



Ministry of Education, Culture and  
Science



# National action plan for greater diversity and inclusion in higher education and research



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for greater diversity and inclusion  
in higher education and research**



## Summary

An inclusive, diverse and safe learning and working environment in which everyone has the opportunity to flourish ensures the highest possible quality of education and research. Achieving diversity in both research content and among the people conducting research will raise educational and research standards throughout the field.

This action plan sets five goals for higher education and research for 2025:

1. embed diversity more effectively in existing instruments
2. monitor diversity more widely
3. establish an award system to provide frameworks and set the direction for policy
4. bring together and support institutional diversity plans
5. establish a national centre of excellence.

An advisory committee will be set up to advise the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the field about the issues that need to be addressed in order to achieve these goals. A number of additional initiatives will also be taken: new target numbers will be agreed for universities for 2025; an advisory report on the prevention of inappropriate behaviour will be published by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW); and a new instrument developed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) will increase the proportion of researchers with a migration background. Through these initiatives, the field of Dutch higher education and research is working with the government to take the next step towards full diversity and inclusion in order to assure the future of the sector. This will enable the Netherlands to contribute ongoing and meaningful solutions to the major societal and scientific challenges facing the world today.

## Inhoud

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## Why seek greater diversity and inclusion?

As their importance becomes more widely recognized, diversity and inclusion are coming to occupy an increasingly prominent place on the higher education and science agenda. They are now a focus of attention in all kinds of areas within universities, universities of applied sciences and research institutes, and we are starting to see the emergence of positive initiatives and infrastructures, such as diversity offices. Education and research will be enriched by a diversity of perspectives, while a diverse and inclusive working and learning environment creates the necessary conditions for fully utilizing talent. Commitment in all layers of the organization is essential, with a particularly important role for leadership. In an inclusive organization, everyone has the chance to participate fully and on an equal footing in decision-making and how the organization is run.<sup>1</sup>

Through this action plan, we aim to achieve a more diverse and inclusive higher education and research sector. Creating conditions in which people from different backgrounds and with a diversity of perspectives are both willing and able to contribute will enable us to maintain our position at the international forefront of research and education, helping to address global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development and the welfare of the population.

By inclusion we mean a safe learning and working environment in which everyone feels at home and is able to flourish, and where a broad range of perspectives are considered and brought into play. While inclusion is of intrinsic value, it is also a prerequisite for quality. Diversity in the content of research and education also has a positive effect on quality. Fundamental questions need to be asked on an ongoing basis. Which research and innovation issues are given priority and why? Which perspectives are involved in these processes? And what impact does research and innovation have on society as a whole? Research and education that fails to take the diversity of society into account is less representative and is therefore limited in terms of its quality and impact.

On paper, everyone has equal rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Dutch Constitution.<sup>2, 3</sup> It is also a societal responsibility to ensure that certain groups are not unfairly treated by being given fewer opportunities. Yet inequality and implicit bias appear to be embedded in the structure, methods and culture of educational and research institutions. These include the qualities and character traits we ascribe to a good researcher or lecturer, and how we define the academic frameworks that determine our disciplines. In practice, these factors lead to a situation in which there is no equality of opportunity. That is why the Recognition and Rewards of Academics programme plan also focuses explicitly on the role of high-quality academic leadership. Leaders play an important part in recognizing and appreciating diversity, and in creating a safe environment. Existing norms mean that diversity and inclusion do not always come to fruition in higher education and research, undermined by factors such as subtle and less subtle forms of gender bias, heteronormativity, racism and validism.<sup>4</sup> Although the percentage has been rising in recent years, only 23% of professors and 40% of lecturers are women.<sup>5</sup> In fields such as engineering and economics, the representation lags behind even more noticeably.<sup>6, 7</sup> We see a similar lack of representation in management positions and board membership.

Dutch citizens with a non-Western migration background account for only a small proportion of staff in higher education and research, although figures for this area are very limited.<sup>8, 9</sup> In addition, and for a number of reasons, there are considerable differences in yield and academic success between different groups of students, especially students with a non-Western migration background.<sup>10</sup> The lack of an inclusive learning and working environment prevents individuals from under-represented groups from taking the next step in their careers. A new norm, in which diversity and inclusion are safeguarded, can change this situation: a transformative potential that is explicitly acknowledged in the new ambitions for recognizing and appreciating more diverse career paths within the academic world.<sup>11</sup> Broader opportunities and profiles give everyone's talent a chance to grow, and this also benefits the quality of education, research and governance in higher education and research.

## The aim of the action plan and an integrated approach

The primary aim of this action plan is to achieve a more diverse and inclusive higher education and research sector. By creating a more inclusive working and learning environment in which everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their potential, we ultimately want to increase diversity both among students and staff and in research and educational content. We will reach these goals by sustainably embedding diversity policy in existing and new instruments, while not averting our gaze from difficult themes such as institutional exclusion and misconduct. This includes proper monitoring and evaluation, so that any necessary adjustments can be made in good time. From a global perspective, this action plan also helps us work towards the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular gender equality and reduced inequalities.<sup>12</sup>

The actions set out in this plan have been formulated at different levels. No single organization can achieve these goals on its own: both the higher education and research field *and* the government aim to take collective action in this area. Intensive cooperation facilitated by the right conditions (e.g. realization of data collection, building support, sufficient time and budget for the various actors, relevant knowledge of working interventions, support from national policy) should enable the aim of this action plan to be achieved more quickly. The ambition is to expand this cooperation in the near future to include secondary vocational education (MBO) and higher professional education (HBO) in the Netherlands. Discussions are already under way.

Firmly embedding diversity and inclusion in higher education and research calls for an intersectional and integrated approach. We use a broad definition of diversity, covering not only characteristics that tend to be visible (e.g. gender, cultural background) but also characteristics which may be either less visible or invisible (e.g. disability, psychological illness, chronic illness, sexual preference, socio-economic background, beliefs, religion, talents, working style, education, experience).<sup>13</sup> It is important to take an intersectional approach, as overlapping forms of inequality have to be tackled at the same time.

## Creating conditions for structural change

The Netherlands can learn a great deal about this issue from other European countries, some of which have already gained extensive experience of working with national instruments for diversity in education and research.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has commissioned a study of good examples in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and Norway.<sup>15</sup> To make higher education and research more inclusive by means of targeted interventions, a number of conditions must first be met. These also emerge strongly from the exploratory study.

- **Students and staff figures: safeguarding and access**

If progress is to be evaluated, objective measures of the current situation are required. Without data, it is not possible to demonstrate the extent and urgency of the issue. Nor can it be shown how much talent we leave untapped. At present, data input at all levels is not sufficient to provide a basis for analysis. Data on gender is often available, but not to an extent that allows progress within an organization to be monitored. Wherever possible, it is important to ensure that personal data (e.g. on ethnicity, migration background) is used only for the purposes of research or monitoring with a view to promoting equality. With this in mind, anonymized data on the migration background of employees can now be retrieved from the CBS Cultural Diversity Barometer.<sup>16</sup> Voluntary arrangements might also be considered, for example in which staff or students supply their own data in response to an anonymized request. In all cases, every effort must be made to ensure careful use of data. The Rathenau Institute will be involved in making sure that all due care is taken.

- **Standards of quality assurance**

Serious attention must be paid to the quality and inclusion of the learning and working environment and how staff and students experience these aspects. These standards should also be reflected in instruments looking at both past and future performance. Looking ahead, the focus lies on matters such as accreditation, the assessment of grant applications, and quality aspects of research and education. Looking back, relevant data sources include the staff survey, the National Student Survey and course evaluations. It is essential to incorporate diversity and inclusion as quality parameters and to obtain and analyse data from an intersectional perspective. Key aspects in this regard are social safety, integrity and inclusion.

- **Ongoing creation of awareness**

Generating greater knowledge and awareness of the value and importance of greater diversity and inclusion is key. This action plan has a vital role to play in that process. Institutions and other organizations also have a responsibility to keep this subject on the agenda at all levels. Widespread support helps bolster awareness of unequal opportunities, exclusion and the realization that change requires an expansion of the norm.

- **Sufficient resources, knowledge and government policy as a basis for progress**

Increasing and consolidating knowledge and expertise, and linking this process to policy, is essential to achieve a solid foundation. The sector cannot do this alone; what's needed is structural policy formulated by the government and institutions, reinforced by knowledge and expertise. To ensure embedding and support, policy staff, academic staff, PhD candidates and students should also have a say in policy, through channels such as participation, focus groups and the appointment of ambassadors.

## A course of action for years to come

Based on the input of stakeholders, the results of an international conference and the above-mentioned exploratory study, we have formulated the following five goals for 2025.<sup>17</sup> A number of questions have also been formulated, the answers to which are essential to achieving these goals. Although some issues will require a much longer-term investment in terms of work and focus, this action plan can be said to have achieved its goals when the following achievements become reality within the next five years:



**Diversity and inclusion are embedded more effectively in existing instruments, such as quality assurance, evaluation and Dutch Research Council instruments.**

- a. The focus here is on issues such as how diversity and inclusion can best be incorporated into the assessment of research proposals, programmes and curriculums, complete with relevant indicators and also with an eye to research content.
- b. A more detailed picture is also needed of the knowledge, expertise and competences required to translate diversity policy on education, research, staff and students into implementation within the various units. This process should take into account the needs of diversity offices and diversity officers in terms of capacity, expertise and authority.
- c. Another area to be examined includes ways to embed diversity and inclusion even better in existing accreditation, inspection and qualification instruments, such as the work of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), the European Charter and Code for Researchers, sector plans, educational qualifications (Basic and Senior Teaching Qualifications) and the range of professional training offered at institutions.
- d. Throughout the sector, skills related to diversity and inclusion can be incorporated more emphatically as competence and selection criteria in vacancies, appointments, leadership and management positions.



**Monitoring will be expanded to longitudinal monitoring of staff and students joining, progressing through and leaving the institution. Where possible, we also intend to monitor other areas, such as the experienced social safety and inclusion.**

This is currently a challenge due to a lack of figures on students and staff throughout higher education and research. The recommendations made by the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands will at least extend the possibility of monitoring cultural diversity by means of the Cultural Diversity Barometer.<sup>18</sup> Broader target

numbers may be formulated on the basis of this new information. We want to look into ways of monitoring diversity and inclusion on a structural basis in the working and learning environment and in the content of research and education, including people's experiences with regard to inclusion and social safety. Once we have established what we want to monitor and what is feasible to monitor, objectives can be formulated.



**The Netherlands can participate in a European charter (CASPER), or an existing charter can be adapted to the Dutch context.**

The exploratory study shows that Ireland has implemented the UK's Athena SWAN charter, having first adapted it to the Irish context. Charters, awards and links to research funding can be effective ways to accelerate progress.<sup>19</sup> The European Commission is currently investigating the possibilities for a joint European charter (CASPER). Action will be taken to determine which approach is likely to meet with sufficient support in the Dutch context.



**A format has been developed for institutional diversity policy that will then be aligned and made readily available.**

De Europese Commissie overweegt om institutionele genderplannen verplicht te stellen voor financiering uit Horizon Europe, het nieuwe Kaderprogramma voor onderzoek en innovatie. Effectief beleid vraagt zowel om landelijke samenwerking als ook om ruimte voor maatwerk, toegepast op de context van de instellingen. Met dit nationale actieplan willen we institutionele plannen versterken, en tegelijkertijd oog houden voor verschillen tussen instellingen en vakgebieden, en maatregelen die nu al effectief zijn versterken en onderling delen. In dat licht zal ook worden gekeken naar de verhouding tussen institutionele plannen en nationale programma's van bijvoorbeeld NWO.



**There will be a call for a national centre of excellence on diversity, with research and knowledge-sharing resources for at least five years.**

Almost all of the countries which took part in the exploratory study have a national knowledge centre where expertise is developed, consolidated and shared effectively. The development potential of a national centre of excellence will be explored in terms of knowledge, expertise and tools aimed at promoting both awareness and the effective implementation of national diversity policy. The experiences of neighbouring countries will be used to determine the criteria for such a centre and the nature of such a call, in addition to considering the best position for the centre to adopt in relation to existing institutes that focus on a specific target group.<sup>20</sup>



Monitoring of people joining, progressing through and leaving the institution is expanded.



Diversity and inclusion are embedded more effectively in existing instruments.



The Netherlands can participate in a European charter, or an existing charter can be adapted to the Dutch context.



A format is developed for institutional diversity policy.



There will be a call for a national centre of excellence on diversity.

## Our ambitions for 2025

### Start of actions 2020

**New target numbers for women professors**

**KNAW-report on prevention of inappropriate behaviour**

**New NWO-instrument for researchers with a migration background**

**Establishing an advisory committee**

In addition, the relevant parties are committed to taking steps in the following areas in the short term:

**1. New target numbers for 2025**

The Dutch Network of Women Professors has asked the Association of Universities in the Netherlands to set new targets for 2025 and to publish them jointly. The Association, in discussion with the universities, is considering setting new targets for female professors, as the current targets run until the end of 2020. The possibility of future targets is also being discussed for other job groups and on the basis of other diversity characteristics.

**2. Advice on the prevention of harassment and misconduct**

An unsafe environment and unethical behaviour have a negative impact on the quality of education and research. Reports by the Dutch Network of Women Professors and the trade unions show that action is needed.<sup>21, 22</sup> At the request of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences is to publish an advisory report on preventing and dealing with misconduct and intimidation in the field of research. The report will look at the structural and cultural factors that can facilitate misconduct within the academic world.

**3. New Dutch Research Council instrument for researchers with a migration background**

In the period 2020-2023, the Dutch Research Council will roll out an impulse programme for refugees and Dutch researchers with a non-Western migration background. In addition, the Council launched an incentive programme for women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in May 2020.

## Operationalization and follow-up

One of the outcomes of the exploratory study is that an advisory committee set up by the government and a national centre of excellence with the right expertise and administrative support can make a significant contribution to ensuring that policy is well-embedded.<sup>23</sup>

With effect from 1 October 2020, a committee will be set up to advise both the government and the sector on inclusion and diversity. This will mainly involve addressing the questions outlined above in connection with the five goals. It is also important to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators so that progress can be measured. The committee will consist of individuals appointed in a personal capacity who combine knowledge and expertise in the field of diversity, inclusion, organizational change, leadership and public administration with experience in the field of science, governance and policy. It goes without saying that the members of the committee will be diverse in their background, knowledge, network and skills. The members will be appointed by the Ministry for a period of two or three years, with a view to maintaining a productive balance between continuity and fresh insights.

The committee will be supported by an independent secretary appointed at the Dutch Research Council, and will be funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.

The committee's remit will be to further explore the above goals and to advise the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the relevant parties in higher education and research on the basis of their findings so that further steps can be taken. This also means that the conditions that enable these parties to take the necessary action must be in place. For its first three years, the committee will be chaired by Prof. Vinod Subramaniam, Rector Magnificus of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

To enable the proper monitoring of progress, the committee's first point of attention will be to formulate measurable indicators for the ambitions. Once this has been achieved, a measurement of the existing situation can be carried out. Halfway through the committee's term and at the end of the five years, review will be carried out to evaluate the progress in diversity and inclusion made in all of the above areas. If the 2025 review indicates a shortfall in terms of results, the need for more far-reaching measures will be considered, including the option of establishing quotas at various levels and for a range of employers. A cascade would be the preferred model for quotas, as this model takes into account the existing structure of the organization or discipline. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, together with the higher education and research field, has committed itself to this course of action in the shorter and longer term. Based on the committee's recommendations, the parties involved are prepared to take practical steps to jointly achieve the goals set.

These parties are the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), Dutch Research Council (NWO), Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH), National Network of Diversity Officers (LanDO), Expertise Centre for Diversity Policy (ECHO), PhD Network Netherlands (PNN) and PostdocNL.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Knowledge Platform for Integration & Society (KIS, 2019). *Inclusief beleid op de werkplek: factoren die bijdragen aan (het creëren van) een inclusieve werkplek*. [Inclusive workplace policy: factors that contribute to (the creation of) an inclusive workplace.]
- <sup>2</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 27.
- <sup>3</sup> The Dutch Constitution, Article 1: Equal treatment and non-discrimination.
- <sup>4</sup> Validism is a term used to describe discrimination based on physical and/or mental capacity.
- <sup>5</sup> Figures from the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences.
- <sup>6</sup> Dutch Network of Women Professors (2020). *Monitor vrouwelijke hoogleraren 2019* [2019 Women Professors Monitor].
- <sup>7</sup> Dutch Network of Women Professors (2020). *Monitor vrouwelijke hoogleraren 2019* [2019 Women Professors Monitor].
- <sup>8</sup> The study *Trends en Cijfers 2019, werken in de overheid- en onderwijssectoren* [Trends and Figures for 2019, Working in the Government and Education Sectors], carried out by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, states that 6.8% of employees in the education and science sector had a non-Western migration background in 2018.
- <sup>9</sup> Figures from Statistics Netherlands (CBS) show that potential job candidates are thin on the ground: of a total of 43,873 Master's students who graduated in 2018, 6782 had a non-Western migration background.
- <sup>10</sup> Wolff, R. P. (2013). *Presteren op vreemde bodem: Een onderzoek naar sociale hulpbronnen en de leeromgeving als studieresultatenfactoren voor niet-westerse allochtone studenten in het Nederlandse hoger onderwijs (1997-2010)*. [Performing on foreign soil: A study of social resources and the learning environment as factors in the academic success of first and second generation students from a non-Western migration background in Dutch higher education (1997-2010)].
- <sup>11</sup> The Netherlands Organization for Health Research and Development (ZonMw), the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO) (2019). *Ruimte voor ieders talent, naar een nieuwe balans in erkennen en waarderen*. [Room for everyone's talent, towards a new balance in the recognition and rewards of academics.] In moves to encourage high-quality academic leadership and team science, attention is being paid to how these factors can promote a safer and more inclusive work culture. After all, it takes inclusive leadership, diversity and a combination of talents and skills to forge a good team. In operationalizing these ambitions, through initiatives such as the Recognition and Appreciation programme plan, there needs to be a continuing focus on the effects that the proposed developments have on diversity.
- <sup>12</sup> Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10.
- <sup>13</sup> Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (2019). *Diversiteit in de top: Tijd voor versnelling*. [Diversity at the top: Time for acceleration.] Wherever possible, CBS definitions are used.
- <sup>14</sup> The Netherlands is comparable to other countries as regards taking steps towards gender diversity. Interventions relating to ethnic diversity have been developed in the UK, but not yet elsewhere.
- <sup>15</sup> Vinkenburg, C., Blank, M. de, and Bouma, S. (2020). *Nationaal actieplan diversiteit in de wetenschap: verkennend onderzoek naar internationale voorbeelden*. [National action plan on diversity in the university sector: an exploratory study of international examples.]
- <sup>16</sup> Source: <https://www.ser.nl/nl/actueel/Nieuws/barometer-culturele-diversiteit>.
- <sup>17</sup> Vinkenburg, C., Blank, M. de, and Bouma, S. (2020). *Nationaal actieplan diversiteit in de wetenschap: verkennend onderzoek naar internationale voorbeelden*. [National action plan on diversity in the university sector: an exploratory study of international examples.]
- <sup>18</sup> Source: <https://www.ser.nl/nl/Publicaties/diversiteit-in-de-top>.
- <sup>19</sup> Advance HE (2019). *An impact evaluation of the Athena SWAN charter*.

- <sup>20</sup> Such as knowledge and experience within the Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History, the ECHO Expertise Centre for Diversity Policy, and the Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH).
- <sup>21</sup> Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH) (2019). *Harassment in Dutch academia. Exploring manifestations, facilitating factors, effects and solutions.*
- <sup>22</sup> The Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) and the Trade Union for Academic Education and Research (VAWO) (2019). *Sociale veiligheid medewerkers universiteiten.* [Social safety among staff at universities.]
- <sup>23</sup> Vinkenburg, C., Blank, M. de, and Bouma, S. (2020). *Nationaal actieplan diversiteit in de wetenschap: verkennend onderzoek naar internationale voorbeelden.* [National action plan on diversity in the university sector: an exploratory study of international examples.]

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