



Intertwined strands: an integrated and inclusive approach to policy

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The Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research advises to connect policy agenda's and initiatives aimed at creating an inclusive higher education and research sector with each other. A compartmentalized approach stands in the way of reaching the intended collective objectives.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) has set itself the goal of creating, along with partners in the field, 'a more diverse and inclusive higher education and research sector.'¹ A stimulating, safe academic environment where there is space for diverse talents and identities, with collaborative working as the focal point.

Countless efforts are being made to achieve this goal. Numerous plans, agendas and initiatives are being rolled out at both the national level and within individual educational and research institutions that promote diversity and inclusion, social safety and mental well-being, as well as countering racism, ableism, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, transgressive behaviour and excessive workload. The academic community is also working on enriching the way in which institutions recognize and reward the various kinds of work staff perform.² At a national level, this broad approach is manifested in the appointment of the National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism (NCDR), the government commissioner for sexually transgressive behaviour and sexual violence, and the Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research. It is also evident in policy initiatives, such as OCW's Agenda Against Racism and Discrimination. In a position paper that offers a great deal of inspiration and grips for collaborative approaches, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences proposes 'inclusive universities of applied sciences with respect for diversity.'³ At the institutional

1 [National action plan for greater diversity and inclusion in higher education and research \(2020\).](#)

2 [Recognition and Rewards.](#)

3 [Samenwerken aan inclusieve hogescholen met oog voor diversiteit \[Collaborating on inclusive universities of applied sciences with respect for diversity\] \(2022\).](#)

level, we are now seeing the development of plans promoting such issues as gender equality, equal opportunity in work placements and the job market, student participation in governing bodies and inclusive leadership.

These are, without exception, all issues that are inextricably bound up together. Each and every one contributes to the core tasks of the educational sector: teaching, research and knowledge valorization. What's more, these issues intersect and reinforce one another. Thus, for example, we know that individuals who belong to groups that are underrepresented in higher education are more likely to end up in unsafe situations.⁴ We also know that new criteria aimed at creating a more inclusive method of recognition and reward may be counterproductive if not designed and applied properly.⁵ Conversely, inclusive leadership can lead to a safer working environment, more social involvement and greater well-being of staff members.⁶

A downside of the fast pace at which action plans and policy agendas are being developed is that there is insufficient exchange of ideas and collaborative working on the various issues. In the best case scenario, such compartmentalization prevents us from reaching our intended, collective objectives expeditiously. In the worst case scenario, the compartmentalized approach leads to unhealthy competition between the different agendas. While social safety and the mental well-being of students and staff have been put on the agenda at many institutions, it is not self-evident that such approaches will also target racism and discrimination. Investing in measures to combat sexually transgressive behaviour fails to have the desired effect if inadequate attention is given to the range of diversity within the staff cohort or student group. When confidential counsellor and ombudspersons have expertise in the field of diversity and inclusion, this enables them to do their work in a way that effectively makes higher education and research institutions a safe place for *all* staff and students.

For these reasons, the Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research is pressing OCW to take the lead in ensuring that the various policy agendas – which each in its own way contributes to creating a diverse, inclusive and safe higher education and research sector – be intertwined so that they can strengthen each other.

The Advisory Committee recommends introducing diversity and inclusion as an integral part of all policy areas, in the form of an Equality Impact Assessment, for example.⁷ The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has a role to play in overseeing the efforts being launched at many institutions, in order to ensure they form an intertwined, integrated approach. Then – together – we really can proceed to our goal by leaps and bounds.

4 'Results from the largest European survey on gender-based violence in academia,' 7 November 2022.

5 <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-01096-1>.

6 Moss, G. (2019). *Inclusive Leadership*. Routledge.

7 <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/governance-and-policies/equality-impact-assessment>.