

# **Let's do diversity**

Appendix Chapter 3:  
The meaning(s) of diversity in higher  
education:  
learning from UvA experiences

Report of the  
University of Amsterdam  
Diversity Commission

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## **§1. Theoretical and methodological approach**

This section to chapter 3 presents the theoretical approach and methodological framework developed for this research. Full references to consulted materials, events attended, and the questionnaires used for the interviews are also included.

This study was framed by two guiding questions:

- a) Which are the meanings associated with diversity in higher education in three policy contexts - the European Commission, Dutch National Laws on Higher Education and Research and the University of Amsterdam - and who is the recipient subject of diversity policies in these three contexts;
- b) Are these meanings (or elements of them) informing everyday decisions (or the lack of them) of academic activities (e.g. teaching and research) at UvA?

In order to address these questions, this study brings into conversation feminist critical race studies, post-colonial and decolonial literature and critical feminist development studies in order to explore the production and association of meanings and their effects in the institutional context of UvA.

Feminist critical race studies, post-colonial and decolonial analyses informed by an intersectional approach, on one hand, bring to the forefront the complex axes of oppression and privilege from which certain configurations of meanings are produced, accepted and imposed (Wekker 2004, Binge 2013, Hill Collins 2000, Lugones 2003). On the other hand, these approaches allow us to understand the power/knowledge nexus in the production of meanings (in this case of diversity) in order to unpack their assumptions and rationalities. These perspectives help us to question how certain configurations of meanings (i.e. diversity as a challenge to the quality of education) are (re)produced institutionally (i.e. through standardized assessment criteria) and by whom (i.e. national and international examination boards) (Ahmed 2012, Lugones 2003).

Feminist critical development studies approaches are relevant for this study as well, because they ask questions about the construction of 'the subject' of (diversity) policy (Harcourt 2009, Griffin 2007, Bergeron 2004): how is this subject imagined and by whom? (Mohanty 1998). By paying attention to how this imagined subject - as a recipient of diversity initiatives - is imagined, described, referred to in texts and conversations, we managed to identify the potentials and limitations of ongoing actions, initiatives, and decisions taken (or not taken) to prescribe changes (or not) within UvA as an institution.

In order to explain a person's full experience, intersectionality allows us to consider intersections rather than separations or compartmentalized views of inequalities and exclusions. It is the combined effect of multiple forms of inequalities experienced by individuals and groups that determine people's different positions in society. By taking

up an intersectional perspective, we can examine the complexities and nuances of diversity and inclusion/exclusion experiences in higher education.

### **Research strategy and information gathering constraints**

This study has deployed a research strategy that aims to illustrate relations between the subjective and personal and the institutional. At the subjective level, this study explores who is assumed to be the recipient of diversity policies and initiatives in higher education and how this person is represented in key policy guidelines dealing with 'diversity' in EU, Dutch and UvA contexts and in the conversations with academic staff at UvA. The analysis was conducted in a question-led framework that allowed us to unpack key assumptions (or patterns of assumptions) regarding an implicit subject within a given institutional context (higher education and curricula) and the rationalities informing those assumptions.

In order to gain deeper insight into the temporal and spatial trajectory of meanings associated with diversity in the institutional context of Dutch Higher Education, we carried out consultations with academic and policy experts. The consultations were in the form of open-semi-structured interviews. To complement this, the team conducted participatory observation in national and international conferences dealing with diversity in higher education in order to get acquainted with how diversity is being talked about by 'experts' in the field.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, we attended consultations organized by the Diversity Commission with academic experts on diversity and racism in the Dutch context.

The interviews conducted with UvA Deans were requested by email while UvA teachers and course leaders were reached through the 'snowball method'. In this way, the team was able to identify and approach people responsible for 'dealing with diversity' in the everyday administration of teaching and research activities (i.e. Deans) and in designing curricula (teachers, course leaders). All the interviews were semi-open.<sup>2</sup> Through these conversations we sought to identify tensions and/or consistencies between subjective and institutionally informed meanings attached to diversity.

In total, we interviewed 21 persons, including 5 of the 7 UvA Deans, 11 members of UvA academic staff, and 5 academic experts on diversity in Dutch higher education who have appointments outside UvA. All the 21 interviews have been documented through transcripts, which have been sent to the interviewees for their verification. All, except one interview, have been recorded for validation purposes only, as anonymity of the respondents will be preserved. This report makes no explicit or implicit identification to persons or personal sources and information disclosed during the conducted interviews.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, when appropriate an administrative position (e.g. Dean, course leader) might be disclosed for the clarity of the analysis. All the direct quotes incorporated into the report are codified.<sup>4</sup>

We have also attended the presentation of 2 academic experts on diversity in Dutch higher education followed up by sessions of consultations and feedback. In addition to the interviews, we have consulted 2 academic experts, one on research methodologies and one on national legislation on discrimination.

The interviews with all the 7 UvA Deans was not possible: one of them declined due to time constraints and the other one expressed interest but did not confirm participation. All the 7 Deans were invited to answer a set of 4 open questions on the state of diversity initiatives at the faculty level (i.e. courses, research projects, MA and PhD dissertations, staff composition by gender and nationality).<sup>5</sup> From the 7 Faculties, only three of them responded to our invitation providing a selective inventory of academic initiatives dealing with diversity. The contributions of these three faculties were considered sources of information for our diagnosis and direct references to these materials are also codified.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the lack of interest and/or time of some members of UvA academic staff but also due to the willingness of some others to participate, the conducted interviews involved a high number of academic staff working in the scientific disciplines located in the Science Park and at Amsterdam University College.

A preliminary findings report was circulated among the International Advisory Board for their comments and suggestions. This Advisory Board included three internationally recognized senior experts (one of them non-Dutch) on higher education and a senior feminist scholar.

Our findings are also informed by the conversations that we systematically held as a team after each interview, consultation and attended event. Through these exchanges, we were able to verify as a team our individual interpretations, to question each other on our initial impressions and to identify relationships between meanings and decisions-actions or the lack of them. As collective self-reflective moments these are not only consistent with our feminist and intersectional approach but also an important element in the research cycle of this study.

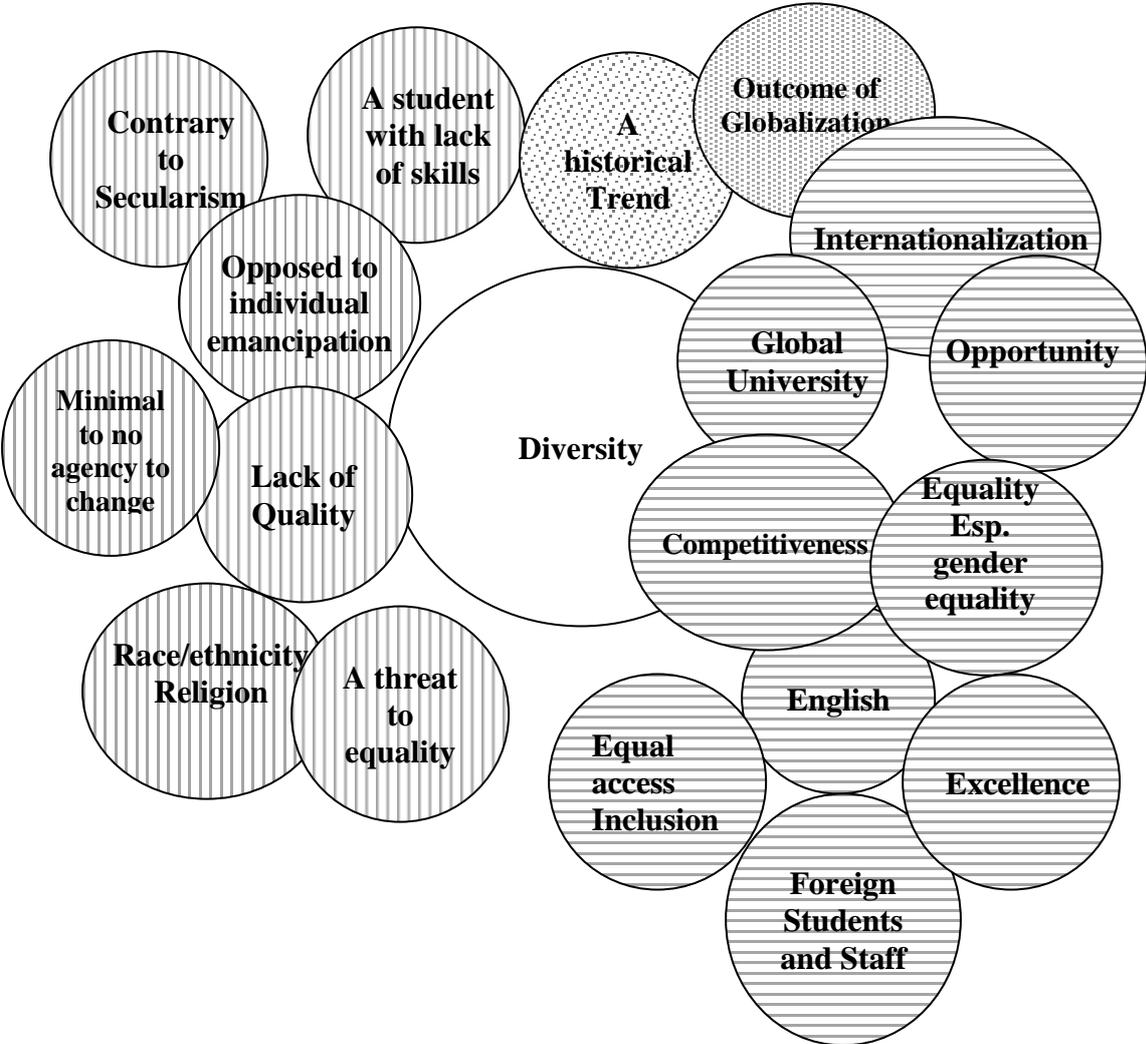
We wrote this final report aware of our different experiences and backgrounds in terms of nationality (one of us is non-Dutch), generation (between our 20s and early 40s), employment situation (only one of us has a permanent appointment at a Dutch University), body impairments, sexual preferences, and so on. We are also fully aware that as three women of color our individual experiences on diversity (or the lack of) in the context of Dutch higher education provide us with an invaluable source of knowledge to critically reflect upon.

The *institutional context* of UvA is the focus of our study.<sup>7</sup> Initially, our focus was on curricula and understanding how certain knowledges are validated through it. However,

a preliminary analysis of our data displayed that the constellations of meanings around diversity effects how academic staff at UvA envisage the *relationship between diversity and curricula* with an evident impact on their everyday decision-making.

We present figure 1 below to visually represent the series of associations we were able to identify. The distinct positions of the lines within the circles – vertical or horizontal - and the dots express the different normative positioning that we found in relation to diversity among the informants. Circles with horizontal lines in the right highlight the optimistic meanings attributed by the informants to the notion of diversity. Dots within the circles expressed ways in which informants explained diversity. Finally, circles with vertical lines in the left aim to highlight meanings associated to the notion of diversity that are considered problematic, negative or with potential to create conflicts.

**Figure 1. Constellations of Meanings**



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[http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2016\\_2017/main/h2020-wp1617-societies\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/wp/2016_2017/main/h2020-wp1617-societies_en.pdf)

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### **§3. Attended conferences and seminars**

During the months of May and June 2016, participative observation was conducted in the following three seminars:

“Opportunities for Inclusive Higher Education Seminar” (Seminar Kansen voor Inclusief Hoger Onderwijs). This was a full day seminar organized by ECHO Expertise Diversity Policy Center (Expertisecentrum Diversiteitsbeleid), Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Dutch Ministry of Education and Science (Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur Wetenschap), May 25th, 2016.

“Gender Based Violence and Global Governance. Resisting the Politics of Othering in Dutch Research, NGO Practice and Policy”, organized by the Prince Claus Chair, ISS and PARTOS on June 8th, 2106.

“Intersectional Empowerment Networks in and out of the Academy”, Round Table at the Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies’ Research Day, June 10th, 2016.

## **§4. Questionnaires**

### **A Questionnaire for interviews**

#### **Legal frameworks**

1. How has diversity been defined by your organization/faculty?  
Are there specific national and international legal frameworks informing this definition?  
Can you explain why these frameworks were chosen?

#### **Shifting patterns**

2. Is this definition/understanding different from a previous notion?
3. If yes, when does it change and why? In which sense(s) is the current definition different?  
If not, can you explain to me why it has remained over the years?

#### **Questions 4-9 specifically for UvA Deans**

#### **Specific meanings and “Disciplines”**

4. Is diversity (an eventual diversity policy) relevant for your faculty?  
Why? Can you give us some examples?
5. Is diversity (an eventual diversity policy) a contested issue in your faculty?  
Why? Can you give us some examples?

#### **Internationalization and Diversity**

6. As Dean of X faculty, how do you envision the relationship between internationalization and diversity or an eventual UvA policy on diversity?

#### **Diversity and Curricula**

7. Has your faculty explored the implications of a diversity policy in curricula?
  - If not, can you explain to us why?
  - If yes, can you explain to us how has this been done? Who is involved?

#### **Diversity and Research (Policy?)**

8. Has your faculty explored the implications of a diversity policy in research policy/priorities?
  - If not, can you explain to us why?
  - If yes, can you explain to us how has this been done? Who is involved?

### **Strategies and Support/Rejection**

9. Which are from your perspective, the strategic steps to be taken by/in your faculty to promote diversity

### **The Everyday of Implementation (Deans/Diversity Task Officers/Research Managers/Officers)**

10. How has diversity, as a rationale for action, been implemented by your organization/office/faculty?

Can you describe the available institutional arrangements for its implementation? Who decides and how? At which level?

Who are the main stakeholders/involved parties and why?

Can you describe the institutional arrangements and processes followed to promote diversity in:

- a) the recruitment of academic (teachers/researchers) and support staff
- b) Selection of students

11. Can you describe to us which the main challenges are, facing your office/faculty in relation to diversity?

12. How has diversity been monitored and assessed? How are complaints followed up?

### **Questions 13-exclusive to (selected) UvA teachers and researchers**

Meanings

13. How do you understand diversity?

Disciplinary/methodological Relevance

14. Is diversity relevant in your teaching/research?

Why? How? Can you give us some examples?

Diversity and Internationalization

16. As teacher of X course/researcher, how do you envision the relationship between internationalization and diversity?

Diversity and Curricula/Research (Policy)

17. Have you consider possible implications of a diversity policy in your course/research?

If not, can you explain to us why?

If yes, can you explain to us, which these implications are?

## **B Question-led framework for text analysis**

### **1. Which EU, Dutch and UvA policy guidelines address diversity in relation to curricula (and research)?**

How is diversity in curricula defined in these three institutional contexts?  
(Identify genealogy (shifts and continuities) in key emphasis)

How are curricula defined/understood?

Who is the implicit targeted subject? How is she/he assumed to be?

Which role is she/he assumed to play in relation to the University?

Are there any key shifts identified from past roles? Are there explanations for these previous roles?

### **2. How is the relationship between internationalization and diversity envisioned in policy guidelines in the three institutional contexts (EU, NL and UvA)?**

How is the meaning of internationalization argued for in the context of diversity in higher education curricula?

What is the role of the University in this context? Has it changed from past conjunctures? How? How are these changes explained?

What are some of the key assumptions informing this shifting role?

What is the role of curricula in this context?

What is the role of diversity administrators (Deans) and teachers in relation to curricula?

Are there other meanings attached to diversity? Are these related to the notion of internationalization? How are these argued for?

### **3. How is the relationship between internationalization and diversity envisioned in everyday work at UvA?**

Why is internationalization relevant for diversity in the specific context of a given faculty and/or course?

Why is internationalization relevant for diversity in curricula?

Are there key differences and similarities between the 7 UvA faculties?

## **§5. Questions sent to all UvA Deans**

- Can you give us an overview of initiatives in the field of diversity in the faculty of X, and any reports, papers and theses, which go about this?
- We would like to get a picture of key researchers and students (PhD, RMA, MA and BA) dealing with diversity in the faculty?
- Which courses deal with any (or several) form (s) of diversity?
- How is diversity understood within the Faculty of Humanities and is a topic of conversation?

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See §3 for the list of Conferences attended.

<sup>2</sup> See §4 for the questionnaires used

<sup>3</sup> This is based on the so-called Chatham House Rules

<sup>4</sup> The interviews with academic and policy experts external to UvA have been codified with numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) while the interviews with UvA members of the academic staff have been codified with letters (A, B, C, etc.).

<sup>5</sup> See §5 for the list of questions sent to the 7 UvA Deans

<sup>6</sup> Faculties were codified as Xi, Xii, Xiii.

<sup>7</sup> The University as an institutional context that involves both structures and feelings and which are constructed through social relationships, is further explored by Sara Ahmed who also points at the idea of institutions as spaces in which “some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm” (Ahmed 2012, p. 3).