioural norms';
- 'I observe or experience exclusion or discrimination by:
  - students within the context of education;
  - students outside the context of education;
  - lecturers'.

Here also, students could select an answer on a 4 point scale ranging from 1 (never or hardly ever) to 4 (always or almost always). It was also measured in how far respondents agreed with a number of statements on reporting discrimination and being taken seriously by VU, such as:

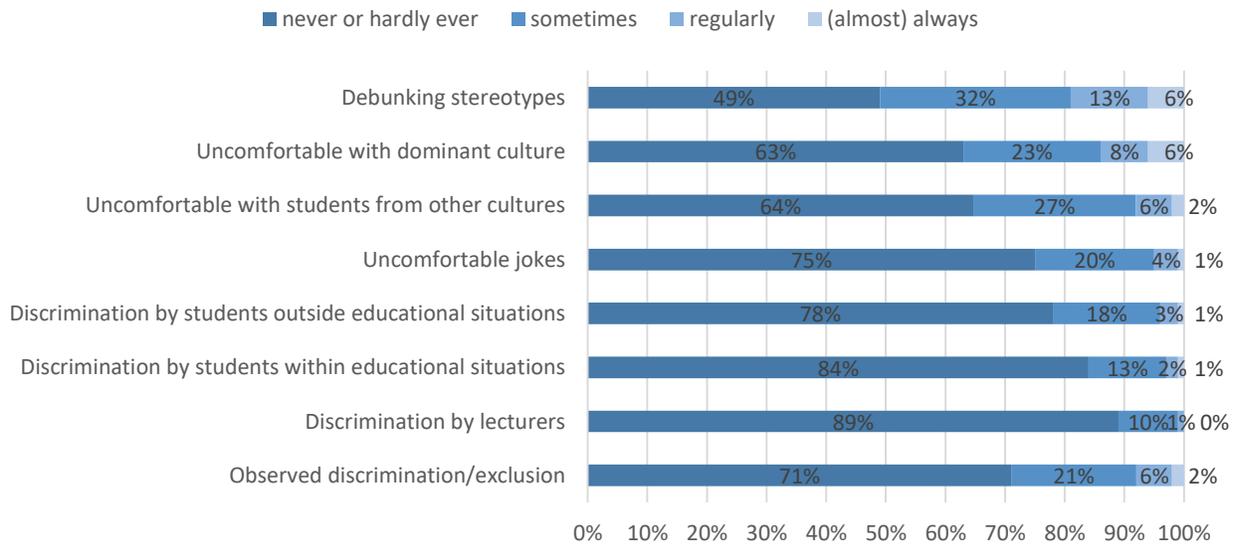
- 'If I were to report an exclusionary or discriminatory incident to VU Amsterdam I believe that I would be taken seriously';
- 'If I were to experience discrimination at VU, I would turn to a confidential counsellor';
- 'If I were to report an exclusionary or discriminatory incident to VU Amsterdam, something would be done about it'.

Respondents were able to choose an answer along a 5 point scale: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) do not agree/disagree, (4) agree, (5) strongly agree.

#### 3.1 Exclusion and discrimination (or the absence thereof) at VU

Eighty-four percent (84%) of the students who filled in the survey said that they had never or hardly ever experienced discrimination from other students within the context of education and 89% said that they had never or hardly ever experienced discrimination from lecturers (see figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1  
Discrimination or exclusion



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The respondents elaborated on their positive experiences in the open answers:

*‘I feel completely at home at the VU in my study programme; I think that there is little or no discrimination (in the WN building)’*

*“I think that the VU sets a tremendous example concerning diversity. I have never personally experienced ethnic profiling but I do not think that this occurs at the VU. I am very proud of this! I have the idea that everyone here is given a chance and that no one is subjected to prejudice, discriminated against or put at a disadvantage because of their ethnicity, orientation or anything at all! Keep up the good work!!!”*

It is very positive that students at VU Amsterdam experience and observe little or no exclusion or discrimination. Although exclusion and discrimination may be based on all types of identity characteristics, it is important to note that the above quotes come from students without a migration background, both of whom identify as heterosexual. This is not to say that they cannot experience exclusion or discrimination, but it does put their comments in a clearer perspective.

We know from various studies that open forms of discrimination and exclusion are no longer common<sup>28</sup>. Instead, people often experience discrimination or exclusion in a more ‘subtle’ manner – which does not, however, necessarily equate to more subtle experiences. Furthermore, the fact that it is not always easy to recognize and name ‘subtle’ forms of discrimination and exclusion makes it more difficult for people to define such experiences as discrimination.

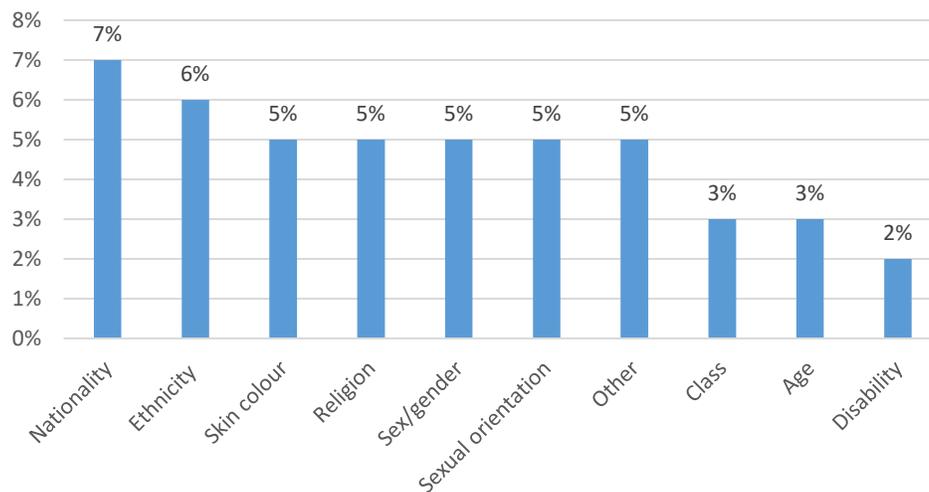
<sup>28</sup> See, among others: Deitch, E. A., Barsky, A., Butz, R. M., Chan, S., Brief, A. P., & Bradley, J. C. (2003). Subtle yet significant: The existence and impact of everyday racial discrimination in the workplace. *Human Relations*, 56(11), 1299-1324 and Zick, A., Pettigrew, T. F., & Wagner, U. (2008). Ethnic prejudice and discrimination in Europe. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(2), 233-251.

Discrimination and exclusion may be difficult to pinpoint, but they still have serious consequences for VU students who experience or observe them. We therefore consider it important to pay detailed attention to students who have observed or experienced exclusion or discrimination at VU Amsterdam. More than one-fifth of VU students have observed or experienced discrimination or exclusion affecting themselves or others. Furthermore, half of VU students said that they occasionally, regularly or almost always have to debunk stereotypes. Finally, one-third of VU Amsterdam students reported feeling uncomfortable with the dominant behavioural norms at VU or with students who are different in terms of background, culture or lifestyle.

### 3.2 On what grounds do students experience exclusion and/or discrimination?

Students reported various grounds for discrimination and/or exclusion (see figure 3.2). Nationality was mentioned most often (7%) as a ground upon which VU students were subjected to discrimination or exclusion.

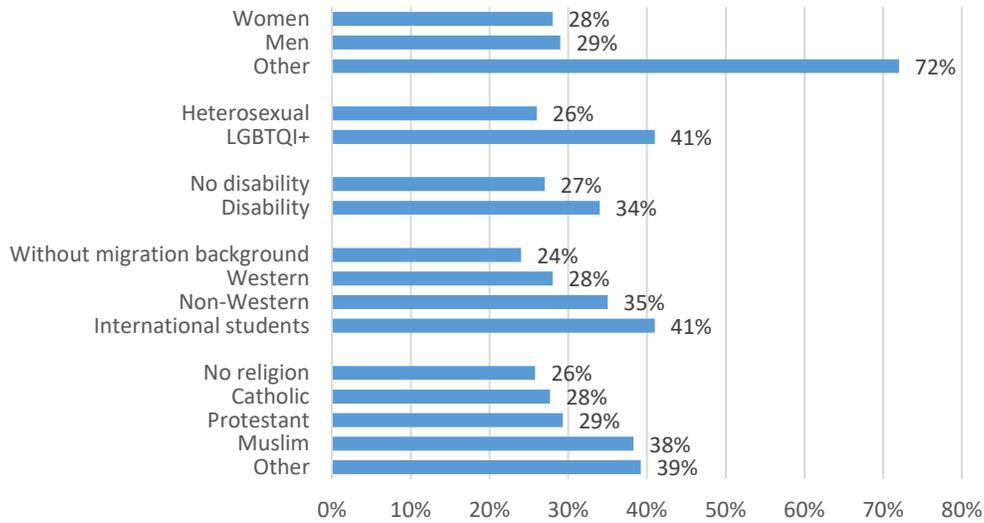
Figure 3.2  
Grounds for discrimination or exclusion



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

In figure 3.3, where the respondents are subdivided according to different personal characteristics, it is noticeable that nationality plays a role in discrimination and exclusion. Forty-one percent (41%) of international students said that they had experienced or observed discrimination, 17 percentage points more often than students without a migration background (see figure 3.5). This figure shows that non-normative groups of students observe or experience discrimination or exclusion more often than normative groups of students. In the following paragraphs we will take a closer look at the different groups of students who observe or experience exclusion or discrimination at VU Amsterdam.

Figure 3.3  
I observe or experience discrimination or exclusion  
(sometimes, regularly or almost always)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

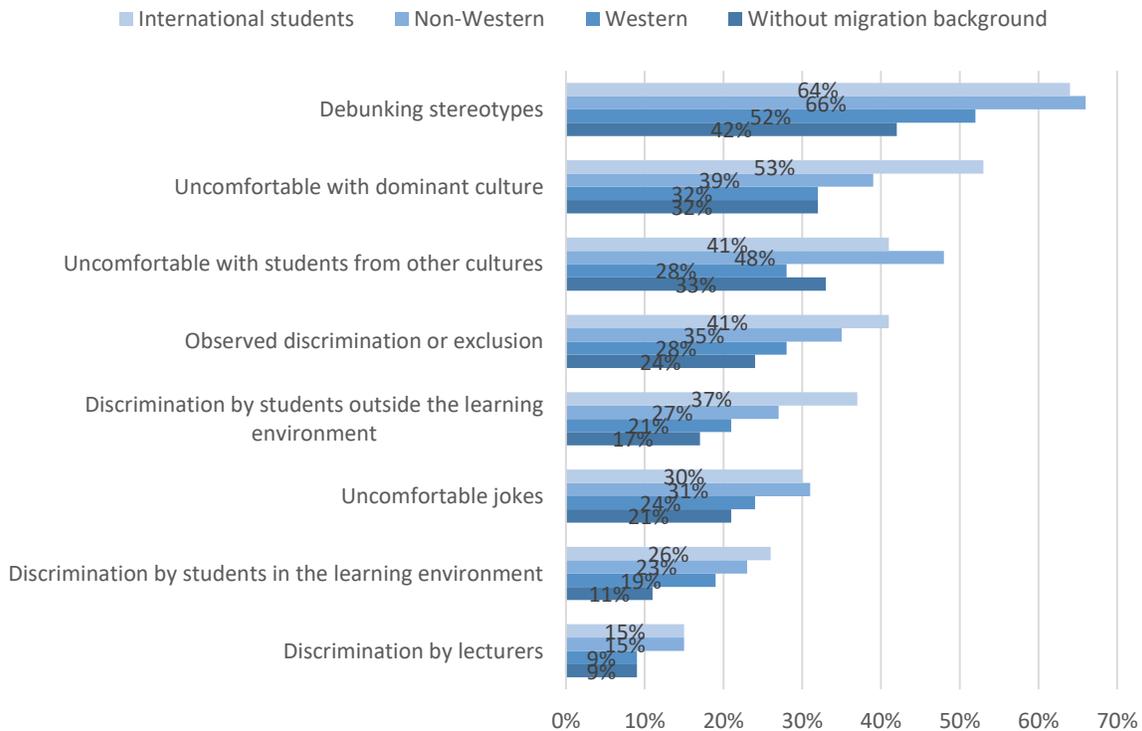
#### Discrimination or exclusion based on nationality

As with group formation in the previous chapter, international students at VU Amsterdam seem to be the most vulnerable to experiencing or observing exclusion and discrimination. Several of the international students also reported being aware of the generally subtle nature of the discrimination they experienced:

*“The level of discrimination is significant and starts from the fact you are not native (Dutch). Of course it is not direct but I can see it and feel it every day.”*

Furthermore, half of the international students said that they had to debunk stereotypes and felt uncomfortable with the dominant culture at VU Amsterdam (see figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4.  
Discrimination or exclusion  
(sometimes, regularly or almost always)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

International students gave examples of exclusion in their open answers.

*“This group formation between the national students and the international students is a typical problem that has been addressed by the international students multiple times, and they feel the exclusion especially when the national students insist on speaking in Dutch in the student group chat (where all students of the program are included) or during the class (when they ask questions or answer to the professor). The problem has been raised many times but nothing has been done so far.”*

The above quote makes it clear how some forms of exclusion are so entrenched that repeated efforts to change them have no effect. It is also clear how important a role language plays, both within the international study programmes and VU Amsterdam as a whole.

Language was frequently mentioned in the open questions as a ground upon which international students feel excluded or discriminated against. On the other hand, some VU students may feel excluded or discriminated against because they cannot or may not always speak Dutch, but are obliged to speak English.

*“Sometimes I cannot even use the Dutch language.”*

This split position regarding language is the subject of a wider discussion within the academic community, and is therefore not unique to VU Amsterdam. However, what clearly emerged is that language in particular may provide grounds for feelings of exclusion and discrimination among various students at VU Amsterdam.

### Discrimination or exclusion based on ethnicity

In addition to the international students, one-third of students with a non-Western migration background reported observing or experiencing discrimination and/or exclusion. Exclusion or discrimination is usually from teachers or students outside their own classroom environment.

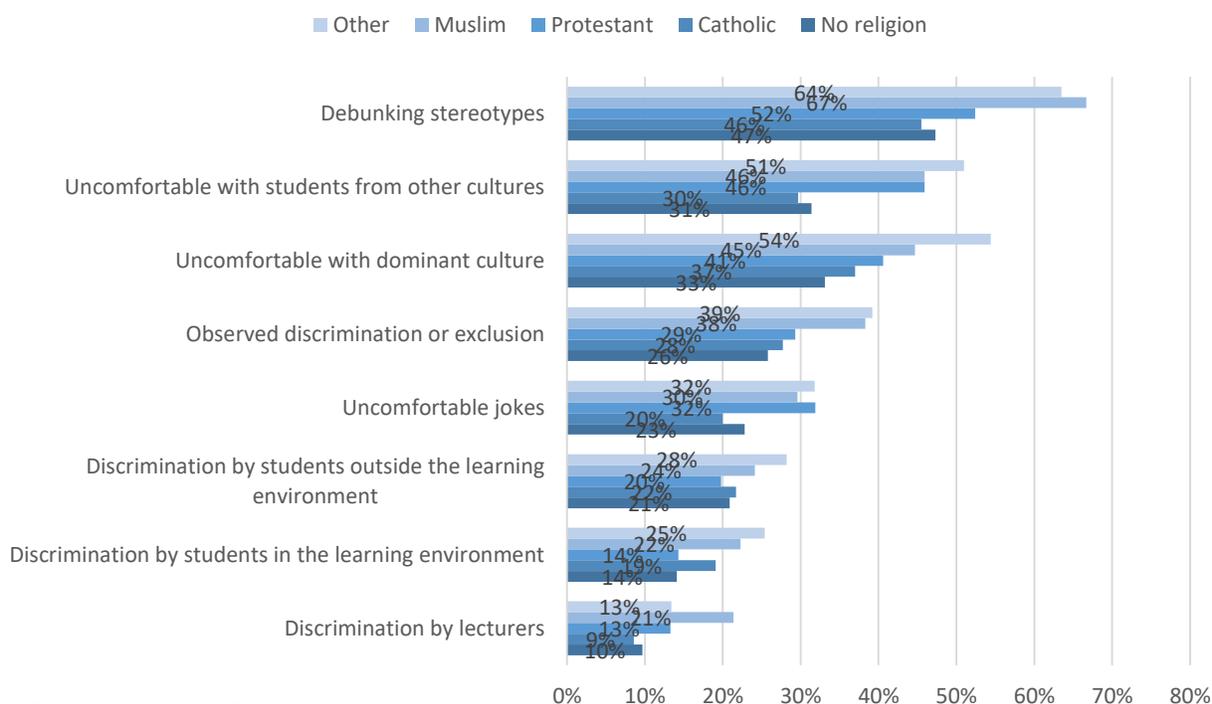
*“I notice that students with a non-migrant background often have stereotypical ideas (i.e. prejudices) about students with a migrant background more often than the other way round. I think that is a real shame. Just because I’m Turkish, it doesn’t mean that I support Erdogan. The fact that I’m Muslim does not mean that I have to wear a headscarf, as there are several currents within Islam. I could give more examples of this. It is also a pity that some lecturers interrupt you in the middle of a conversation because they want to know exactly where you come from. When they do that, I think: we don’t do this to you?”*

Students with a non-Western migration background find that they have to debunk stereotypes (66%) even more so than international students or students with a Western migration background. VU students with a Western migration background reported having to debunk stereotypes 10 percentage points more often than VU students without a migration background.

### Discrimination or exclusion based on religion or political preference

Figure 3.2 on page 37 shows that 5% of students experience exclusion or discrimination based on religion. Both Christian and Muslim students reported being excluded or discriminated against on the basis of their religion (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5  
Discrimination or exclusion  
(sometimes, regularly or (almost) always)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Students said the following:

*“In essence, VU is a Christian university, but unfortunately I do not notice this very much here. Christians’ opinions are often considered outdated, unrealistic and even sometimes discriminatory. The picture that is often sketched of Christians is totally untrue. That hurts me!”*

*“I don’t feel discriminated against, but I do sometimes feel that the study outings with the association are a bit limited. For example, they would usually go out to strange places or for alcoholic drinks [...]”*

*“Young foreign people are more drawn to each other, just like young Dutch people. Maybe this is because many young Dutch people are members of a student society where a lot of alcohol is consumed at get-togethers and the foreigners cannot relate to this as their religion forbids them to drink alcohol.”*

Some of the exclusion and discrimination experienced by VU students with a religious background arises from perceived tensions between the concept of ‘space for diversity’ and their own convictions. For example, tensions may arise concerning space for LGBTQ+ and religion. However, other, more conservative ideas held by VU students with a religious background are sometimes at odds with prevailing, mainly secular standards and ensuing ideas about diversity and the value of minority positions. These religious VU students feel a tension between their minority position and what is accepted with regard to being ‘different’.

This tension also surfaced in the open answers given by a small minority of 19 respondents who reported experiencing exclusion or discrimination on the basis of their political views or opinions:

*"I am a western heterosexual man who tends towards the right on matters of economics. I am often dismissed as racist, capitalist, or sexist without any justification just because I am male, western, white and heterosexual. No arguments are put forward, just that I am privileged [.....]."*

*"Political preference. You don't dare to say that you vote for a left-wing party as you will be excluded if you do. The questions in this study underline this!"*

The above, and other, quotes describe situations in which students feel that they are excluded or discriminated against because of their political persuasion. This was mentioned by both students who have experienced this themselves and students who have witnessed others in such a situation. As a result, some students no longer discuss certain topics and keep their opinion to themselves to avoid being mocked or excluded. These situations do not only occur with fellow students but also with lecturers. For example, in their open answers, respondents said that when writing a paper they were reluctant to choose a topic that might reveal their political views if they thought that their lecturer may not agree with them as they feared this might affect their assessment.

#### Discrimination or exclusion based on gender

Figures 3.2 and 3.3 above also show exclusion on the basis of sex or gender. We see, for example, that respondents who identify as being 'other' or non-binary, experience or observe the most (72%) discrimination or exclusion in comparison to male and female students. Although this group of students only make up a small part of the survey respondents (N=21), these figures give an indication of their diverse experiences with exclusion and/or discrimination at VU:

*"There does not seem to be space at VU for students who can't be pigeonholed as either male or female. This is reflected in the curriculum and there is a lack of gender neutral toilets."*

*"I am not allowed to exist at VU and this is reflected in every aspect: the curriculum, the facilities (toilets, etc.), and the way in which I am treated in classes (mainly in work groups but also if I approach lecturers during lectures)."*

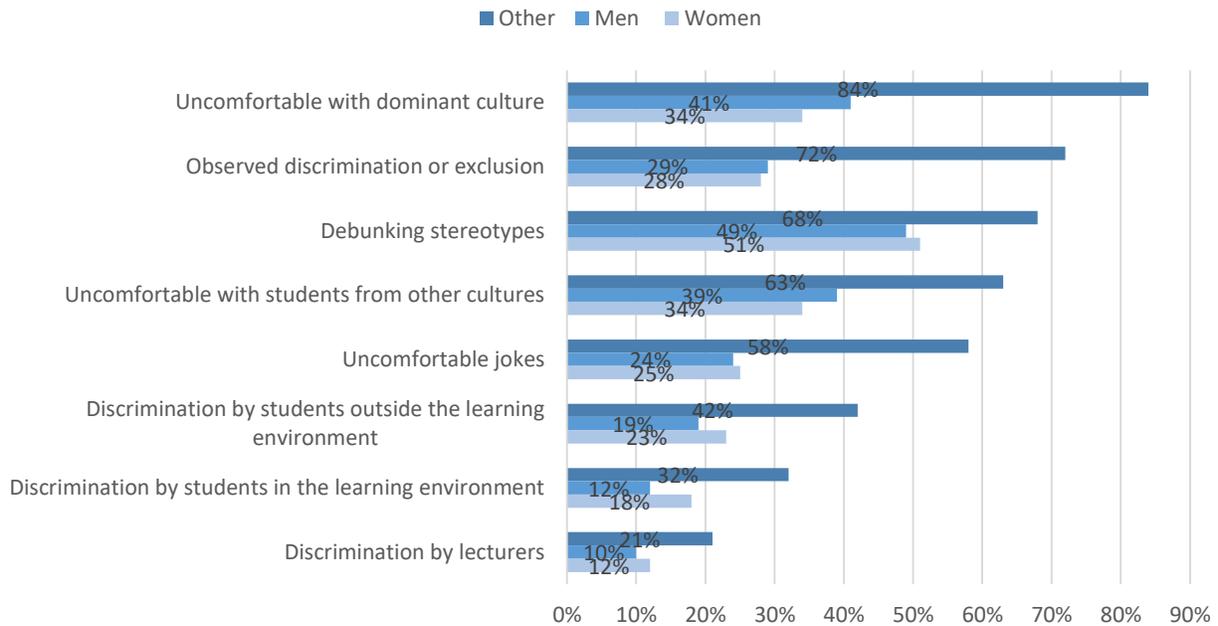
Almost three-quarters of this group of students said that they had experienced discrimination and/or exclusion or had seen it happening to others (72%). This is 43% more often than male students at VU Amsterdam. 84% of this non-binary group said that they felt uncomfortable with the dominant culture.

Although figure 3.3 shows that the difference between male (29%) and female (28%) students with respect to experiences with exclusion is not so great, figure 3.6 shows a gender difference. For example, women feel excluded or discriminated against by lecturers more often than men (25% versus 19%) but also by other students in the classroom environment (18% versus 12%). The following quote describes this:

*"I have been discriminated against several times as a woman. A lecturer told me that more women working in care was bad for society. When I stood up for myself, I was intimidated on several occasions by the lecturer and thrown*

out of his room. Once, I also saw how a white man in the same situation was given priority even though the situation was identical.”

Figure 3.6  
Discrimination or exclusion  
(sometimes, regularly or (almost) always)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Nevertheless, there were a few statements for which male respondents had higher scores than female respondents. Male students said that they felt uncomfortable with the dominant culture or with students from other cultures more often than female students. It is striking that male respondents also observe discrimination and/or exclusion one percentage point more often than female respondents, but at the same time female respondents observe or experience discrimination among students inside and outside the classroom environment and among lecturers more often than males.

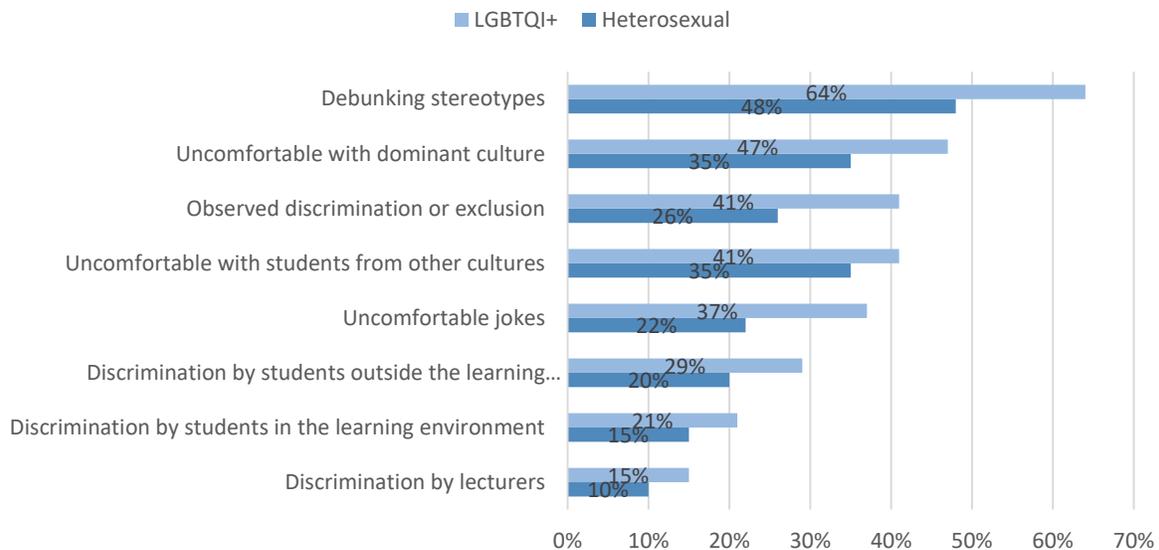
### Students with a non-normative sexual orientation

Another group that observes or experiences discrimination or exclusion to a significantly greater extent, are VU students with a non-normative sexual orientation. Sometimes there are unconscious exclusionary mechanisms at play, as the following quote illustrates:

*“I do not feel discriminated against, but because many of the girls on my course are heterosexual and talk a lot about their boyfriends, etc., I sometimes do not feel completely at ease. Especially when they assume that I am also heterosexual and make comments on this, so that I have to explicitly explain that I like women, which is sometimes uncomfortable.”*

VU students with a non-normative sexual orientation also experience discrimination or exclusion within and outside the classroom environment (see Figure 3.7) more often than heterosexual VU students (41% versus 26%), and are more likely to have to deal with uncomfortable jokes and debunk stereotypes (64% versus 48%).

Figure 3.7.  
Discrimination or exclusion  
(sometimes, regularly or (almost) always)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

These students told their story in the open answers:

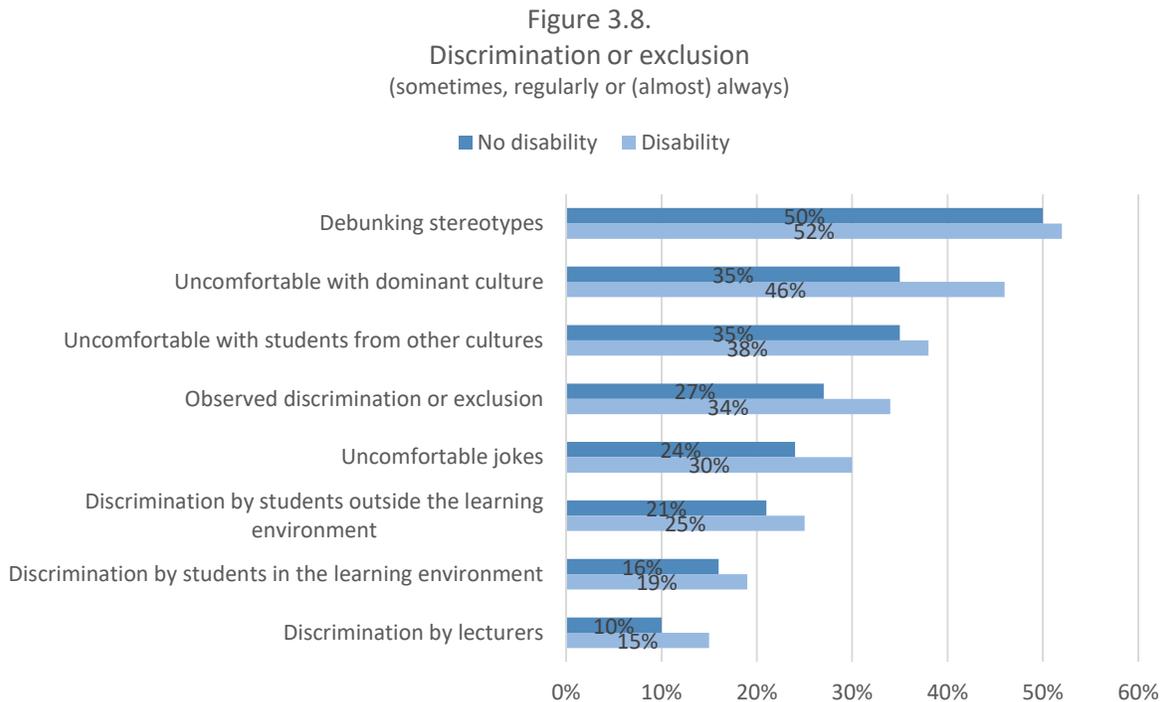
*“I have had various upsetting interactions with fellow students who were making extremely negative comments about homosexuality, thinking that I shared their opinion. I also think that acceptance at the university has become less visible since VU’s gay network was discontinued. I understood from the organizers that their participation in VU-wide events was no longer always appreciated.”*

*“Sometimes I feel excluded because I do not know of any other LGBT students. VU Pride was set up about a month ago and I joined immediately in order to meet other LGBT students. I hope that as it grows, I will be able to meet other like-minded students so that I will not feel excluded anymore”*

These quotes illustrate various instances of exclusion and discrimination. Students with a non-normative sexual orientation experience exclusion or discrimination both in everyday conversations and in their dealings with fellow students, but also due to the lack of certain events, interest groups or the way in which they do or do not feel represented in examples used in the context of education. The students also describe feeling that they are not yet fully accepted. This intensifies their feeling of exclusion.

## Students with a disability or illness

Respondents with a disability scored higher with respect to experiencing or observing exclusion and discrimination than VU students without a disability (34% versus 27%), as shown in figure 3.8. Furthermore, students with a disability reported feeling uncomfortable with the dominant culture at VU 11 percentage points more often than students without a disability.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

As was the case with VU students with a non-normative sexual orientation, lecturers can create feelings of exclusion and discrimination by using stereotypical examples when discussing diseases or medical conditions, or even by making misplaced jokes about them:

*“Once, one of my lecturers made jokes about diabetes, an illness I suffer from and other illnesses that are dealt with in this subject. I took this up with him in an email, but he did not reply. I think that is appalling”.*

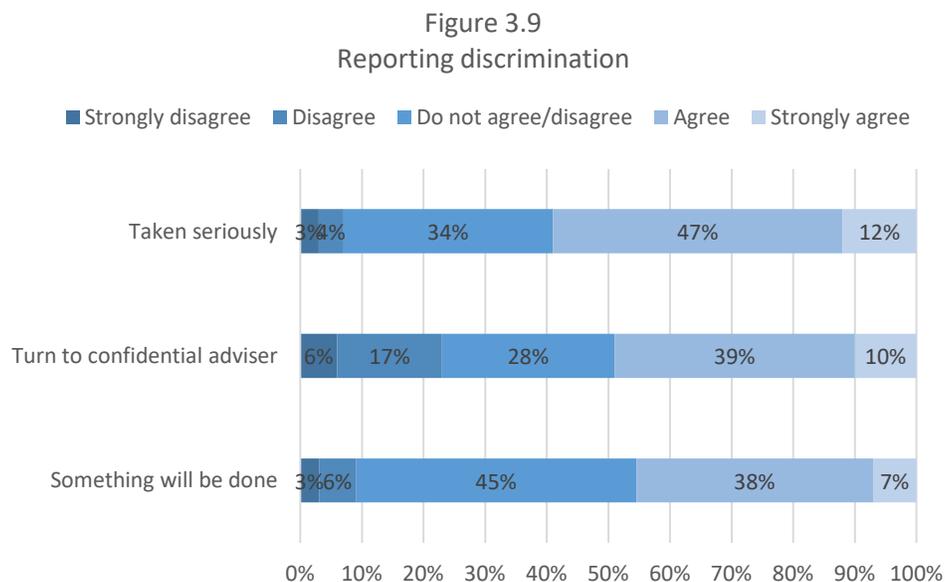
Apart from the fact that the VU student referred to above justifiably feels excluded or discriminated against by the lecturer, this quote also illustrates how important it is to respond when someone takes the trouble to address another person about his/her behaviour. This is about becoming aware of the fact that some VU students have disabilities that may be visible to a greater or lesser extent, but that first of all require acknowledgement and then understanding:

*“[...] As a person with a chronic illness, I often feel that I do not belong and that I am not good enough to study at VU. There is no place for illness on my course and the students' mental and physical health is totally ignored by some teachers. [...]”*

The above quotes describe how students with a disability, medical condition and/or illness regularly experience exclusion and a lack of understanding from both their fellow students and lecturers. These students notice that they are generally shown little consideration. This may be because fellow students or lecturers are not aware of their disability or illness – after all, it is not always easy to tell people about this. Students who do tell others about their disability or illness are often left feeling that they are still not understood or taken seriously. This makes them feel excluded or discriminated against on a regular basis.

### 3.3 Reporting discrimination

Figure 3.9 shows how students scored on questions on reporting discrimination. Approximately half of the students were not convinced that they would be taken seriously if they reported discrimination (41%), or that anything would be done about the situation (54%). It appears to be difficult to find or approach someone who could offer help in this situation: 51% did not know whether or not they could turn to a confidential counsellor if confronted with discrimination.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The open questions show that students do not always know who to turn to if they want to report exclusion or discrimination. Students had the following to say on this topic:

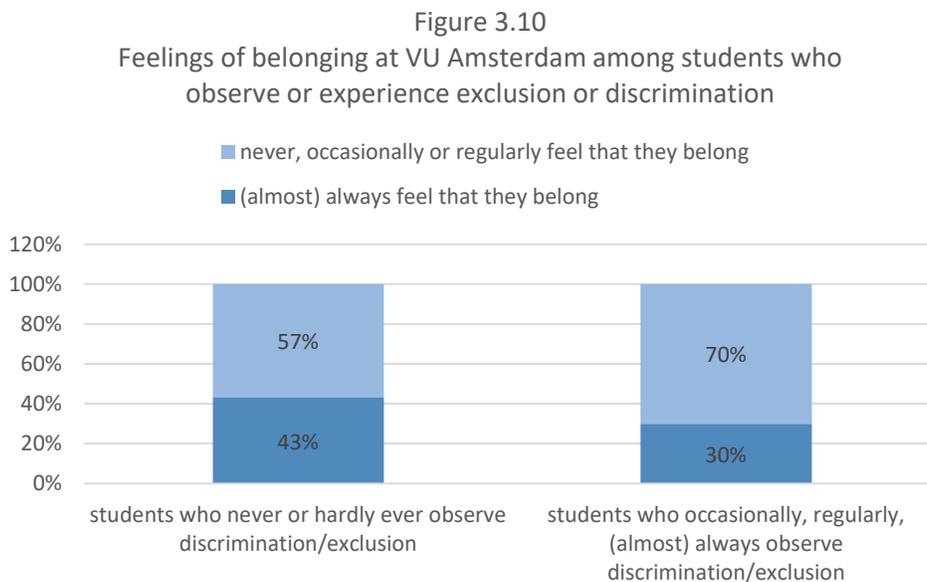
*“Yes! Concerning the question about a contact person for reporting discrimination, I - and many other people too, I think - am not sure who to contact if discriminated against. Make this clear through study coordinators who talk to students.”*

*“VU is fine with regard to acceptance, I don’t think it should be any more or any less. Maybe they could more actively communicate [what to do] if you experience discrimination, because it’s not clear to me where I could report something like this.*

Scores on reporting discrimination varied between groups of students. Students with a disability were more likely to think that nothing would be done if discrimination was reported than students without a disability (13% versus 9%). Students with a non-Western migration background also think this more often than students without a migration background (13% versus 8%). Muslim students said that they would not go to a confidential counsellor in the event of discrimination more often than students without religious convictions (14% versus 9%).

### 3.4 Discrimination and belonging

Exclusion and discrimination seem to be related to feelings of belonging among VU students. Figure 3.10 shows that 43% of the students who never or hardly ever experience or observe practices of discrimination and/or exclusion against themselves or others always or almost always feel at home at VU Amsterdam. Only 30% of students who sometimes experience or observe discrimination said that they always or almost always feel at home at VU. The percentage for feeling that one belongs at VU was almost zero for students who said that they regularly or almost always observe or experience exclusion or discrimination.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Experiencing or observing exclusion or discrimination therefore seems to have a major impact on the extent to which VU students feel that they belong at their university.

## 4. Recognition at VU Amsterdam

In the first chapter of this report, we showed that the extent to which students feel that they belong at VU Amsterdam is connected to whether or not they can see themselves reflected in both the university's visual material and in their fellow students. This chapter will take a closer look at the importance of recognition. We will elaborate on the survey questions that asked students for their opinion on the level of ethnic diversity among their teachers and in the curriculum. The answer categories were: 'much too limited', 'too limited', 'good', 'too extensive', and 'much too extensive'.

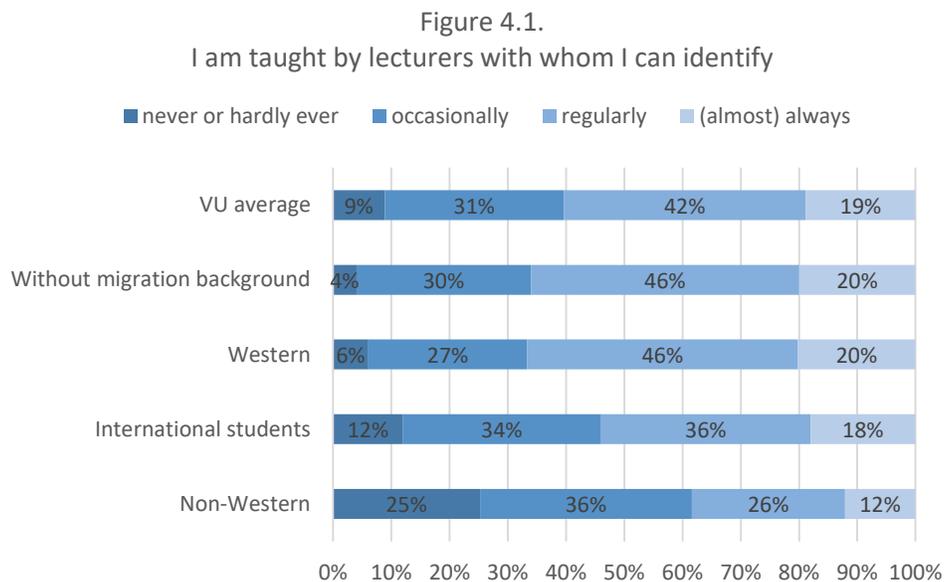
Using a 4 point scale ranging from 1 (never or hardly ever) to 4 (always or almost always), questions were also asked on the extent to which students recognized themselves in lecturers and the curriculum, by means of the following statements:

- 'I can identify with my lecturers';
- 'My course pays sufficient attention to different perspectives on the topics it covers';
- 'The examples given in my course sufficiently represent perspectives from different parts of the world';
- 'The literature in my course sufficiently represents both male and female authors'.

In this chapter we also ask whether VU students would like to pursue a career in academia. We therefore asked pre-master and master students whether they were planning to apply for a PhD place after obtaining their MA diploma, to which they could answer 'yes', 'no', or 'I don't know yet'. Finally, the survey left space for open answers, which the respondents made extensive use of.

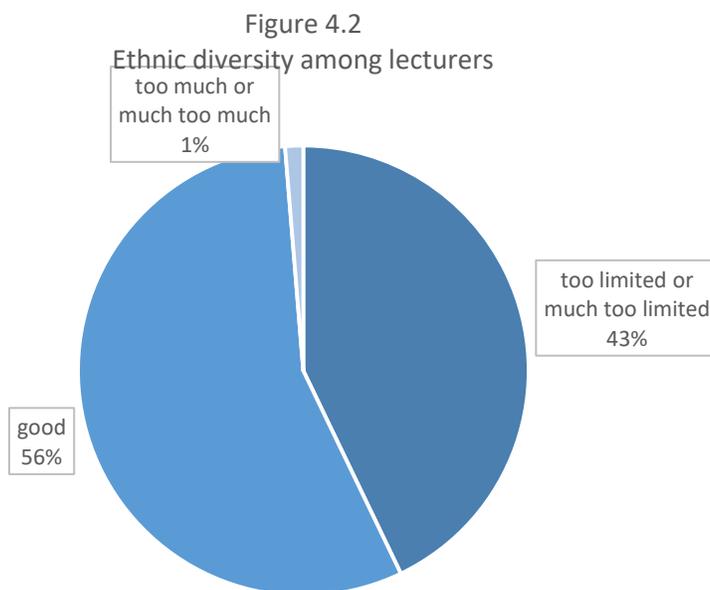
### 4.1 Recognizing oneself in one's lecturers and the curriculum.

More than half of the respondents (61%) said that they could regularly or almost always identify with their lecturers (see figure 4.1). This percentage was slightly lower for international students and students with a non-Western migration background, while students without a migration background or with a Western migration background scored above the VU-wide average for being able to identify with one's lecturers.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Furthermore, more than half of VU students thought that the level of ethnic diversity among lecturers was 'good' (see figure 4.2). Both figures show the predominantly positive picture that VU students can identify with their lecturers.



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

At the same time, however, figure 4.2 shows that 43% of the respondents thought that the level of ethnic diversity among lecturers was 'too limited', or 'much too limited'. Furthermore, when we take a closer

look at who reported never or hardly ever being able to identify with lecturers, we see considerable differences between groups of students (see figure 4.1). Four percent (4%) of VU students without a migration background said that they could not identify with their lecturers, while this figure was 25% for VU students with a non-Western migration background. A student with a non-Western background said the following:

*“I appreciate it that the VU actively works to achieve a diverse and inclusive environment and this can certainly be seen in the posters, etc. It is just a pity that the team of lecturers is so representative of the dominant standard (male, white, western) that I have still not seen a lecturer who represents me (female & black, Asian etc.).”*

International students were also critical of the lack of ethnic diversity among lecturers:

*“[...] I wish the VU was more diverse, especially the professors. All of the non-white people I see working at the VU are either cleaning, serving food, etc... My education would be very much enriched by having more non-white professors.”*

*“Ethnic diversity is now a buzzword that big institutions use in order to show that they are adapting to change, yet change has to happen first within the institution - the staff, teachers, professors are representing this university and my programme does not reflect the wants and desires of the international students, we want professors we can relate to, who are viable representations of different groups of groups”*

The above quotes show that being able to identify with one's lecturers is not a given fact for these VU students, but that they wish that they could, as this would enrich their learning experience. We also know that role models in education are important <sup>29</sup>because students can see themselves reflected in them and envision themselves standing at the front of a lecture room as a lecturer one day.

*“[...] Despite the students being a reasonably good reflection of society, I see much too little of this in the lecturers/professors and in the curriculum. It is of major importance to have better representation and to see diverse perspectives. For example, when I went to a lecture given by a black, female, lesbian (!) professor, my jaw dropped in surprise. I knew theoretically that it was possible, but it is not until you actually see someone like you that you understand the sentence "If you can't see it, you can't be it". This is why we need better representation. Now I am also thinking about becoming a professor someday [...]"*

*“I cannot say much about ethnic diversity among the lecturers – I don't pay much attention to it. However, Dimitris and the lecturer who was originally from Iran (I forgot the name) gave me the feeling that despite the fact that I speak Dutch with a foreign accent I could still work at the VU (if that's what I wanted to do).”*

The fact that 56% of the respondents thought that the level of ethnic diversity among lecturers was 'good' while 43% considered it 'too limited', or 'much too limited' is a clear indication that opinions are divided among VU students on this topic. And whereas the above quotes show why some students would like to see more diversity among lecturers, other open answers reveal the opinions of a group of VU students who say that educational quality must not be sacrificed in order to promote diversity.

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<sup>29</sup> Klaassen, C. (2012). De pedagogische voorbeeldfunctie van de leerkracht. Nijmegen. Sociology department, Radboud Universiteit.

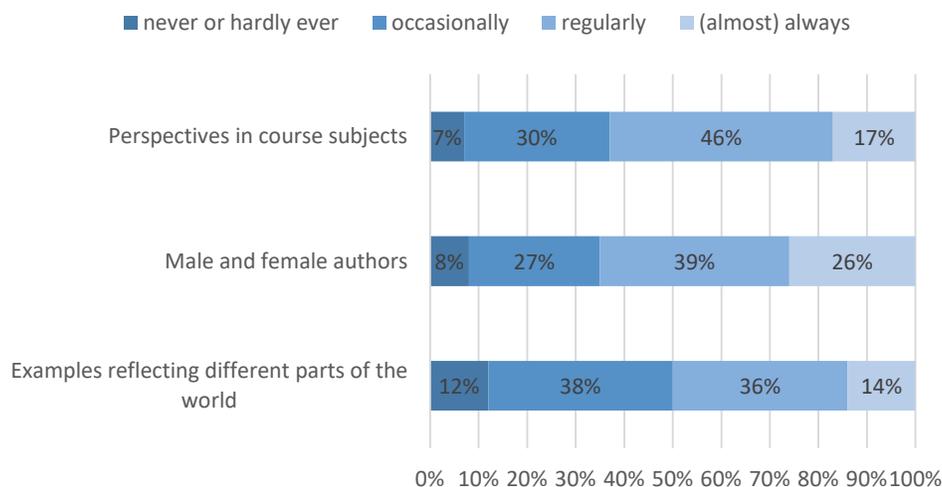
*“There is too much focus on diversity rather than the quality of the education. Diversity exists and is normal. It doesn’t always have to be magnified.”*

*“Sometimes a person’s origins or gender seems to be more important than content. We should, as it were, forget the person and only handle the material (including criticism of it).”*

These students comment that lecturers and course literature should be selected on the basis of their worth, rather than their ethnicity or origins. These answers show that many students still often see attempts to increase diversity as being at odds with quality.

Opinions were divided on the curriculum (diversity with regard to gender, geography, perspective in examples, literature and authors). While more than half said that the curriculum is regularly or almost always sufficiently diverse, a third said that this was sometimes the case and a tenth said that was never or hardly ever the case (see figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3.  
Diversity in the curriculum



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

In particular, a large majority of VU students said that they regularly, always or almost always agreed with the following statements: ‘The study programme sufficiently represents different perspectives on the course’s subjects’ and ‘The literature offered on my course sufficiently represents both male and female authors’.

Despite this, figure 4.3 also shows that a considerable number of VU students never, hardly ever or only sometimes agreed with these statements. The answers reveal that only half of the respondents agreed with the statement ‘The examples given in my course sufficiently represent perspectives from diverse parts of the world’. The following quotes were selected from the open answers:

*"I mainly notice the lack of diversity in the selective sources on the curriculum which often have a western bias and do not include research by or the perspectives of academics in other parts of the world."*

Furthermore, students who thought that there is too little ethnic diversity in the curriculum, felt that they belonged 15 percentage points than students who thought that there was a satisfactory level of ethnic diversity in the curriculum (see figure 4.4).

## 5. Student involvement

We have already mentioned student Involvement and participation at VU Amsterdam in the previous chapters, and will now explore this topic in more detail. Student involvement at VU Amsterdam deserves particular attention because it has a major influence on the extent to which students feel they belong at their educational institution<sup>30</sup>. The survey measured involvement by asking students whether they were a member of a society or organization inside or outside VU Amsterdam and if they participated in social activities organized by their study programme through the following statement: 'I attend social activities that are organized by my study programme'. We also asked about the interaction between the respondents and their fellow students via the following statements:

- 'I feel that I belong among my fellow students';
- 'I have good friends among my fellow students';
- 'I meet up with other students in my leisure time';
- 'It is easy to find students to work with'<sup>31</sup>;
- 'Fellow students approach me to discuss course material or course assignments';
- 'My contributions during seminars are taken seriously by the other students';
- 'When a personal situation affects my studies, I discuss it with a fellow student or students'.

Finally, we used the following statements to ask about the interaction between the respondents and lecturers:

- 'Lecturers recognize me when they encounter me in the hallway';
- 'Lecturers take my contributions during seminars/lectures seriously';
- 'When I need help with a subject, I immediately ask it of my lecturer';
- 'When a personal situation affects my studies, I discuss it with a lecturer'.

The statements used a 4 point item scale ranging from 1 (never or hardly ever) to 4 (always or almost always).

### 5.1 Contact and involvement with fellow students

Contact and involvement with fellow students influence the extent to which VU students feel that they belong at their university. Contact with fellow students refers to both study-related contact and interactions of a more social nature (see figure 5.1<sup>32</sup>).

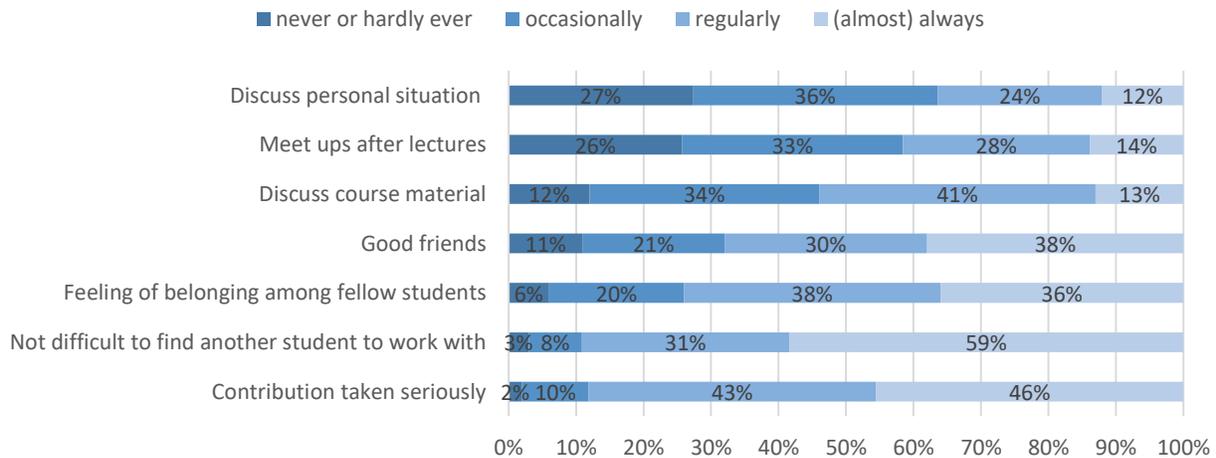
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<sup>30</sup> Meeuwisse, M., Severiens, S. E., and Ph Born, M. "Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups." *Research in Higher Education* 51.6 (2010): 528-545.

<sup>31</sup> This statement was reversed. The original statement was "It is difficult to find students to work with".

<sup>32</sup> There are small percentage deviations in the total due to rounding off to whole numbers.

Figure 5.1  
Student involvement



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

When referring to their study programme, 90% of the respondents said it was regularly, always or almost always easy for them to find a partner to cooperate with. Furthermore, 89% of VU Amsterdam students said that their contribution during work groups was taken seriously by their fellow students. Although course material was discussed to a lesser extent, more than half of the respondents (54%) said that they were regularly, always or almost always approached to discuss course material.

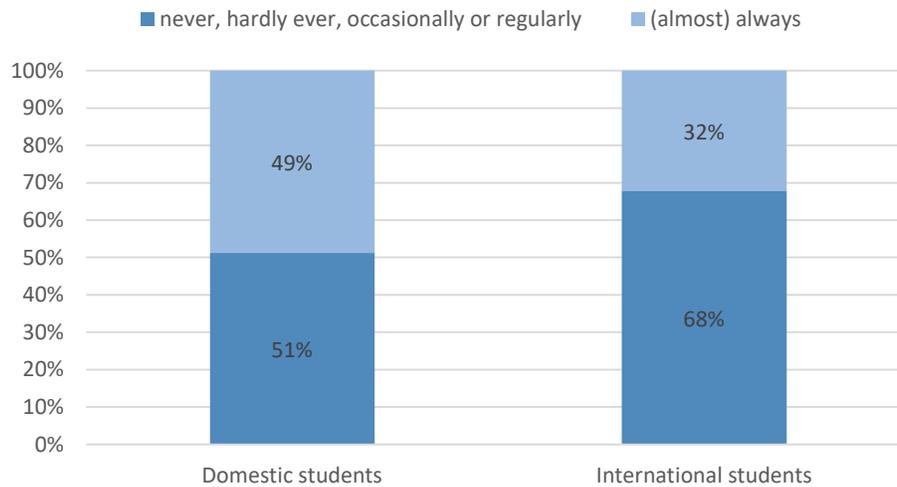
This positive picture that it is not difficult to find a partner to work with is particularly important because VU students often have to cooperate when carrying out projects and group assignments. Although most students had no difficulty in finding a partner to work with, we had to adjust this positive picture when we looked at the international students as it is not always easy for these students to find someone to work with:

*"I choose Amsterdam as the city I wanted to live because I love that it is so diverse. I was disappointed that many of my classmates in my introduction to Java course seemed to be unwilling to interact with me / assist me in the homework assignments / collaborate with me on the homework assignments. I felt that was because I was a foreigner and they already had a group of friends"*

*"[...] I also heard about some experiences [Dutch] students had when working together with Asian students. This did not run very smoothly due to the enormous cultural differences regarding group work and hierarchy. Consequently, these Dutch students now prefer not to work with Asian students [...]"*

When we take a more specific look at international students, we are forced to temper the positive picture put forward by the answers to the statement 'My contribution is taken seriously' (see figure 5.2). International respondents said that their contribution during work groups was always or almost always taken seriously by their fellow students 17 percentage points less often than domestic respondents.

Figure 5.2  
My contribution is taken seriously by fellow students

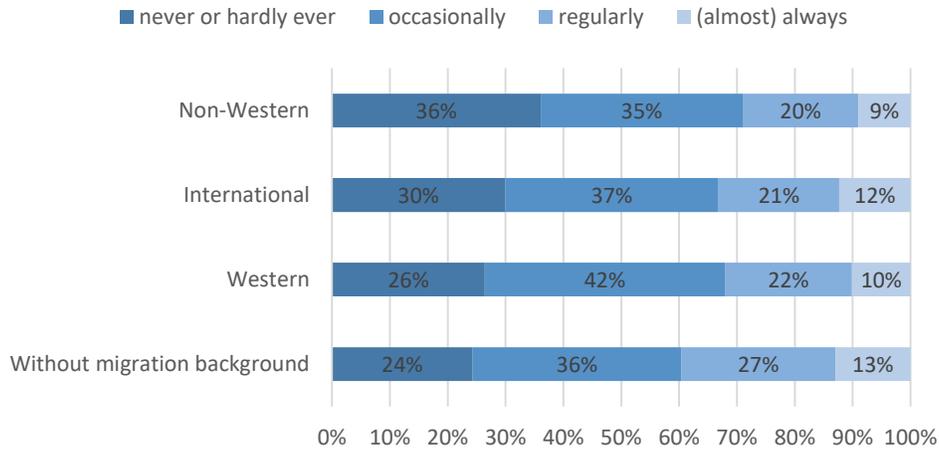


Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The nuances that the experiences of international students add to this positive image of students' involvement in their study programme, can also be seen in a broader sense when we look at student involvement of a more social nature. For example, a quarter (26%) of the students who answered the survey said that they never or hardly ever met up with other students after lectures. Furthermore, even when their personal situation was affecting their studies, 27% said that they never or hardly ever discussed this with fellow students.

When we look at the different personality characteristics, we can observe clear differences between groups of VU students. Students with a non-Western migration background said that they never or hardly ever discussed their personal situation 12 percentage points more often than students without a migration background (see figure 5.3).

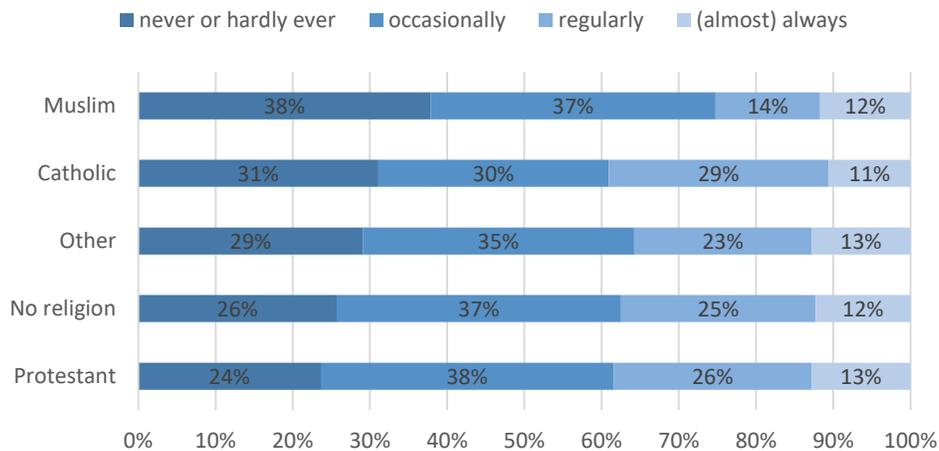
Figure 5.3  
If a personal situation were to affect my studies, I would discuss it with a fellow student/s



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Out of the religious groups, Muslim VU students least often discuss their personal situation when it is affecting their studies (see figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4  
If a personal situation were to affect my studies, I would discuss it with a fellow student/s



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

We also see that non-binary students share less with their fellow students. These students make up a small group within the survey and therefore the results are only indicative. But what can be observed is that non-binary VU students have the lowest scores for all topics related to contact and involvement with

fellow students, in particular with regard to feelings of belonging, meeting up after lectures and discussing their personal situation.

Students with a disability, medical condition or illness who answered the survey did not show any major differences to students without a disability, medical condition or illness with regard to discussing their personal situation with fellow students when it was affecting their studies, nor did they meet up with their fellow students less often in their free time. A recurring theme that kept cropping up in the open answers, however, was that it can be a challenge for these VU students to make contact and establish friendships:

*“Because of my visual disability, I always sit in the front of the lecture hall and have difficulty recognizing other students; this means that I’m not as sociable as I could be [...].”*

Furthermore, VU students with a disability, medical condition or illness often encounter a lack of understanding from their fellow students:

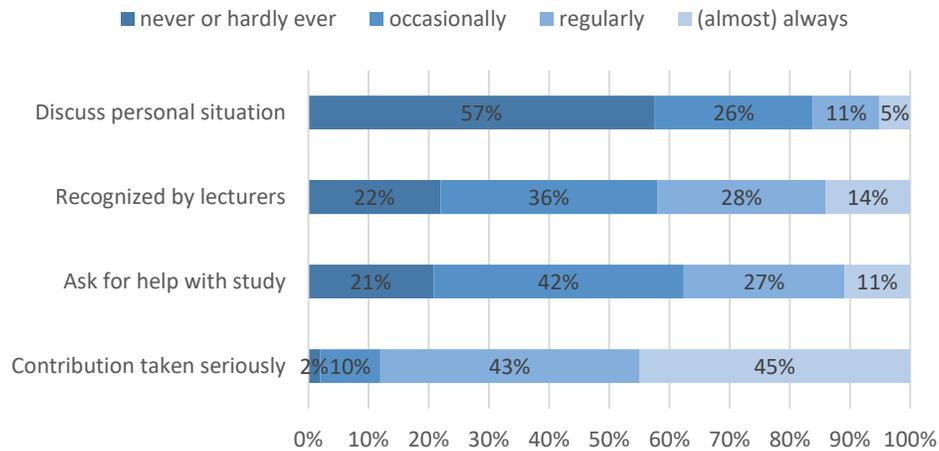
*“It would be nice if there was a little bit more awareness of or attention for less physical disabilities, such as my ADD. I often have to explain what this entails to lecturers or fellow students, and this is not always taken seriously, or understood properly – even though it has an enormous impact on my day-to-day life and my studies.”*

It is painful that students with a disability, medical condition or illness – who tell their fellow students and lecturers about their personal situation more often in comparison to other groups of VU students – frequently feel that they are not taken seriously. This, in addition to other issues, means that students with a disability, medical condition or illness do not always feel that they belong at VU Amsterdam and are less likely to have good friends among their fellow students and to meet up with other students after lectures.

## 5.2 Contact and involvement with lecturers

The above quote mentioned the role played by lecturers and fellow students in the same sentence. We will continue by exploring students’ contact and involvement with their lecturers. We derived four themes from the statements about lecturers in the survey, which are broken down in figure 5.5.

Figure 5.5  
Student involvement  
(lecturers)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

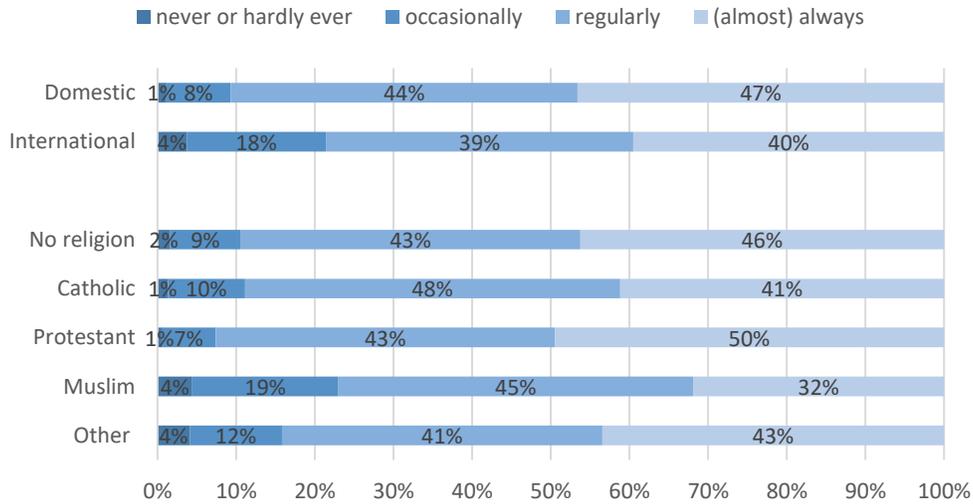
This figure shows that 42% of the students said that they were regularly, always or almost always recognized by lecturers and 38% regularly, always or almost always asked a lecturer for help with their studies when necessary. Only 12% of the respondents said that they sometimes, hardly ever or never felt that their contribution was taken seriously. Most students had predominantly positive experiences with regard to contact and involvement concerning lecturers. Students made the following comments in their open answers:

*"I have always had a good relationship with the lecturers; they are very understanding if something is going on."*

*"Lecturers are always willing to help and are very approachable."*

Although the students generally felt that the lecturers took their contributions seriously, there were differences between groups of students. For example, Muslim students said least often than they felt that their contribution was always or almost always taken seriously by lecturers during work groups or lectures (see figure 5.6). Protestant students said most often that they always or almost always felt that lecturers took them seriously. Furthermore, international students felt that they were taken seriously by lecturers less often than domestic students.

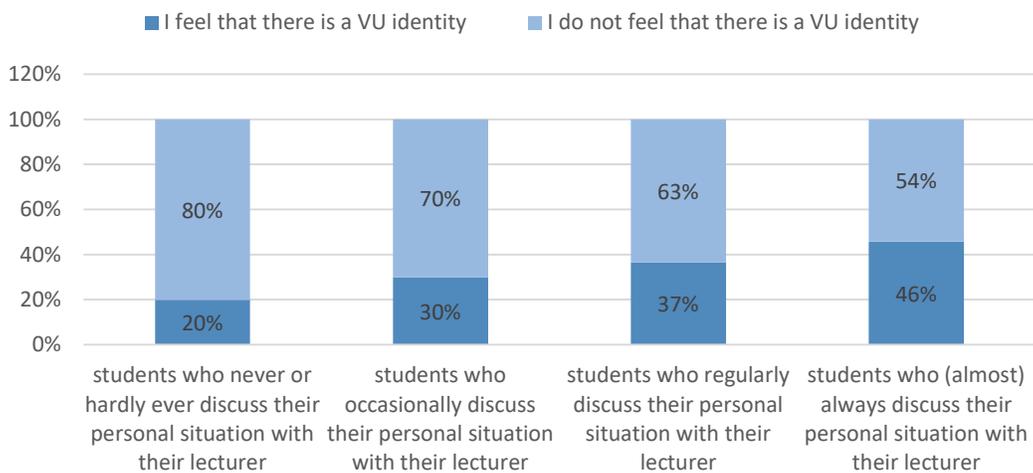
Figure 5.6  
Lecturers take my contributions seriously during work groups/lectures



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Approximately half of the respondents (57%) said that they never or hardly ever discussed their personal situation with lecturers if it was affecting their studies (see figure 5.5). Figure 5.7 also shows that students who never or hardly ever discuss their personal situation with lecturers experienced a VU identity 16% less often than students who always or almost always discussed their personal situation. Only 5% said that they always or almost always discuss their personal situation with a lecturer if it is affecting their studies.

Figure 5.7  
VU identity among students who discuss their personal situation with their lecturer



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

The open answers reveal that students may feel demotivated if they think that their voices are not heard and that they go unnoticed as individuals:

*“VU Amsterdam is a large university with large study programmes. As a student you often feel like a number. Lecturers do not know you personally and there are no mentors or study advisers. The atmosphere is like a school – critical comments from students are not appreciated. Researchers are busy and you should be grateful that they bother to teach you at all.”*

*“Certain beliefs and political opinions are sometimes excessively prevalent among the lecturers. [...] If a lecturer has already decided upon the answer, why should we even bother answering? It is boring and does not leave much space for other opinions held by my fellow students. It means that discussions often remain silent in the classroom, which is a pity.”*

The lack of personal contact is very demotivating for some students, as it makes them feel like a number. This also applies if students do not feel that there is enough freedom in class to give their opinion or make critical comments because their lecturer has made political affiliations or beliefs apparent. In this situation, there is no safe space where everyone can give their opinion, which affects the involvement that students feel towards their lecturers.

### 5.3 Participation in student organizations and social activities

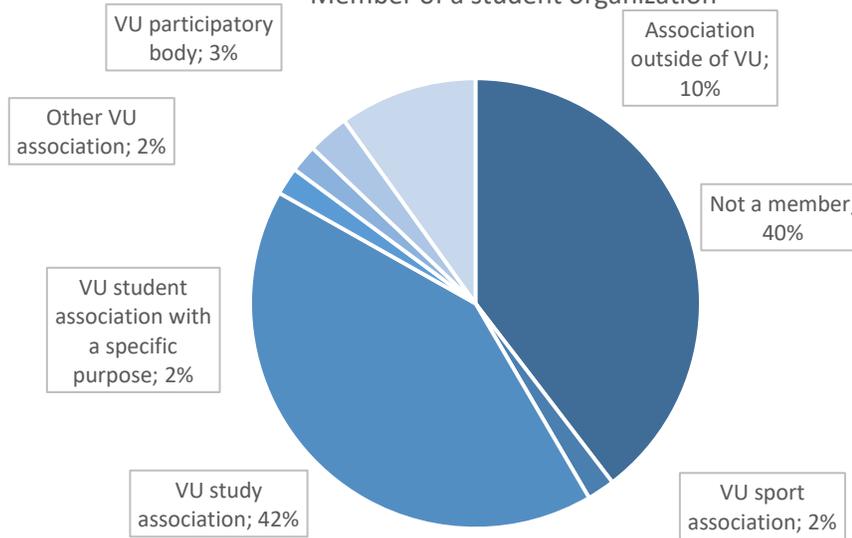
The extent to which VU students feel involved also seems to be strongly influenced by whether they participate in student organizations and social activities at VU Amsterdam. There is a wide range of organizations and societies available to students. In the academic year 2019-2020, there were 48 study or student societies (student organizations) at VU Amsterdam<sup>33</sup>. Half of the respondents said they belonged to a student organization or participatory body (see figure 5.8<sup>34</sup>). Student organizations include societies for specific groups based on, for example, religion, ethnicity or sexual diversity, as well as societies organized by disciplines/faculties, such as the societies for Law and Mathematics. There are also societies for leisure activities, such as sports clubs and the university choir.

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<sup>33</sup> Vrije Universiteit. (not dated). Official student organizations. Consulted at: <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/contact-routebeschrijving/adressen-en-telefoonnummers/studentenorganisaties/erkende-verenigingen/index.aspx>

<sup>34</sup> Three percent of these students was a member of two or more societies at VU Amsterdam.

Figure 5.8  
Member of a student organization

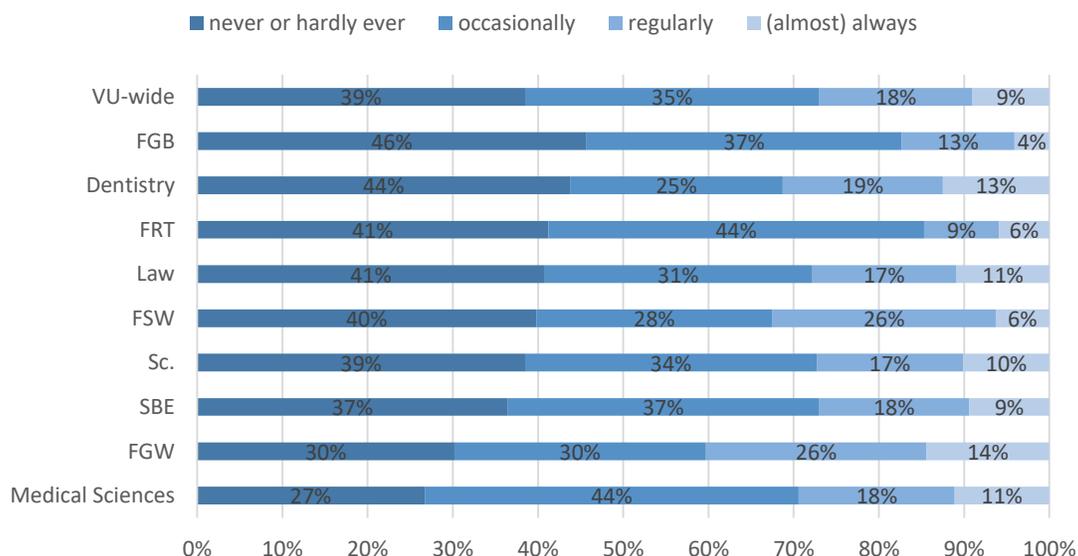


Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

Participatory bodies, such as the Faculty Student Council (FSR) and the University Student Council (USR), give students at VU Amsterdam a platform for joining discussions and participating in decisions on education at the university. Three percent of the students who filled in the survey said that they were on a council. Finally, 10% of the respondents were members of an organization or society outside of VU Amsterdam.

In addition to the student organizations, activities and events are organized regularly, both at VU-wide level and per study programme or faculty. The survey reveals that 39% of the respondents never or hardly ever participate in social activities connected to their study programme (see figure 5.9). In Chapter 4 on Belonging, we showed that VU students who always or almost always participate in activities and events connected to their study programme experience a VU identity 37 percentage points more often than students who never or hardly ever participate.

Figure 5.9  
I attend social activities organized by my study programme



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

VU students also drew a connection between participation and whether or not they felt a VU identity in the open answers:

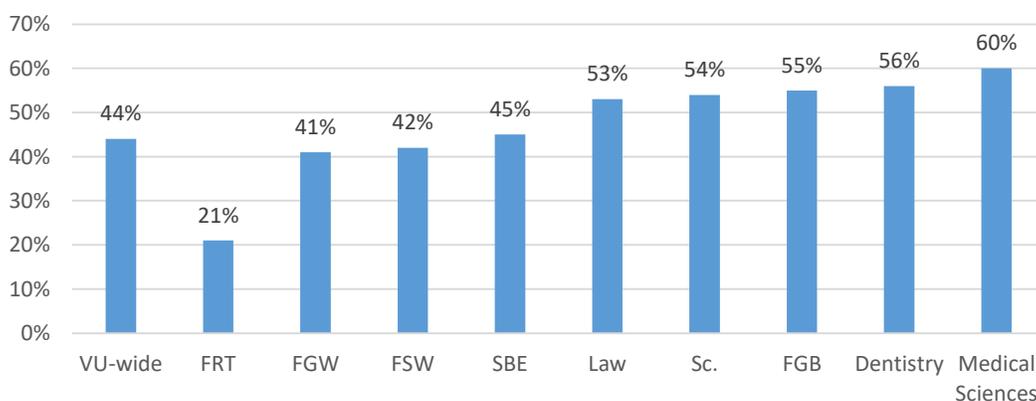
*“I think that I can imagine someone experiencing a VU identity, but I have not participated enough in extra-curricular activities to feel this myself (in any case, I think that this is the main reason).”*

These percentages vary per faculty. Students at the Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences (FGB) said that they never or hardly ever participated seven percentage points more often than students across VU Amsterdam as a whole, while this percentage in the Faculty of Medicine was 12 percentage points lower than the VU Amsterdam average. Study programmes and faculties therefore seem to influence the extent to which students participate in social activities.

We also see the role played by the various study programmes when we look at participation in student organizations. Out of all the faculties, students at the Faculty of Medicine are most often members of a student organization at VU Amsterdam (see figure 5.10). Students at the Faculty of Religion and Theology (FRT) are the least likely to be members of a VU student organization.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The survey contains 34 FRT students. The sample is three percent, which means an error margin of 16%. The results are therefore indicative.

Figure 5.10  
Member of a VU association  
(VU sport association, VU study association, VU student association, Other VU association)



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

### Who belongs to a student organization at VU Amsterdam?

The choice to become involved in student organizations at VU Amsterdam is influenced by other factors than one's faculty or study programme (see table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Membership of a VU student organization /Participatory body in percentages

Member-ship of	Study programme		Gender			Sexual orientation		Disability			Parents'education		Migration status				Religion			
	BA	MA	M	F	O	H	O	N	Y	HE	nHE	W M	N W	W	Int	N	Cath	Prot	Mus	O
VU student org.	67	31	48	49	38	47	55	48	52	50	47	53	52	44	30	50	49	45	43	47
Participatory council	1	2	2	2	0	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	1

Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019,

M = Male, V = Female, O = Other, H = Heterosexual, N = No, Y = Yes, HE = Higher Education, nHE = No Higher Educations, WM = Without migration background, NW = Non-Western, W = Western, Int = International, Cath = Catholic, Prot = Protestant, Mus = Muslim

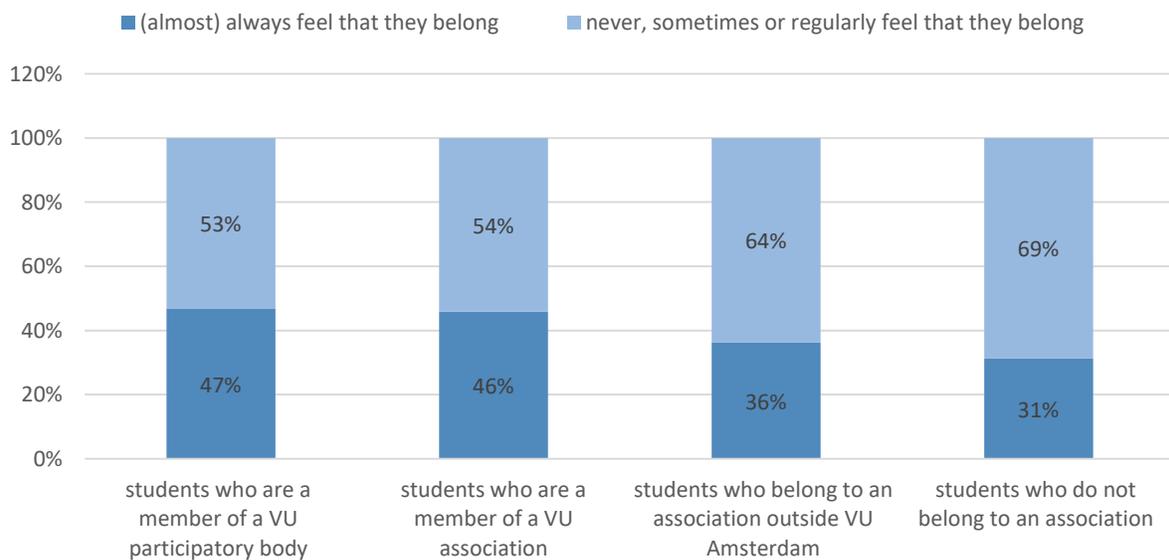
First of all it is striking that bachelor students are members of a VU student organization twice as often as master students. Furthermore, although the number of non-binary students in the survey is low (N=21), they report belonging to a student organization at VU Amsterdam less often than other groups of students. It is also noticeable that there are few differences between men and women with regard to

participation in a student organization at VU Amsterdam. We also see that percentage-wise, students with a non-normative sexual orientation are more often a member of a VU student organization (55%) than students with a heterosexual orientation (47%). Finally, we notice that international students and students with a Western migration background join student organizations less often and that Muslim and Protestant students join student organizations less often than Catholic students or students who are not affiliated to a particular belief.

## 5.4 Student involvement and belonging

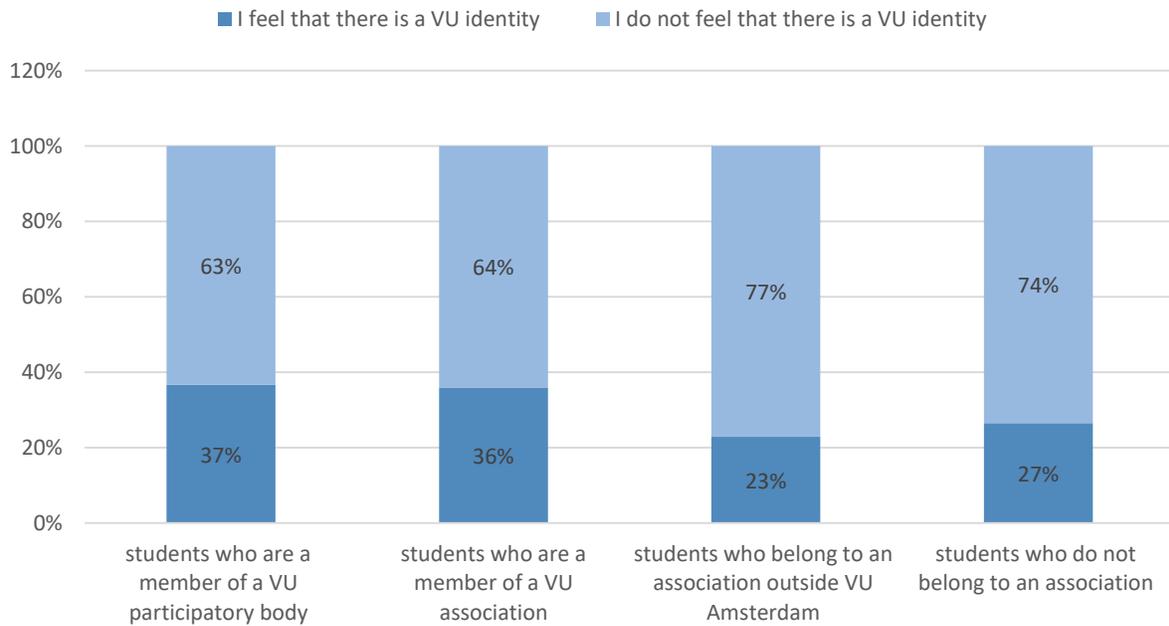
Chapter 4 on Belonging has already indicated a connection between membership of and participation in student organizations on the one hand, and feelings of belonging and a shared VU identity on the other. This is shown in figures 5.11 and 5.12.

Figure 5.11  
Feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam among students who belong to an association



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

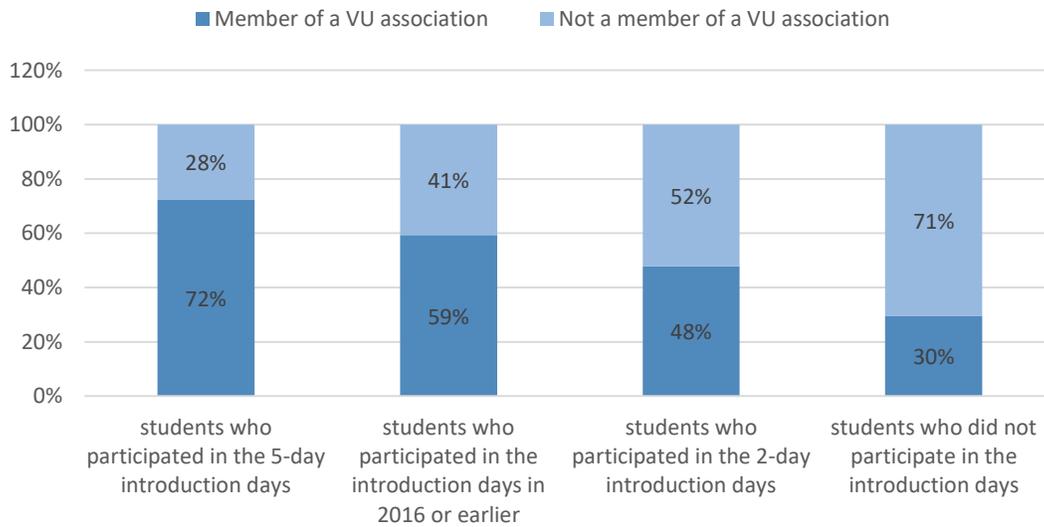
Figure 5.12  
 VU identity among students who belong to an association



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

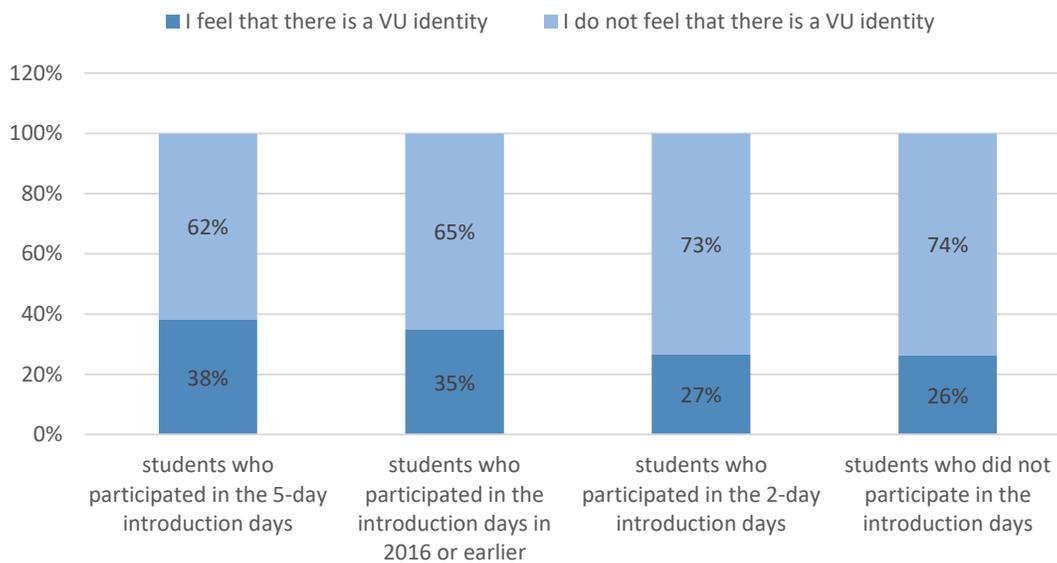
The survey also reveals the importance of the introduction days. Students who attended the introduction days are more often members of a VU student organization than students who said that they had not participated in the introduction days (see figure 5.13). We also see that students who participated in the introduction days experience a shared VU identity more often (see figure 5.14).

Figure 5.13  
Member of a VU association among students who participated in the introduction days



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Figure 5.14  
VI identity among students who participated in the introduction days



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

It is possible that students who participate in the introduction days are also more likely to join and participate in student organizations. This does not necessarily mean that the introduction days inspire students to participate in societies, but rather that they attract a specific type of student. In view of the

fact that participation in the introduction days and in student organizations increase feelings of belonging, it is worth our while to gain a better understanding of the importance of these introduction days and how VU Amsterdam can make them as interesting and accessible as possible for all of its students.

## 6. VU support

VU Amsterdam offers its students support in a variety of ways and through several channels if, for example, they are finding it difficult to plan their work, would like to discuss a difficult home situation or ask questions about their study programme. Several members of staff, including mentors, tutors, study advisers and student psychologists are available to help students with their problems. There are also programmes whereby students help each other with their studies (such as Student-4-Student@VU or the faculty mentorate). Other courses and training programmes include a mindfulness course, the plan-and-do-group, efficient studying and a fear of failure programme.

The 'Belonging@VU' survey asked students for their opinions and experiences with receiving support from VU Amsterdam. The first question was 'Have you ever made use of support offered by VU Amsterdam when you needed it?' Students could choose from five different answers:

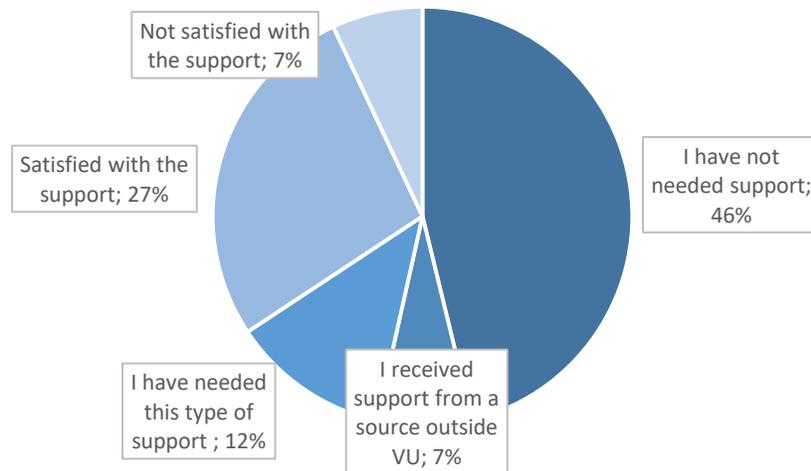
- 'I have not made use of it; I have not needed support';
- 'I have not made use of it; I have had support from outside VU Amsterdam';
- 'I have not made use of it, but I have felt in need of such support';
- 'I have made use of it and I was satisfied with the support I received';
- 'I have made use of it, but I was not satisfied with the support I received'.

Secondly, the open questions gave respondents the opportunity to elaborate on their answers, and many of them made use of this option. This chapter will look at the results of both the open and closed answers.

### 6.1 Positive experiences with VU support

Figure 6.1 shows how students answered the question on whether they had made use of support provided by VU Amsterdam.

Figure 6.1  
Have you ever used support made available by VU Amsterdam when you needed it?



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

In answer to the question 'Have you ever used support offered by VU Amsterdam when you needed it?' 27% of the respondents said that they had made use of this support and were satisfied with the help they received. Students were therefore satisfied with this support more often than they were dissatisfied with it (7%). This corresponds with the open answers in which many of the respondents shared their positive experiences.

*"I'm in the StudeerSamen [Studying Together] group, which is actively maintained and has a really great group app for finding people to study with. I also went to the study adviser recently; that was a good conversation. [...]"*

*"I followed fear of failure training at the VU and it was an enormous help."*

*"I have talked to a study adviser twice about personal circumstances and their impact on my study progress. She was really able to reassure me by listening to me compassionately and setting out my options clearly in answer to my questions. I am still grateful to her for this."*

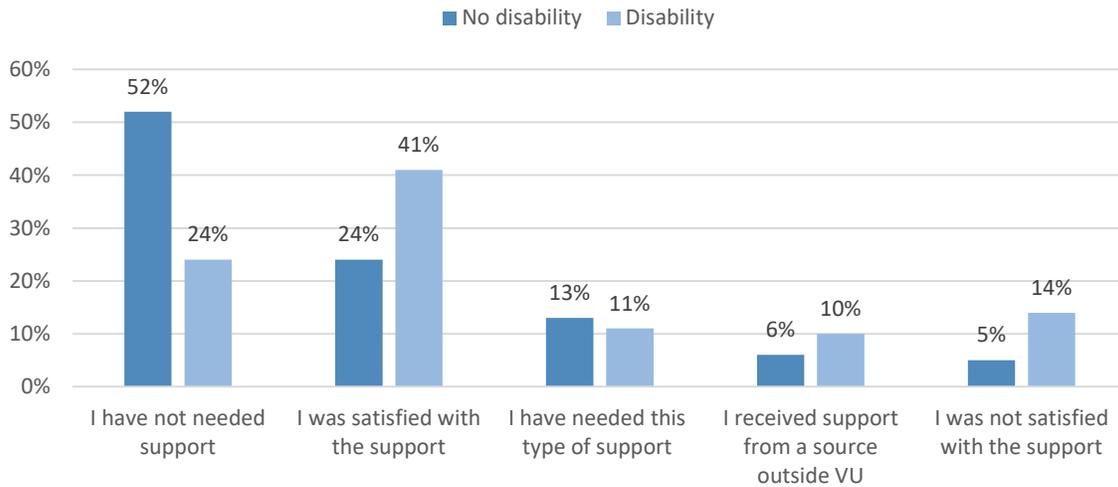
*"I followed a short course of treatment with a student psychologist because of problems with burn-out. I was extremely satisfied with the guidance I received and am stronger today because of it."*

The above quotes, among others, show why these students were satisfied with the support they received from VU Amsterdam. They report that they felt they had been taken seriously, had received help, that the interaction with the support provider had been pleasant and helpful and that the response had been swift.

When we take a closer look at specific groups of VU students, such as students with a disability, we see that these students also feel positive about the support they received (see figure 6.2). Students

with a disability were even satisfied with the support provided by VU Amsterdam 17 percentage points more often than students without a disability.

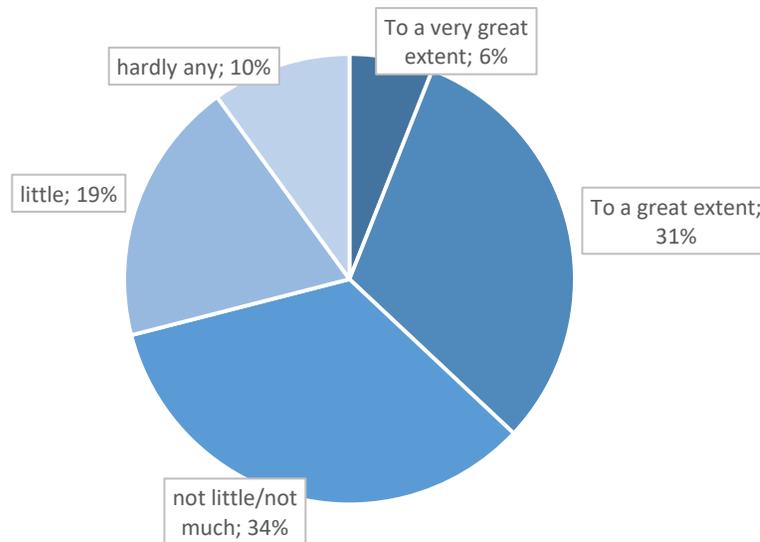
Figure 6.2  
VU support



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

This does not mean that students with a disability are not hindered by it. The next question in the survey was: 'To what extent does this disability, medical condition or illness hinder you during your studies?' Figure 6.3 shows the results of this question:

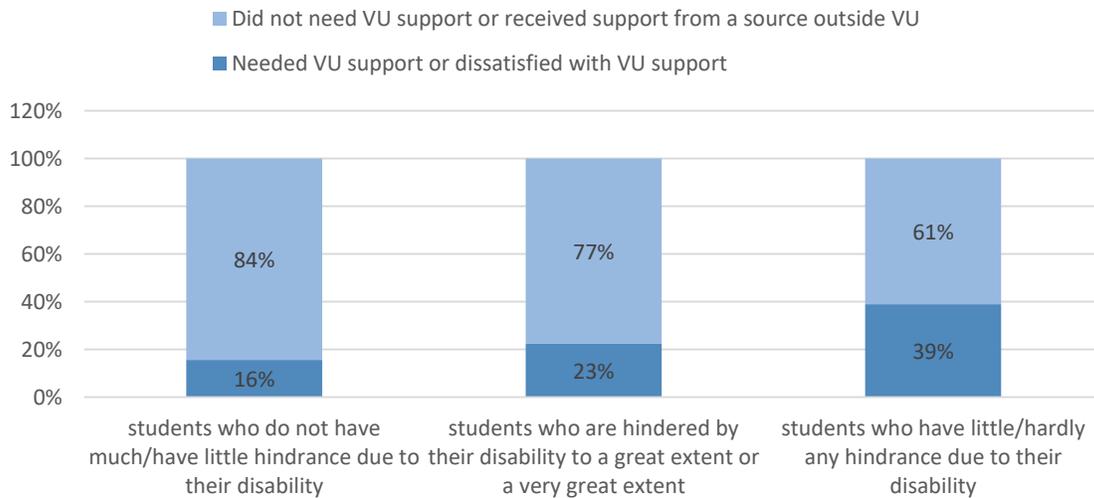
Figure 6.3  
Hindrance due to disability



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

For 37% of the students with a disability, their disability, medical condition or illness formed an impediment to their studies. This is eight percentage points more than the students who experience their disability, medical condition or illness as a minor or very minor impediment. Furthermore, figure 6.4 shows that the students who were most often dissatisfied with the support provided by VU Amsterdam or who needed support, were also the students who experienced that their disability hindered them to a great or very great extent during their studies.

Figure 6.4  
VU support for students who are hindered by their disability



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

These findings show that it is important to look out for any differences that may exist between groups of VU students. Students with a disability, medical condition or illness have different experiences regarding the way in which they experience support provided by VU Amsterdam, and therefore require a more customized approach from the university.

Differences between groups of VU students regarding their experience with VU support can also be seen among individual students. This means that although some students had made use of the various means of support available and considered this as a positive experience, the same students also reported less positive experiences with the support provided by VU Amsterdam. This duality was expressed in the open answers:

*"I was satisfied with the one-on-one study guidance I eventually received. I also saw the student psychologist. This was good because it was very accessible. However, I must say that I had the feeling that the VU as an institution did not give me enough of the support I needed and also not in time. They could take a more pro-active approach to providing information, especially to students who have already reached a total impasse. "*

*"I reported an incident of sexual violence, but was not taken seriously by the study adviser in question. After that I went to the student psychologist but did not feel sufficiently at ease to be able to talk about it. This happened back in*

*2007. Because I no longer receive a student grant, the student dean wrote a letter recommending me for a scholarship. She did this three times, [she was] very quick, very committed and very professional."*

Both of the students quoted above described both positive and negative experiences. The contact with the student psychologist was pleasant and accessible, the student dean was quick, committed and professional. At the same time, however, both respondents were critical of the support provided by VU Amsterdam: they said that there was not sufficient information about the fact it was available and furthermore, they reported instances of feeling ill at ease or being left with the impression that they had not been taken seriously. Both of these issues were mentioned more frequently in the descriptions of negative experiences with the support provided by VU Amsterdam. We will examine this in more detail in the next paragraph.

## 6.2 Negative experiences with VU support

Seven percent (7%) of the respondents who filled in the survey said that they had made use of the support provided by VU Amsterdam, but were dissatisfied with it. They described their dissatisfaction in the open answers:

*"The waiting list was very long and when I was finally able to see the student psychologist, I was immediately referred to a fear of failure programme. This training programme hardly helped me at all, mainly because fear of failure was not the only problem I had by far. Because of the enormous demand for the student psychologists, I had the feeling that they could not take enough time for me."*

*"I had sent an email to the student counsellor because of mental health complaints. My appointment was cancelled because the counsellor was sick and I never heard anything more from them. I thought that they were not careful in how they handled the nature of the complaints that I had described briefly when trying to arrange an appointment."*

*"I was told that I should be happy that my restrictions had not cost me more than the six study points that I had needlessly missed and I didn't receive any further help."*

*"I asked the student dean for help because it was difficult for me to make the transition from Higher Professional Education (HBO) to university, but I did not feel taken seriously as a former HBO student. I thought the way the dean spoke to me was condescending. I don't find it easy to ask for help, it was quite a big step for me to do this - this is why I was even more annoyed by this."*

Whereas one student received help in the form of a training programme and benefited greatly from the advice given by a dean or adviser, other students received little benefit, and were even left feeling upset by this experience. The fact that not all help is free is very problematic for some students and puts it beyond their reach. Furthermore, many respondents said that the waiting lists for some support providers are so long that they are unable to access help in time.

Most of the students who expressed dissatisfaction with the support they had received in the open answers, said that they had been annoyed by the attitude of the coach or adviser as they had been insufficiently aware of relevant details, had not taken the situation seriously enough or had come across

as being disinterested or unprofessional. These experiences had led to misunderstandings, miscommunication and even incorrect information. Finally, a number of respondents said that they had either had to wait a long time for a response before or after an appointment or received no follow-up whatsoever.

### Not everyone is aware that support is available from VU Amsterdam

Finally, 12% of the respondents said that although they had needed some type of support from VU Amsterdam, they had not made use of it. Some of these students explained in the open answers that they were either unaware that this support existed or had found it extremely difficult to find any information about it:

*“It has always been very unclear to me how support, such as a psychologist, can be accessed and what the conditions and costs are. The information provided by the VU leaves a lot of room for improvement in my opinion. It is often already difficult to ask for help and the VU doesn’t make it easy to do so.”*

*“I could use some help, but it is inaccessible to me.”*

Many survey respondents said that it had taken them a long time to find support provided by VU Amsterdam. VU students who did not directly need help also mentioned that they would like to have information on the available options. Some students even said that it was a pity that it had taken this survey to make them aware of the existence of this support. Approximately one-third of respondents had therefore sought help from sources outside the VU, such as friends, family or an external psychologist.

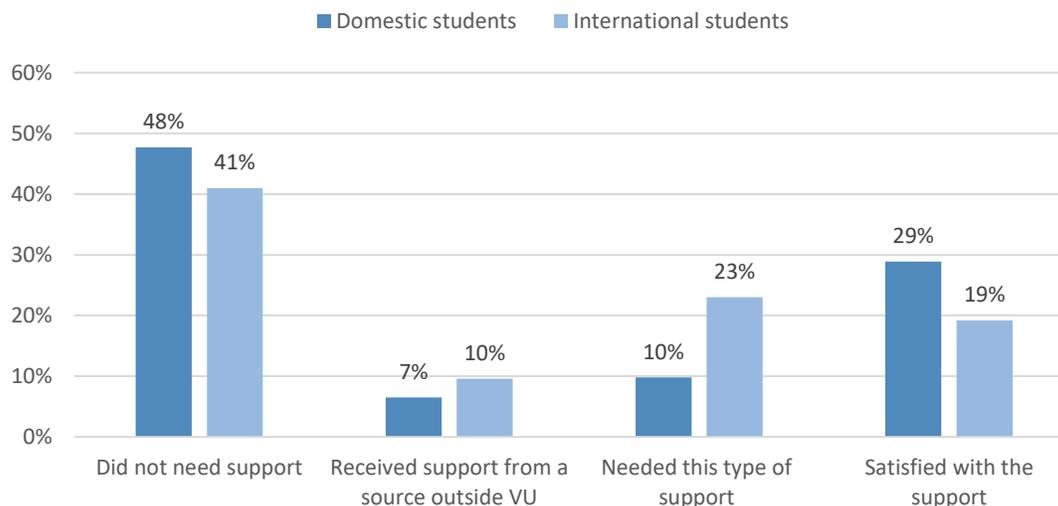
The open answers from one group of students in particular – the international students – revealed that they have no idea of what is available in terms of support from VU Amsterdam.

*“I only found out today that psychological counselling is available. I was never made aware of this but found it by chance, and feel it should be made better known to students, particularly international students. I have arranged an appointment but have to wait over a month before anything is available; I feel this is far too long.”*

*“I did not really know where to go and if services are available in English.”*

As shown in figure 6.5, international students needed support from the VU 13 percentage points more often than domestic students and were satisfied with the support provided by VU Amsterdam 10 percentage points less often than domestic students. These respondents gave approximately the same reasons for their lack of satisfaction as the domestic students: information on support was either lacking or difficult to access. Once more, language was a major factor as, for example, the international students did not know whether support was available in English or only in Dutch.

Figure 6.5  
VU support



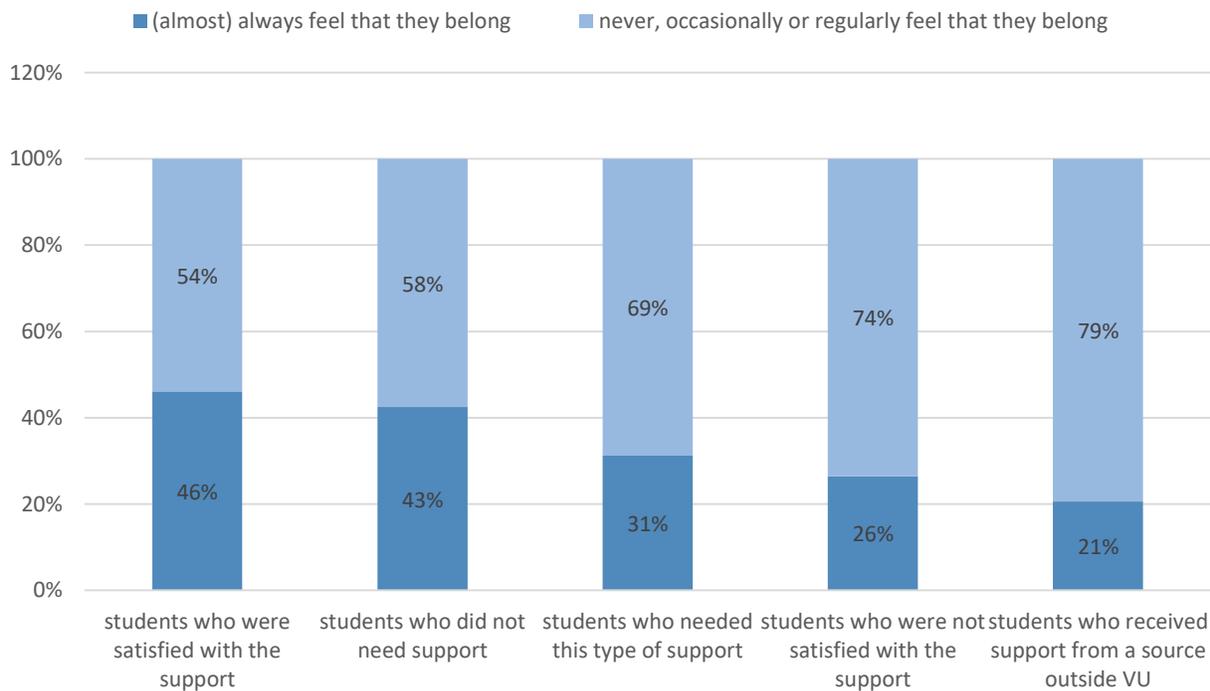
Source: Belonging@VU 2019

This lack of information with regard to the availability, nature and content of the various forms of support provided by VU Amsterdam is a missed opportunity for students, support providers and the university as a whole. Many students seem to be largely or even completely unaware of the wide range of options provided by VU Amsterdam, even though just knowing that help is available if they should need it, would in itself be reassuring. The importance of effective and transparent communication regarding the support provided by VU Amsterdam becomes even more important when we examine the relationship between support and feelings of belonging.

### 6.3 VU support and belonging

Figure 6.6 shows that the need for and satisfaction with support from VU Amsterdam are important indicators of the extent to which students feel that they belong at their university. Students who required support from VU Amsterdam felt that they always or almost always belonged 12 percentage points more often than students who needed support but did not make use of the available options.

Figure 6.6  
Feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam among students who used VU support



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Furthermore, students who were satisfied with the support they had received from VU Amsterdam said that they always or almost always felt they belonged at VU Amsterdam 20 percentage points more often than students who were dissatisfied with this support. These results emphasize the importance of anchoring the various forms of support currently provided by VU Amsterdam and making them more widely known.

# 7. Study progress

This chapter looks at the relationship between study progress and both the various groups of VU students and the topics discussed in the previous chapters. We pay particular attention to the theme of belonging as the survey was prompted by the research question of how belonging and study progress are related to each other at VU Amsterdam<sup>36</sup>. The survey measured study progress through questions about the approximate number of ECTS that students had obtained in the study programme and the maximum they could have obtained. Students could also give an estimate of their study progress by selecting one of the following options:

- 'I have passed all of the courses offered in my study';
- 'I have passed almost all of the courses offered in my study';
- 'I have passed most of the courses offered in my study';
- 'I have passed approximately half of the courses offered in my study';
- 'I have passed less than half of the courses offered in my study';
- 'I have passed none or hardly any of the courses offered in my study'.

## 7.1 Study progress of VU students

Table 7.1 shows that at the time of completing the 'Belonging@VU' survey, the respondents had obtained 88% of the maximum number of ECTS they could have obtained for that study on average, according to their own estimate.

Table 7.1 Proportion of study points in percentages

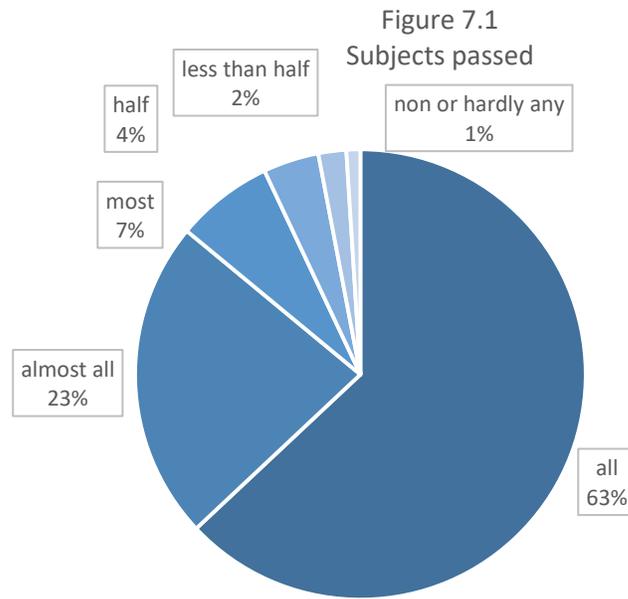
Average % ECTS obtained in current study (a)	64
Average maximum % of ECTS that it was possible to obtain (b)	72
Average % proportion of ECTS obtained (a/b)	88
Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019	

Furthermore, 97% of the students said that they had passed at least half of the courses belonging to their study programme at the time of completing the survey (see figure 7.1).

<sup>36</sup> Hoffman, M., Richmond, J., Morrow, J., & Salomone, K. (2002). Investigating "sense of belonging" in first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 4(3), 227-256.

Meeuwisse, Marieke, Sabine E. Severiens, and Marise Ph Born (2010). "Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups." *Research in Higher Education* 51.6: 528-545.

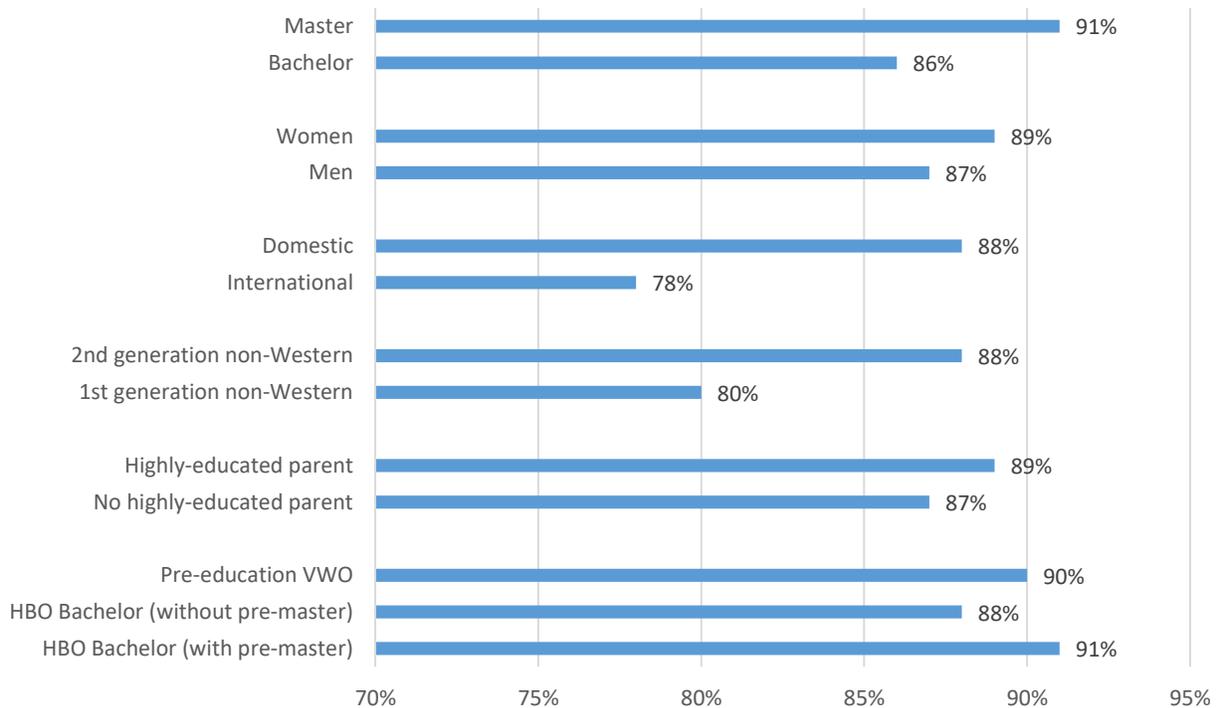
Master, A., Cheryan, S., & Meltzoff, A. N. (2016). Computing whether she belongs: Stereotypes undermine girls' interest and sense of belonging in computer science. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(3), 424.



Source: 'Belonging@VU' 2019

In figure 7.2 VU students are divided into a number of groups to see whether there are any significant differences between them. Most percentages are pretty close to each other, the only striking differences concern 'Nationality' and the contrast between 'second-generation and first-generation non-Western migrants'.

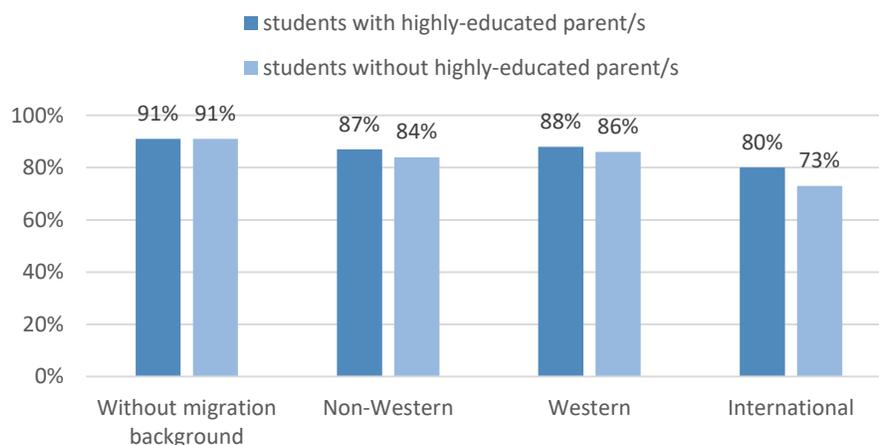
Figure 7.2  
Proportion ECTS obtained among different groups of students



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

One of the most noticeable results is that the education level of the parents of VU students shows no relation to the proportion of ECTS that these students said they had obtained. If we sub-divide this into different groups of students, we see that this applies to the different ethnic groups (see figure 7.3). It was only among international students that we could observe a substantial difference between students with and without highly-educated parents.

Figure 7.3  
Proportion ECTS obtained



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

When looking at the international students we also see that, proportionally, they had obtained ten percentage points fewer study points than the domestic students at the time of the survey. International students answering the survey had the following to say about their study progress:

*“The studying load in Human Movement is way too high for international students. Some programmes are also only for Dutch students.”*

*“I have a non-European educational background, which caused some educational barriers. Nevertheless, I managed to pass all my courses but have been struggling to write my thesis for two years. Attending thesis writing classes was not possible since it was only offered in Dutch, although I am registered for an international programme. Many other interesting courses were offered only in Dutch. I thought that was not fair for international students. I believe all available classes for international programmes should be offered in English.”*

The second quote shows that the study progress of international students is hindered to some extent by the inadequacy of the facilities made available to them by VU Amsterdam. We have already seen similar experiences among international students in the chapter on the support provided by VU Amsterdam and in other chapters in which international students described their experiences with the language barrier.

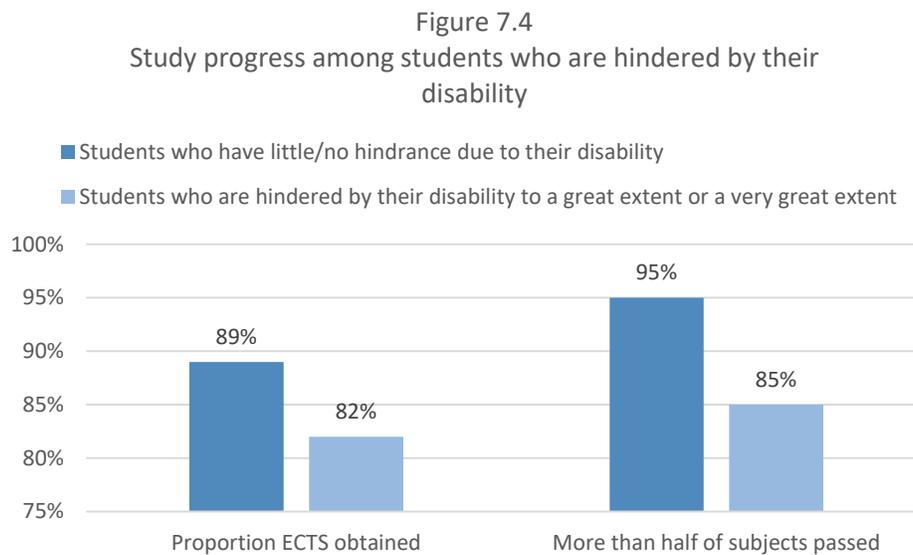
Furthermore, second-generation students with a non-Western migration background obtained eight percentage points more credits than first-generation students with a non-Western migration background<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> Categorizing students can contribute to stereotyping and profiling and may raise questions about issues concerning inequality. As we are aware of this, we decided to use categories that are in line with the categories used by Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek): (1) Students without a migration background (grandparents, parents and students born in the Netherlands), (2) first generation non-Western students (students born in a non-Western country and pre-educated in the Netherlands), (3) first generation Western students (students born in a Western country and pre-educated in the Netherlands), (4) second generation non-Western students (students born in the Netherlands, but with at least one parent born in a non-

### Study progress of students with a disability, medical condition or illness

In this chapter, we will also focus on students with a disability, medical condition or illness. The survey specifically asked them about the extent to which their disability, medical condition or illness hindered their studies. Respondents could choose from (1) very strongly hindered, (2) strongly hindered, (3) hindered, (4) slightly hindered or (5) hardly hindered/not at all hindered.

Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the respondents with a disability, medical condition or illness said they were very strongly or strongly hindered in their studies. In addition to this, figure 7.4 shows that students with a disability who experience a great deal of hindrance reported passing ‘more than half’ of their subjects ten percentage points less often than students who were not or only slightly hindered by their disability.



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

In the open question, VU students with a disability, medical condition or illness reflected upon the connection between experiencing hindrances and their study progress:

*“I often don’t have enough concentration to study and I get tired quickly, it’s difficult to keep up with all my subjects at the same speed as the other students. I can do it, but I think it’s more difficult for me than for the average student.”*

*“I don’t have much energy, so I have to rest during the day. It’s also very tiring to read/study, so there is a limit to how much I can study in one day.”*

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Western country), (5) second generation Western students (students born in the Netherlands, but with at least one parent born in a Western country), (6) international students (students with a foreign educational background).

*“My migraine influences the time I can spend on my studies. I’m sometimes unable to attend lectures and exams.”*

*“Regular hospital appointments hinder me from attending lectures and meeting deadlines.”*

Students said that their disability, medical condition or illness limited the time they were able to concentrate on their studies. They felt that they needed more time for this than their fellow students or the time allocated to them by their lecturers. Although this was not always the case, concentration problems are closely related to tiredness, as the first two of the above quotes describe. Concentration problems in combination with fatigue hinder study progress to an ever greater extent.

In addition to concentration problems and tiredness, some students are unable to attend lectures, or even examinations because of pain or other physical complaints. They are regularly absent due to check-ups, operations or other hospital appointments. Students said that when they had to miss lectures, they could often read or copy notes from fellow students. In short, students with a disability, medical condition or illness apply their own strategies as the situation requires, but these strategies do not work in all circumstances. VU students with a disability, medical condition or illness said that sitting an examination is extra stressful and tiring for them because, for example, they have to read quickly or sit still for a long time. Some of these students said that it was helpful if they were given extra time for examinations, but this is not a strategy that they can use themselves, as it is dependent upon the university.

This dependence on VU Amsterdam also emerges when students with a disability, medical condition or illness need specific support to be able to follow their study programme. Some students think that VU Amsterdam makes little or no allowances for their situation:

*“Because of the complexity and the fact that the university does not make any allowances for it, it is a constant struggle.”*

Other students said that facilities were available to them, but in everyday life, there was not enough space and flexibility to enable them to make good use of them:

*“In general, I do not feel that my studies are hampered by my deafness. However, it does take a lot of energy as I always have to make sure that I have an interpreter in Dutch Sign Language (NGT) and that they receive the necessary preparation. And when I don't have my 'regular' interpreter, it takes a lot more energy to be able to follow the interpreter because she is not familiar with the subject, jargon etc. and therefore has more difficulty with translation from Dutch to NGT than my regular interpreters”.*

In the previous chapter on the support offered by VU Amsterdam, it emerged that the interaction between students with a disability, medical condition or illness and their fellow students and lecturers was sometimes affected by a lack of understanding or ignorance. This situation may hinder students’ study progress, as the above quotes describe. These students wondered whether their fellow students or lecturers realize that some students may have a disability or medical condition and that it can feel awkward for them to have to inform people of this. This can make working together with fellow students

more difficult or mean that a lecturer shows little understanding when an assignment is submitted past the deadline.

There were not only critical comments however: students with a disability, medical condition or illness also made positive comments about their study progress.

*"I have learned to cope with my limitations during my study. [...]."*

*"I have always had to do everything myself and have the luck that I have always managed to do so."*

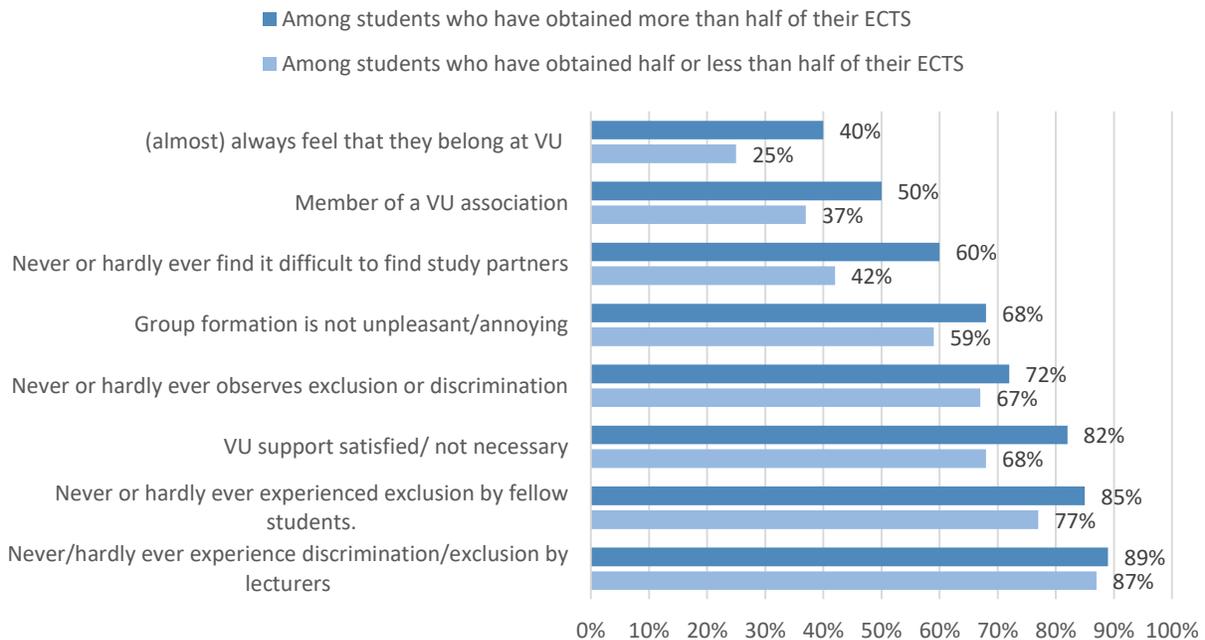
*"I can usually find a way to manage everything. I don't think I need any help. [...]."*

As the above quotes show, a disability, medical condition or illness does not always have to hinder a student's study progress. In fact, VU students with a disability, medical condition or illness are often used to dealing with it and are often extra motivated to study and complete their course. Like all students at VU Amsterdam, it is mainly up to them to make progress in their studies and bring them to a successful conclusion.

## 7.2 What factors can hinder study progress?

In addition to focusing on international VU students and students with a disability, medical condition or illness, we also took a more general look at factors that could hinder study progress. Figure 7.5 shows the relationship between study progress and a number of topics discussed in the previous chapters, such as feelings of belonging, group formation, exclusion/discrimination, student involvement and VU support, all of which seem to be related to the study progress of students at VU Amsterdam.

Figure 7.5  
Outcomes for different theme statements in relation to ECTS obtained



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

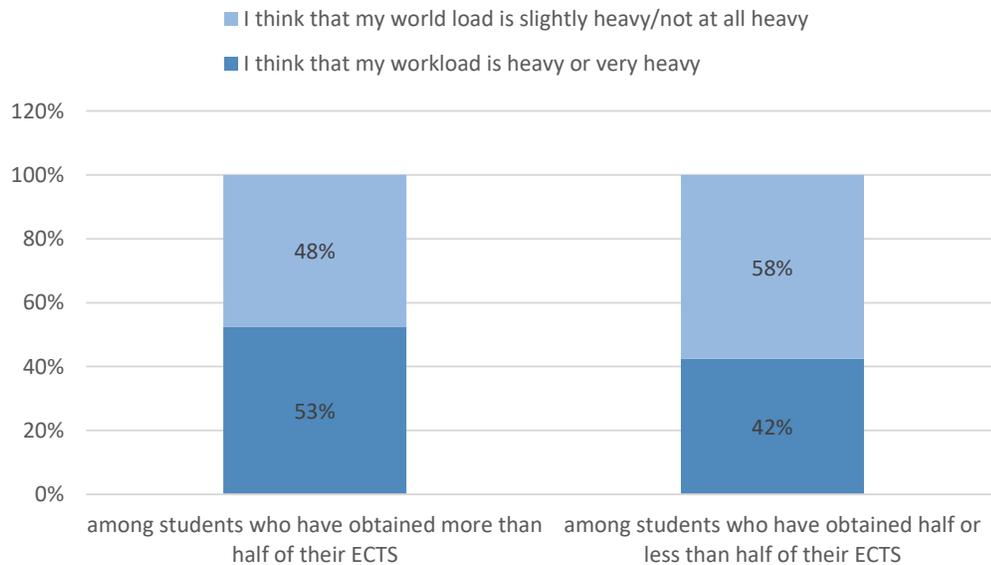
Students who had obtained more than half of their credits felt that they belonged more often (always or almost always) than students who had passed half or less than half of their subjects. Consequently, there seems to be a relation between students' feelings of belonging and academic success. The group of students who had obtained more than half of their credits also found group formation less unpleasant or annoying. This group also reported membership of a VU association 13% more often and said that they never or hardly ever had trouble finding students to work with 18% more often.

On the other hand, we see that students who had obtained more than half of their credits indicated more often that they never or hardly ever experience discrimination or exclusion by fellow students in educational situations. The greatest difference was observed in students who said that it was difficult to find other students to work with. Students who had obtained more than half of their credits said that they never or hardly ever have difficulty finding fellow students to study with 18 percentage points more often. Both results indicate the importance of good study partners for the study progress of VU students.

### Workload

In addition to the topics mentioned in the previous section, many students also indicated that the workload or pace of their studies is sometimes too high, leading to stress and making it difficult for them to finish everything in time. Figure 7.6 shows that students who had obtained more than half of their credits experienced more pressure than students who had obtained less than half of their credits. Delay appears to be a way of coping with the high work load and reducing it, at least to some extent.

Figure 7.6  
Workload among among students who have obtained more or less than half of their ECTS



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Respondents said the following in the open answers:

*"[...] I had a lot of stress during the first year of my master programme and received a great deal of support from friends and family. This way, I decided to delay my thesis and that restored calm and gave me time to relax again for a little. This is why there was less pressure last year, but the year before that, there was really much too much."*

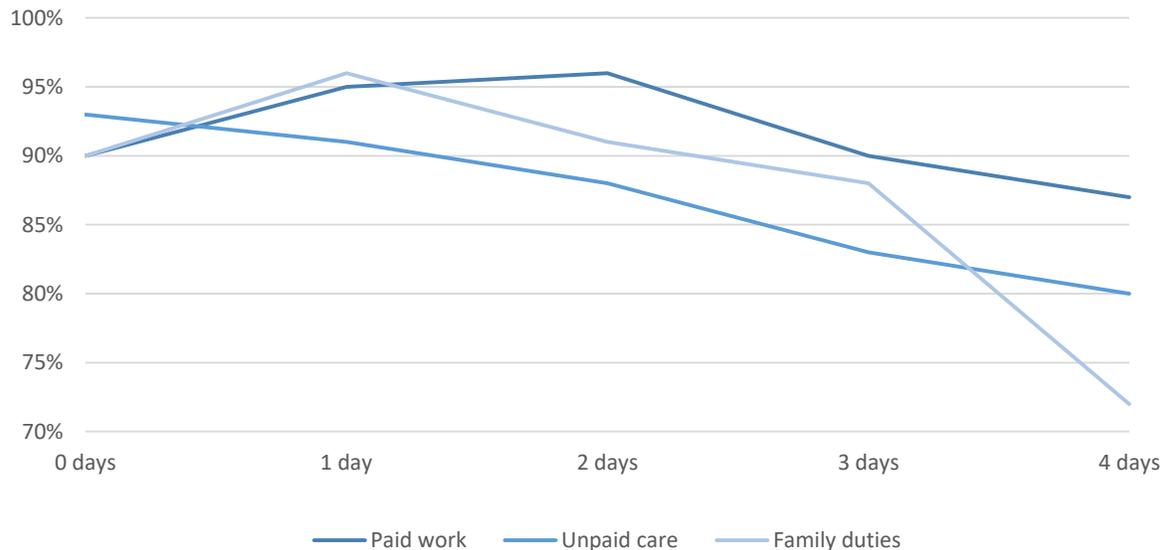
*"The workload for law is too high."*

*"Personally, I don't have any problems, but I notice around me that the work load for medicine seems to be pretty high for some of my fellow students. They are sometimes genuinely on the brink of nervous exhaustion, which is a real pity. In that way they lose some of their energy and enthusiasm which is a shame."*

For some VU students this situation can get so out of hand that they are unable to attend university due to a burn-out. Another stress-increasing factor is that it can be difficult during busy periods to plan properly and keep an overview. A large number of students said in the open answers that they sometimes find it difficult to plan properly and this gets them into difficulties with their studies. Some of them also attribute this to procrastination, which further hampers their study progress.

Other VU students are hindered by personal situations, such as a difficult home situation, caring for a family member or having a part-time job. Figure 7.7 shows how the average ECTS obtained decrease in line with the compulsory tasks a student has to undertake, such as paid work, care and/or family duties.

Figure 7.7  
Proportion ECTS obtained by students with obligations/duties



Source: Belonging@VU 2019

Extra-curricular activities may also influence study progress:

*"I have a year's delay because I served on the board for a year and the people I studied with for three years are now in their master phase. They are no longer my classmates, but they are people I am close to and with whom I discuss things related to my study. I find it difficult to mix with the people who I currently attend lectures with.*

Board duties, but also other extra-curricular activities can take up a lot of time, leaving less time for studying. For some students this is a deliberate personal choice if, for example, they want to join a student or study association or continue working to earn some extra money. But for other students, extra-curricular activities are not a matter of choice, but a situation beyond their control, due to caring for a family member, the death of a family member or having to work in order to make ends meet.

### Internships

Finally, looking for and finding an internship can also influence study progress. Not all university courses require students to do an internship, but when they are compulsory it can be extremely difficult to find a placement, as the following quote illustrates. An internship is the final thing this student has to complete in order to graduate, but their inability to find one has delayed their studies by two years.

*"[...] I had several meetings with internship coordinators because completing an internship was the only thing I still had to do before graduating in my master in neuropsychology. After the first conversation with the first internship coordinator, I asked her for help again because even though I had followed all her advice I still had not managed to find an internship. I did not receive an answer until after I found out that she had already passed on all her tasks to a new internship coordinator because she had a new job. This new internship coordinator was unable to help me much*

*in the beginning because she did not have any overview of what I had already done to find an internship but eventually she gave me some good advice. Despite this, my study has been delayed by two years and I still have not found an internship."*

What played a major role in this case, but also in other situations, is the extent to which students received satisfactory support from VU Amsterdam. Students often use support made available by VU Amsterdam if they come up against an obstacle to their study progress, and effective help from VU Amsterdam can certainly help them. No matter whether this support was seen as a positive or negative experience, students often mentioned in the survey's open answers that they see a connection between study progress and the support provided by VU Amsterdam.

### When factors accumulate

This chapter has described a number of factors related to study progress, such as previous education, feelings of belonging, exclusion, the number of days' paid work or voluntary care, support and student involvement. We have examined these factors separately in relation to study progress. However, there is often a combination of factors at play. Students who took an indirect route to university, through Middle Vocational Education (MBO) and Higher Professional Education (HBO), more often come from poorer families and have a greater need to work alongside their studies. Because they have taken an indirect route, they are often older and may even have family responsibilities or be taking care of relatives. Some of them also have a migration background and consequently encounter exclusion and discrimination more often. It is therefore important to consider that some students are faced with an accumulation of factors that may have a negative impact on their study progress. When seeking to improve opportunities for these students it is important to consider all these aspects in combination and address them in a coherent manner.

# Conclusions

In the previous chapters, we have used the 'Belonging@VU' survey to convey an idea of the experiences of VU students with regard to belonging at VU Amsterdam. We have also explored the ways in which feelings of belonging are connected to the following topics: group formation, exclusion and discrimination, recognition, student involvement, support made available by VU Amsterdam and study progress.

In this concluding chapter, we will summarize the main results of the preceding chapters. These results are based on the answers of the more than 2,000 students who completed the survey, including their responses to the open questions, which gave them the opportunity to elaborate on their answers. This option was widely used by the respondents.

- *Feelings of belonging are not significantly different among students without a migration background and students with a non-Western migration background.*

Half of the students said that they always or almost always felt that they belong on their course; the feeling of belonging at VU Amsterdam as a whole was slightly lower. Students in the faculties of Humanities and Medicine had the strongest feelings of belonging on their course as compared to students from other faculties. Bachelor students felt that they belonged more often than master or pre-master students (ten percentage points), which could be connected to the length of time they had attended VU Amsterdam. Students with a non-Western migration background felt that they belonged at VU Amsterdam just as strongly as students without a migration background. This percentage was slightly lower among students with a Western migration background. Bringing up the rear were the international students. Only 20% always or almost always felt that they belonged at VU Amsterdam.

- *International students feel the least sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam because of the language barrier and group formation.*

International students felt the least sense of belonging by far. They gave a range of explanations for this, whereby the language barrier seemed to be the greatest obstacle: domestic students continue to conduct most conversations in Dutch, mix little with the international students and show little interest in them. International students reported having difficulties finding other students to work with more often than domestic students. The domestic students also revealed in their open answers that they did not mix much with the international students. One-third of the international students said that they experienced group formation based on nationality and that they found this unpleasant.

- *Minority groups experience and observe exclusion and discrimination significantly more often than other groups.*

Minority groups experienced and observed exclusion and discrimination significantly more often than other students. To explore the presence of discrimination, we used the statement 'I experience or observe discrimination or exclusion'. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents answered: sometimes/frequently/almost always/always. This percentage was significantly higher for students with a minority identity, such as LGBTQ+ students (41%) and non-binary students (72%), students with a

disability (34%), students with a non-Western migration background (35%), international students (41%), and Muslim students (38%). Students from these groups were forced to debunk stereotypes significantly more often, heard jokes that make them feel uncomfortable and they also felt uncomfortable with the dominant culture more often. It is striking that students with a non-Western background felt that they belonged to the same extent as students without a migration background, while at the same time they experienced more exclusion. Discrimination by fellow students outside the lecture hall occurred slightly more frequently than discrimination by students within the educational setting and discrimination by lecturers.

The open answers also showed that some students experienced exclusion or discrimination based on their Protestant religion or right-wing political persuasion. They found that there was little room for their opinion at VU Amsterdam.

○ *Students do not know who they can approach if they experience exclusion or discrimination.*

More than one-fifth of students at VU Amsterdam said that they would not approach a confidential adviser if faced with exclusion or discrimination. A major reason for this was that they did not know who to approach. More than half said that they were not convinced that lodging a complaint would change anything or that they would be taken seriously.

○ *It is mainly students without a migration background who do not perceive group formation as being negative.*

Half of the students said that they experienced a great deal of group formation at VU Amsterdam, however, in contrast to the international students, other groups of students did not necessarily see group formation at VU Amsterdam in a negative light, and saw the fact that they mixed mainly with other students who were similar to them as a natural state of affairs. They did, however, think that no one should be excluded. Students without a migration background were most at ease with group formation; they felt the least need for a more diverse group of students. This means that group formation is probably not something that will diminish by itself, and that some responsibility for breaking though it lies with the students without a migration background.

○ *There is no difference in study progress between students with or without highly-educated parents.*

While other research shows that students without highly-educated parents, so-called first-generation students, experience more barriers than students with highly-educated parents, this is not reflected in the survey results on study progress. In general, first-generation VU students (with and without a migration background) reported obtaining the same proportion of ECTS as VU students whose parents had a higher professional or university education. Their (self-reported) study progress was the same. This also applied to feelings of belonging at VU Amsterdam. This could be because the percentage of first-generation students at VU Amsterdam is relatively high (more than 50%), and because the first-generation students who reach university have their own ways of compensating for any disadvantage or lack of academic resources. This finding requires further comparative research. The group of international students was an exception, and did indicate a difference between students with and without highly-educated parents. International students with highly-educated parents reported a higher proportion of

ECTS obtained than international students without highly-educated parents (difference of seven percentage points).

○ *Students support VU Amsterdam's openness towards diversity.*

Students appreciated the level of ethnic diversity in the student body. Eighty percent were satisfied with the ethnic composition of the student population, 9% thought that there was too much ethnic diversity, and 11% thought there was not enough. This did not, however, apply to diversity among the lecturers. There was widespread support among students for increasing the level of ethnic diversity among lecturers, as 43% thought that it was too limited. The open answers revealed that the call for more ethnic diversity among lecturers was loudest among students with a migration background and international students. These two groups of VU students also said most often that they could seldom identify with their lecturers. Students who were unable to identify with lecturers also thought more often that there was not enough diversity among the lecturers, and felt less often that they belonged at VU Amsterdam.

There was also criticism of the university's visual material, as 42% said they could only occasionally, hardly ever or never recognize themselves in VU Amsterdam's visual material. This was not due to the level of ethnic diversity reflected in this material (80% were satisfied with this, while 9% thought it was excessive and 11% thought it was too limited). Rather, these criticisms concerned the lack of representation of other aspects of diversity. In particular, students with a disability and LGBTQ+ students felt that they were underrepresented in VU Amsterdam's visual material.

○ *Not everyone can find and make use of the support provided by VU Amsterdam.*

A range of options is available to students in need of support at VU Amsterdam. Most students who had made use of this support were satisfied with the help they had received (80%). They said that they felt that they were taken seriously, that they benefited from it, that the VU staff providing the support were helpful, contact with them was good and they responded swiftly. However, 20% of students who had made use of the support provided by VU Amsterdam were dissatisfied. They said that the support was not much help to them or even left them feeling bad about the process. The coach or adviser was not sufficiently aware of relevant matters, did not take the situation seriously enough, and/or behaved in a disinterested or unprofessional manner.

One-fifth of all respondents had been in need of support but had not obtained it from VU Amsterdam. Some students said that they had missed specific types of support during their studies. There were also students who said that they had not even been aware of the fact that VU Amsterdam offered support, or that it had been necessary for them to go to a great deal of trouble to find any information about the help available. A few said that they thought it was a pity that it had taken this survey to make them aware that certain types of help were available at VU Amsterdam. Furthermore, the fact that not all help was free of charge created a barrier that prevented some students from accessing it.

○ *The VU Amsterdam identity does not play any clear role.*

The idea that a strong identity contributes to a feeling of belonging and connectedness was tempered by the answers to the open questions from the survey. Some students experienced a VU identity that contributed to a feeling of belonging. They were proud to be part of VU Amsterdam, felt they could be themselves and that there was a pleasant atmosphere. Some experienced VU Amsterdam identity in a

negative way and did not identify with this large, cumbersome organization. Others did not experience a VU identity, as they thought that VU Amsterdam was too diverse for that, but they saw this as an advantage, because it reinforced the university's inclusive nature and did not exclude anyone.

○ *Students who are a member of a VU student organization feel a greater sense of belonging.*

Almost half of the respondents were members of a student organization or a participatory body; a factor related to their sense of belonging. Students who belonged to a student organization or participatory body at VU Amsterdam said 10 to 15 percentage points more often that they always or almost always felt that they belonged at VU Amsterdam. Students saw a connection between their participation in social activities or membership of a student organization and their experience of a shared VU Amsterdam identity. Students who attended the introduction days, especially the five-day introduction week, were more often members of a VU student organization. Finally, students who were members of a student organization said that they felt more of a connection with the people in their association than with the university as a whole.

○ *Students with more credits feel a stronger sense of belonging at VU Amsterdam.*

Students who had obtained more than half of their credits always or almost always felt that they belonged at VU Amsterdam 15 percentage points more often than students who had obtained half or less than half of their credits. We are unable to draw any conclusions from the survey about a causal relationship, but the various themes related to belonging are also related to study progress. For example, it appears that compared to students who have obtained more than half of their credits, students who have obtained half or less than half of their credits more often found group formation unpleasant or disruptive, more often experienced discrimination by fellow students in educational situations, have found it more difficult to find fellow students to work with, and are less satisfied with the support provided by VU Amsterdam.

Not surprisingly, paid work, care-giving and family duties were found to have an enormous impact. The more time that students spent on such tasks, the lower the proportion of ECTS they obtained. The effect was more pronounced for care-giving and family duties, tasks that required a high level of responsibility and emotional labour. Some students with a disability, illness or medical condition also took longer to obtain credits because they suffered from concentration problems, fatigue or physical complaints. In addition, they sometimes had to miss lectures or exams due to pain or hospital appointments. All these things had a partial or significant impact on their studies. Students also mentioned difficulties with planning, a problematic home situation or the search for an internship as factors that influenced their study progress.

