Diversity policy VU University Amsterdam (VUA)

Our vision on diversity

Diversity is a key element in the new strategic plan of the university. VUA aspires to provide a learning environment that produces committed and conscientious academics who constantly open new frontiers. Our future academics are trained to contribute to society in a professional and responsible way.

In a world that is increasingly culturally diverse, this implies that students learn to understand how scientific insights can be biased by the specific culture in which they were generated and cannot necessarily be applied across cultures. In our own research, we want to generate academic knowledge that is not biased by our own cultural context, but reflects pluralism, both at the global level and the societal level. It also implies that we teach our students intercultural competencies. We aim to educate a future generation of academics who contribute to societies where differences are encountered with confidence, where diversity is valued and actually used. The university aims to provide an inclusive learning and working environment that capitalizes on differences to stimulate creativity and talent. We believe that this constitutes the basis for social stability and innovation.

Diversity is about all features on which people can differ from each other. The diversity vision of VUA is not limited to cultural differences, but also addresses differences on other dimensions. Our model of an inclusive organization is generic. That means we seek a context for teaching and research in which there is room for differences and differences are positively valued and utilized, regardless of whether it concerns cultural differences or differences on other dimensions. Diversity is instrumental for a confrontation between perspectives and opinions, which is the hallmark of an excellent university. Although our basic approach is generic approach, we will pay special attention to cultural differences.

Diversity strategy

In our diversity policy we will focus on three themes:

Diversity and the university as organization and employer

To become an inclusive environment that promotes creativity and talent, the organization has to meet certain conditions. These conditions relate to the structure of the organization, procedures of staff selection and assessment, organizational climate and opportunities for training and growth. The university will repeatedly perform self-assessments to identify promoting and inhibitory factors in the organizational climate, structures and procedures and its personnel practices. As a concrete case, special attention will be given to the support of PhD students and their supervisors from Africa in the context of the joint doctorate program that is part of the Desmond Tutu program at VUA.
Diversity as a theme in education
The premise of the VUA is that diversity is part of the curriculum for all VUA-students regardless of their discipline. First, course work can be designed to stimulate students to reflect on the culture-boundedness of knowledge in a particular field. What does for example knowledge about dental care mean in cultures where beliefs about dental hygiene are different from Western conceptions? Secondly, students can be trained in intercultural competencies that are relevant to a specific discipline. How do medical doctors and psychologists respond to the needs of patients and clients with a different cultural background? To teach students to use different backgrounds and perspectives in the analysis of complex social issues, community service and service learning will be part of the study curriculum. Finally, we also consider it important that our teachers are well equipped in dealing with diversity among their students. We will intensify the attention for these issues in staff training.

Training and labor market perspective of bi-cultural students
The university wants to increase cooperation with secondary schools, for example through the establishment of a Pre University College. Its purpose is to help particularly first generation freshman students to make a focused choice for an academic career that matches their skills and interests. We also want to initiate activities aimed at effective matching of these students to their training. Once entered, the university offers students new kinds of introduction programs and Summer Schools. These programs are still in development. To promote the integration of students, it is also important to encourage balanced participation of native and non-native students in extracurricular activities.

High level education is no guarantee for labor market integration. Problems with labor market integration of students of minority background often deal with their socialization in the workplace. How do you deal with biased images of others? How do you activate your unique strength, without losing the connection with your working environment? The university plans to start a program to better prepare students in the final phase of the transition to the workplace. We cannot solve this problem alone: we need trade and industry, governmental organizations, alumni and students themselves as our partners. Special attention should be given to the transition to an academic career. The cultural diversity among our PhD students is relatively small. For cultural minorities it seems no logical career move to choose for a scientific career after a successful completion of an academic study.

Research
It is important that activities are based on research. There is plenty of expertise on diversity present at VUA, approaching the issue from different scientific disciplines. We aim to make this rich knowledge available within our own university but also to other educational institutions. Moreover, we aim to link further research activities to the design, implementation and evaluation of the interventions that are part of our diversity policy.

Cooperation and charter
The university wants to collaborate in its diversity policy with other organizations. First, the VUA has started a collaboration with the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) that has a well-developed diversity program. In the Netherlands, recent collaboration has started with the University of Leiden and
the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. VUA will work closely together with these institutions in realizing its ambitions on diversity. Specifically, we aim to cooperate and create partnerships with organizations in the environment of the university, such as the municipality, the police, health care institutions, trade and business, the Foundation for Refugee Students UAF.

VUA will play a leading role in the development of a charter for diversity in higher education, in collaboration with the Expertise Center for diversity in Higher Education ECHO. Signing the Charter implies commitment to well-defined diversity targets and participation in a knowledge network on diversity in higher education. Furthermore, such standards could be used by the Ministry of Education and Inspection of Education, including diversity in audits and performance agreements. The criteria established in the context of the charter may all serve as a starting point. Criteria will not exclusively concern cultural diversity, but will also address the position of female staff and students, staff and students with disabilities, and LGBT-groups.

To achieve its diversity goals, the VU appointed Prof. Dr. Karen Oudenhoven-van der Zee, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, as its Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). As CDO she is responsible for the strategic objectives in the field of diversity and inclusion. Specifically, she will deal with the further development of the vision on diversity at VUA and with translating this vision to activities in the field of education, research and community service. She will be also responsible for expertise development on the theme of diversity as well as the external profile of the institution on this theme.

**Contact**

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