



Providing advice & fostering connections

Final Report of the Advisory
Committee Diverse and Inclusive
Higher Education and Research

2020-2026

Advisory Committee
Diverse and **Inclusive**
Higher Education
and Research

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1 Introduction

On 1 September 2020, the then Minister for Education, Culture and Science, Ingrid van Engelshoven, presented the National Action Plan for Greater Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research (hereinafter: the national action plan).¹ The national action plan was drawn up in collaboration with the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU),² the National Network of Female Professors (LNVH), the Centre of Expertise on Diversity (ECHO) and the National Consultation of Diversity Officers (LanDO). The Dutch PhD Network (PNN) and PostdocNL also endorsed the national action plan. In 2022, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences joined as a partner.³

1.1 Aim, assignment, vision

At the outset, the national action plan had five objectives:

- 1 To embed diversity and inclusion more effectively in existing instruments, such as quality assurance, evaluation and NWO instruments.
- 2 To expand monitoring to include longitudinal monitoring of staff and student intake, progression and attrition, and, where possible, to monitor other areas such as perceived social safety and inclusion.
- 3 Participate in a European charter (CASPER) or adapt an existing charter to the Dutch context.
- 4 Develop a format for an institutional diversity policy which is then harmonised and made easily accessible.
- 5 Launch a call for a national knowledge centre for diversity, with funding for research and knowledge-sharing for at least five years.

Before drawing up the national action plan, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science commissioned an exploratory study to examine international examples of national instruments for promoting diversity in higher education and research.⁴ One finding was that

- 1 Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2020). Nationaal Actieplan voor meer diversiteit en inclusie in het hoger onderwijs en onderzoek. (in Dutch)
- 2 In November 2021, the Association of Dutch Universities changed its name to Universities of the Netherlands (UNL).
- 3 In this final report, we refer to these organisations and bodies simply as ‘the partners’.
- 4 C. Vinkenburg, M. de Blank, and S. Bouma (2020). Nationaal Actieplan: Diversiteit in de wetenschap. Verkennend onderzoek naar internationale voorbeelden. (in Dutch)

an advisory committee can significantly help ensure that policy is properly embedded. On 1 October 2020, the Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (hereinafter: the advisory committee) was established with the assignment to advise both the government and the sector, on both a solicited and unsolicited basis, on diversity and inclusion, with a view to achieving the objectives of the national action plan.

The members of the advisory committee were appointed by the Minister for Education, Culture and Science. When composing the advisory committee, careful consideration was always given to ensuring broad diversity of knowledge, expertise, backgrounds, experiences, and positions within universities and universities of applied sciences. As a result, the committee was able to engage in well-informed discussions both during its meetings and in its contacts with partners and stakeholders,⁵ and to reflect and advise from a rich and varied perspective. Over these six years, the advisory committee's role has alternated between setting the agenda, advising, investigating, stimulating, and fostering connections. Based on discussions about experiences and visions regarding diversity and inclusion, and a growing understanding of objectives and barriers, it has taken steps to deepen and broaden its approach.⁶ In this final report, the advisory committee reports on its work. Quotes in this report from (former) committee members and other stakeholders serve as illustrations. They are taken from minutes of committee meetings and from responses to a short survey conducted in connection with this final report.

‘[...] I see that it is often students and young researchers of colour and from marginalised backgrounds who take on the responsibility of carrying out diversity-related tasks within the institutions... and consequently have less time for their core duties; as a result, they fall behind peers who only need to focus on their core duties.’ (student member, 2022)

- 5 In addition to the aforementioned partners, the committee, in its advisory capacity, has been in contact with a large number of organisations during or following its own meetings, including the National Network for Diversity and Inclusion, the Platform for Integral Safety in Higher Education (IV-HO), the National Coordinator against Racism and Discrimination (NCDR), the Rathenau Institute, the Dutch National Student Association (ISO), the IDEA Centre at Erasmus University Rotterdam, Recognition & Rewards, the National UNESCO Commission, the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS, Leiden University), Ieder(in), the National Student Union (LSVb), the Expert Group on Accessibility in Higher Education (ETHO), Verwey Jonker Institute, SER Diversity in Business, Government Commissioner on Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Violence (RCGOG), State Commission on Racism and Discrimination, Steering Group on Social Safety, The Young Academy, the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), Centre of Expertise for Inclusive Education, Mantelzorg NL.
- 6 The committee published its vision on diversity and inclusion in 2020 on its website: “Advisory Committee,” Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research, <https://www.dihoo.nl/adviescommissie>. (for English: <https://www.dihoo.eu/>)

1.2 Context: COVID-19, discussions in the House of Representatives with the Minister

The committee began its work in the autumn of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic posed major challenges to higher education and research. Universities and universities of applied sciences went into lockdown; institutions switched to online education and other digital infrastructures at record speed, while online forms of research collaboration and new administrative routines were developed. Much had to be worked out from scratch, and existing rules were reassessed. Education and research lost crucial face-to-face contact for several months. In education in particular, this would have long-lasting effects. The advisory committee, too, met exclusively online during the initial period.

Another important issue for the advisory committee's assignment was the widespread anti-Black racism movement, Black Lives Matter, which began in the United States after 2012. From the outset, and especially after George Floyd's death in May 2020, this movement also resonated widely in the Netherlands. On 1 July 2020, the House of Representatives debated institutional racism and the appointment of a National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism with the Minister for Education, Culture and Science.⁷ In connection with the national action plan, the House also discussed mechanisms of exclusion in higher education and research.

At the outset, in November 2020, the Standing Committee on Education, Culture and Science in the House of Representatives asked the Minister questions about the national action plan, to which the Minister replied in writing,⁸ followed by various motions from the House. The subsequent letter to the House on 'Progress on the National Action Plan for greater diversity and inclusion in higher education and research', dated 9 July 2021, addressed this in more detail.⁹ The advisory committee also discussed these questions and motions. Some indicated a reluctance among those asking the questions to explicitly adopt the promotion of diversity and inclusion as a policy principle. Other questions relevant to the committee concerned intersectionality. These questions also compelled the committee to clarify what this means: considering the diverse causes, backgrounds, patterns, and mechanisms of inclusion and

7 Proceedings of the House of Representatives, Debate on institutional racism in the Netherlands, 1 July 2020, https://www.tweedekamer.nl/debat_en_vergadering/plenaire_vergaderingen/details/activiteit?id=2020Ao2618 (in Dutch)

8 Parliamentary Document No. 226, Report on a written consultation, 16 November 2020, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29338-226.html> (in Dutch)

9 Parliamentary Document No. 250, Letter from the Minister for Education, Culture and Science, 9 July 2021, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-29338-250.html> (in Dutch)

exclusion in society, and their impact (or repercussions) on higher education and research at both the individual and institutional levels. During this discussion, the advisory committee also considered Article 1 of the Constitution.¹⁰

‘What struck me yesterday was the way people talk about dreams and ambitions when it comes to combating racism and discrimination. I wonder – why do we use the language of “dreams and ambitions”? It’s in the Constitution...’

‘...I think dreams are indispensable to cultural change. Laws, rules and policies are one thing, but as long as their intent does not ‘come to life’, it can remain a clinical, one-sided narrative. I offer this response from a disability justice perspective, a movement born out of the frustration that laws and rules did not – and do not – help people with disabilities who face multiple forms of marginalisation. (...) Or, as Munganyende Hélène Christelle so beautifully puts it: “What does the day after the revolution look like?” To arrive at such a vision for the future, dreams are indispensable.’ (discussion within the advisory committee, 2024)

Finally, right from the outset, doubts were raised in various forums about the national action plan’s objective of monitoring developments in diversity and inclusion in higher education and research. In response to questions from MPs on this matter, Minister Van Engelshoven asked the Rathenau Institute to find a solution to any obstacles to collecting diversity data.¹¹ Earlier, in 2012, the Council for Social Development (Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, RMO) had recommended, in the context of immigration, integration and asylum policy, exercising restraint in this regard.¹² A similar reluctance was also evident within the higher education and research institutions. For example, this was evident in initiatives to use the Cultural Diversity Barometer for monitoring during the period when the Black Lives Matter movement resonated within higher education. Underlying this resistance was (and remains) a long social and administrative history of reluctance to document, categorise and analyse specific individual characteristics. This can lead institutions and the government astray, for example through

10 In 2023, Article 1 was expanded to include two new grounds for the prohibition of discrimination: disability and sexual orientation.

11 Rathenau Institute (2021, unpublished). Meedenken over monitoren diversiteit en inclusie in het hoger onderwijs en onderzoek (Contributing ideas on monitoring diversity and inclusion in higher education and research).

12 Council for Social Development (Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, RMO) (2012). Tussen afkomst en toekomst. Etnische Categorisering door de overheid. (in Dutch)

ethnic profiling.¹³ The Cultural Diversity Barometer provides insight into the workforce's cultural diversity. This insight is important for promoting equality and combating discrimination. With this aim in mind, Rotterdam has implemented it successfully. Meanwhile, elsewhere, individual staff members have strongly objected to completing surveys such as the Cultural Diversity Barometer. In some cases, this went so far that diversity officers at the institutions concerned received threats. As will become apparent below, of all the objectives, the issue of monitoring and evaluation has posed the greatest challenges for the advisory committee (see further 2.3 'Guidance on the GDPR and equality data in higher education and research' and 4 'The way forward'). At the same time, polarisation within higher education increased due to geopolitical developments, while institutions were also urged to scale back their efforts to recruit international students.

'I would like the committee to pave the way for better monitoring and measurement – and thus better policy – of diversity and inclusion in higher education. So no longer just looking at, for example, the number of women recruited by which institutions, but looking at what is happening to everyone...' (committee member, 2022)

1.3 Organisation and funding

The Minister of Education, Culture and Science appoints advisory committee members for at least one year (student members) and two or three years.¹⁴

During its term of office, the advisory committee met five times a year. Members received an allowance for attending these committee meetings. A secretary supported the advisory committee's work. The secretariat was housed at NWO. The advisory committee has made its recommendations and other information for the sector available on the website [dihoo.nl](https://www.dihoo.nl) and, in English, <https://www.dihoo.eu>.

¹³ One of the examples in recent years within the remit of the advisory committee concerned, for instance, the identification by the Education Executive Agency (DUO) of potential fraudsters claiming student finance on the basis of unjustified ethnic profiling (for which the agency has apologised and attempted to compensate the students affected).

¹⁴ See the appendix for an overview of the committee members and their terms of office. See also: [Instellingsbesluit adviescommissie diversiteit en inclusie in onderwijs en onderzoek](#). (in Dutch)

Overview of annual expenditure:¹⁵

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Project and meetings costs	0,0	18.350,00	8.419,60	5.015,24	10.261,21	30.274,16	19.481,17
web editing/documentation	0,0	16.846,83	6.691,30	2.510,75	4.157,41	23.631,52	10.430,20
venue rental	0,0	0,0	778,59	1.424,57	5.654,30	5.889,89	8.498,47
translations	0,0	813,99	371,89	145,05	114,95	0,0	0,0
other expense claims	0,0	689,24	577,82	934,87	334,55	752,75	552,50
Fees and committee members	2.104,76	15.566,43	12.570,70	15.993,11	23.505,97	26.548,40	18.102,95
Total	2.104,76	33.916,49	20.990,30	21.008,35	33.767,18	56.822,56	37.584,12

In the early stages, the advisory committee had to define its role and responsibilities, particularly in relation to the partners of the national action plan. This relationship became clearer following the mid-term evaluation at the end of 2023. That evaluation confirmed the committee's advisory role and entrusted a network coordinator with coordinating the national action plan.¹⁶ During the period 2020–2026, the secretary of the advisory committee and its chair maintained close contact with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (and, from 2025, also with the network coordinator). This link was crucial to the committee's effective functioning and to broader cooperation on the action plan.

'I want the committee to bring about real change in embedding DEI in higher education. That means providing meaningful advice to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, which is then translated into sustainable policy. Step by step, if necessary...'
(committee member, 2022)

¹⁵ At the time of drafting this final report, not all costs incurred had been accounted for. Consequently, some of the costs incurred in 2026 are missing from this overview.

¹⁶ Bureau Omlo (2023). Midterm-evaluatie voor meer diversiteit en inclusie in het hoger onderwijs en onderzoek. (in Dutch)

2 Report on the activities

The advisory committee focused on contributing to the framework conditions for an integrated and intersectional approach to diversity, inclusion, and equality in higher education and research. The national action plan's objectives served as a guide in this regard. In its advisory role, the committee formulated practical guidelines, encouraged collaboration and the exchange of knowledge and experience within the sector, and endeavoured to keep diversity and inclusion on the agenda, ensuring that discussions among partners were grounded in knowledge, facts, and diverse perspectives.

2.1 Vision on diversity, inclusion and equality

Over time, the advisory committee has further developed and refined its vision on diversity and inclusion from its original formulation.

Inclusion relates not only to access to higher education and research, but also to the way in which education and research are designed, organised, experienced and improved. The advisory committee regards diversity and inclusion as indispensable prerequisites for the quality of education and research. In an inclusive learning, research, and working environment, diversity among students and staff, within curricula, and in research is recognised, valued, and utilised so everyone feels they belong, is seen, and can participate. Working towards diversity and inclusion requires a collective, sustainable approach at societal, political, and institutional levels.¹⁷ Inclusion presupposes a willingness to change, both institutionally and in terms of content. It therefore potentially affects everyone in higher education and research. Moreover, change aimed at equality and justice happens at various policy levels.

'We must realise that diversity and inclusion require profound changes and are not merely a decorative addition to existing structures.' (survey respondent, 2026)

2.2 The five objectives of the national action plan

'The DIHOO advisory committee has a purely advisory role. The 2020 national action plan set out five objectives for the committee to address. A number of these objectives

¹⁷ Based on the Glossary in the *Guidance on navigating GDPR and equality data* (see 2.3) and the position paper *Inclusion as a core principle and across the chain* (see 2.3). See also: <https://www.dihoo.nl/adviescommissie>.

have now been achieved, while others have been refined. It is a dynamic field; times change and so does the context. For example, one objective was to set up a diversity awards scheme. We have since realised that, even though such an award is valuable, it offers little real added value. We would rather steer clear of tick-box exercises and focus instead on cultural change.’ (Chair of the advisory committee, 2025)¹⁸

The advisory committee was established to help achieve the five objectives of the national action plan. Through its publications, this has certainly been achieved for Objective 1 (better embedding of diversity and inclusion in existing instruments, such as quality assessment, evaluation and NWO instruments), Objective 2 (expanding monitoring to include longitudinal tracking of staff and student intake, progression and attrition, and, where possible, monitoring in other areas, such as perceived social safety and inclusion) and Objective 4 (developing a format for institutional diversity policy that is subsequently harmonised and made accessible). Further details on the publications are provided in section 2.3.

Objective 3 (participating in a European charter (CASPER) or adapting an existing charter to the Dutch context) soon proved to be obsolete in that form, as there was ultimately little international interest.¹⁹ However, the EU established an Award for Gender Equality Champions. In this context, NWO took the initiative to launch a programme-based research funding scheme entitled ‘Advancing Equity in Academia through Innovation’²⁰ (2023), and also consulted the advisory committee.

Regarding Objective 5 (the call for a national knowledge centre for diversity, funding for research and knowledge-sharing), the committee advised during the mid-term evaluation that it should not be pursued. The committee reasoned that pooling existing expertise and, above all, encouraging collaboration between the various knowledge centres is more important than setting up a new knowledge centre. In this regard, the advisory committee referred to ‘INSPIRE’, the European initiative which Dutch institutions could join.²¹

18 For the full interview, see: [Advisory Committee for a diverse education and research sector: ‘Don’t limit yourself to a single dimension’](#), 3 July 2025 (in Dutch)

19 For the European CASPER programme to promote gender equality in research, see <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/872113>. This subsequently led to the [EU Award for Gender Equality Champions](#).

20 Dutch Research Council, [Advancing Equity in Academia through Innovation](#).

21 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (2024). [Response to the mid-term evaluation of the National Action Plan on Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research](#). (in Dutch). Inspire: <https://www.inspirequality.eu/>.

2.3 Publications

In line with Objectives 1, 2 and 4, the committee has issued several written recommendations.

1 Guidance on drawing up a gender equality plan

To be eligible for funding under the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, every public body, research organisation or educational institution must, as of 2022, have an institutional gender equality plan in place. The *Guidance on drawing up a gender equality plan*, published by the advisory committee²², provides practical information, starting points, examples and best practices, in line with the European Commission's requirements and recommendations. As drawing up a gender equality plan can serve as a stepping stone towards a broader diversity policy, the guidance also offers starting points and inspiration in this regard. In addition to the European Commission's requirements and recommendations, the advisory committee therefore emphasises the importance of an intersectional approach when drawing up a gender equality plan. After all, gender is always linked to other social categories, such as ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation and social class. The advisory committee's website provides an overview of gender equality plans from education and research institutions.²³ The guide and the overview of gender equality plans align with the first and second objectives of the national action plan.

2 Advice and recommendations following the advisory report 'Social Safety in Dutch Science – From Paper to Practice'

The advisory committee endorsed the analyses and recommendations set out in the guide 'Social Safety in Dutch Academia – From Paper to Practice', initiated by KNAW.²⁴ The report clearly shows that social safety is closely linked to hierarchical organisational structures, power imbalances, and dependencies. To encourage both the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and its partners to take concrete action, the advisory committee highlighted the vulnerable position of marginalised and under-represented groups and advised them to work towards a flatter organisational structure. The advisory committee also formulated its own supplementary advice and recommendations in response to the KNAW report. As in the *Guide to drawing up a gender equality plan*, the advisory committee once again advocated for an 'integrated and intersectional approach to diversity, inclusion and social safety throughout

22 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (2021). [Guide for Drawing Up Gender Equality Plans](#).

23 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research. Overview of gender equality plans: <https://www.dihoo.eu/topics/g/gender-equality-plans/overview-of-gender-equality-plans>.

24 Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW, 2022). [Social Safety in Dutch Academia – From Paper to Practice](#).

the entire chain’.²⁵ This also aligned with the administrative agreement between the Minister of Education, Culture and Science and the universities affiliated with UNL and the universities of applied sciences affiliated with VH.²⁶ This publication also relates to the first and second objectives of the national action plan.

3 Intertwined strands: an integrated and inclusive approach to policy

Drawing on its central position and links with the sector²⁷, the advisory committee noted that, while numerous efforts were underway to promote diversity and inclusion, exchange and collaboration remained insufficient. A ‘siloed approach’ can hinder shared goals and may even lead to competing issues for attention, resources, and manpower. Both at national level and within higher education and research institutions, there are plans, agendas and initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion, social safety and mental wellbeing, and combating racism, ableism, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, inappropriate behaviour and (excessive) work pressure. In its memorandum *Vervlochten draden* (intertwined strands), the advisory committee urged the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to take the lead ‘to ensure that various policy agendas, each of which contributes in its own way to realising a diverse, inclusive and safe higher education and research sector, are interwoven so that they can reinforce one another.’²⁸

‘The most difficult, yet most necessary, change is the transition from isolated initiatives to a structural and integrated approach to diversity and inclusion in higher education and research.’ (survey respondent, 2026)

Under the title *Intertwined strands*, the advisory committee also submitted the memorandum as a contribution to the discussion on the European Research Era, the European Commission’s multi-annual policy to promote the free movement of knowledge within its research & innovation systems.²⁹ In doing so, the advisory committee sought to emphasise that an integrated approach to promoting diversity and inclusion should also be a guiding principle in European policy. This initiative aligns with the third and fourth objectives of the national action plan.

25 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (2022). [Recommendations following the report Social safety in Dutch Academia](#).

26 Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2022). [2022 Administrative Agreement on Higher Education and Science](#). (Bestuursakkoord 2022 hoger onderwijs en wetenschap, in Dutch)

27 See note 3.

28 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (2024). [Intertwined strands: An integrated and inclusive approach to policy](#).

29 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research (2024). [Advice for the European Research Area](#). The committee’s contribution to the 2024 Gender Summit in Ottawa also built on this.

4 Guidance on navigating GDPR and equality data in higher education and research

The second objective of the national action plan, expanding monitoring, was not only a priority from the outset but also a subject of discussion. In section 1.2, we already mentioned the parliamentary questions, the Minister's request to the Rathenau Institute and the debate regarding the Cultural Diversity Barometer. This led to discussions, such as with The Young Academy regarding their exploratory study and international comparison concerning the collection of what they term 'anti-discrimination data' at universities,³⁰ and a commissioned advisory report to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2024) on what data is required and can be collected regarding the backgrounds of staff and students to monitor developments in the field of diversity and inclusion. In this context, the advisory committee also took the initiative to draft guidance on collecting diversity data (equality data) from staff and students while complying with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2026). After all, a frequently heard argument against collecting diversity data is that the GDPR does not permit such collection. To give institutions practical guidance on using monitoring to identify trends in diversity and inclusion, the advisory committee commissioned a working group³¹ to draft the '*Guidance to navigate GDPR and equality data in higher education and research*'.³² The guidance contains specific references to legislation and regulations, as well as examples of ways in which universities can use surveys to ask questions of staff and students. The guide also helps fulfil the second and fourth objectives of the national action plan.

5 Inclusion as a core principle and a chain - A position paper on inclusive curriculum, inclusive learning and working environments, and educational quality in higher education

Thanks in part to contributions from student members, the advisory committee has also consistently focused on an inclusive curriculum. The committee set out its vision in the position

30 The Young Academy (2022). [An exploration of the perspectives of cities and students of colour on anti-discrimination data](#).

31 The working group, chaired by Marlon Domingus (Erasmus University Rotterdam), comprised: Aya Ezawa (Leiden University), Jule van den Berg (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Helen Tibboel (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Nellie Konijnendijk (KNAW, National Consultative Body of Diversity Officers), Jan van den Berg (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences), Floor May-Smit (NHL Stenden), Dick Houtzager (Office of the National Coordinator against Discrimination and Racism), Onur Şahin (State Commission against Discrimination and Racism), Danique Knibbeler (NautaDutilh) and delegated members of the Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusive Higher Education and Research.

32 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research (2026). [Guidance on navigating GDPR and equality data](#).

paper *Inclusion as a core principle and a chain*.³³ In doing so, it drew on the experiences of its members, a ‘pilot discussion’ with students and staff, and an exchange with the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) on the extent to which, and how, policy and practice relating to diversity and inclusion play (or can play) a role in the quality assessments of degree programmes. The term ‘core’ in the title reflects the view that inclusion is an essential component of educational quality: inclusive education enables students to participate, develop, identify with the curriculum, feel safe in the learning environment, and influence educational practice. ‘Chain’ refers to the fact that sustainable embedding of inclusion is possible only if the various links are connected. Inclusion relates to content, access, participation, recognition, progression and status. This position paper also contributes to fulfilling the second and fourth objectives of the national action plan.

‘It is important to get students involved in the discussions. Don’t talk about students, but with them.’ (student member, 2025)

2.4 Collaboration and networking

The five recommendations mentioned above demonstrate the scope of the advisory committee’s work and the connections it has sought to establish with other stakeholders. In its Guide to drawing up a gender equality plan, the advisory committee responded to European policy and recommended further developing it based on a broad, intersectional understanding of diversity and inclusion. The recommendation on social safety in academia aimed to advance implementation of the KNAW report, with the advisory committee once again explicitly placing intersectionality on the agenda. With the recommendation *Intertwined strands*, the committee reflected on how policy efforts across government ministries and higher education and research institutions have broadened, deepened, and fragmented. The *Guidance on navigating GDPR and equality data in higher education and research* aims, in line with the committee’s mandate and in conjunction with an exploratory study by the Young Academy, to break the deadlock on monitoring that the ministry and the sector are struggling with. The committee’s position paper, *Inclusion as a core principle and a chain*, produced in part with input from discussions with LanDO, encourages looking beyond existing programmes and institutional boundaries through chain responsibility.

Not all the topics discussed by the committee led to a recommendation, guidance document or position paper. In 2024, for example, a working group within the committee initiated a discussion of an internal memorandum in response to motions in the House of Representatives

33 Advisory Committee Diverse and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research (2026). [Inclusion as a core principle and a chain](#).

on a plan to make universities and universities of applied sciences more supportive of students providing informal care.³⁴ The advisory committee decided to contribute to an unsolicited written advisory opinion to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), drawn up by MantelzorgNL and ECIO, which advocates for enshrining the rights of student informal carers in the Higher Education and Scientific Research Act.³⁵ In 2024, a working group of the committee also examined the broader issues of neutrality, professionalism and ‘securitisation’, in response to the way in which universities and universities of applied sciences communicated and formulated policy regarding developments following the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 in Israel and the subsequent escalation of violence in the Palestinian territories. The resulting tensions negatively affected a study and work environment that pursues diversity, inclusion, and equality. In fact, the institutions are still grappling with these issues. Finally, in 2025, the advisory committee, in consultation with the PNN, discussed vulnerabilities in the legal position of PhD candidates and postdocs funded by research grants in the event of special leave and long-term illness. This collective agreement-related issue, closely linked to research funding, remains unresolved.

These discussions and documents were developed based on partner meetings; contacts with LanDO, The Young Academy, LNVH, and many other stakeholders; on-site meetings; and committee members’ participation in events such as Town Hall sessions, national NCDR meetings, and networking events. On three occasions (in 2022, 2023 and 2025), the committee organised partner meetings to discuss progress on the national action plan.³⁶ On a few occasions, the committee convened a pilot group – for example, on inclusive curricula – or invited a guest speaker for the partners. One example is the 2025 discussion with sociologist Frank Dobbin on what does and does not work for diversity, equality, and inclusion (more on this in 3.2).³⁷ Committee members also represented the advisory committee on a few occasions at international forums, such as during the European University Association’s 2023 meeting ‘Towards an inclusive EHEA’, and the Gender Summit 2024 in November 2024 in Ottawa, Canada (see also 2.3 ‘Intertwined strands’). Taken together, the committee reports,

34 These are often first-generation students who experience inequality of opportunity due to social exclusion, a lack of flexibility and financial vulnerability. Educational institutions and fellow students often do not understand or support their responsibilities and challenges, which exacerbates their isolation and increases the risk of study delays and dropout. See also: Pieter Vanreybrouck & Freya Ponteur (2023). [Towards a policy on informal care in higher education in Belgium.](#)

35 For the sake of brevity, we refer here to [this recent post](#) by MantelzorgNL.

36 See, for example: [Review of the partner meeting on the National Action Plan for Diversity & Inclusion in Higher Education and Research.](#)

37 Frank Dobbin is a professor of sociology at Harvard University, known for his research into the effectiveness of diversity policies within companies and universities in the US; he was a NIAS-KNAW fellow in 2024–2025. See: [Throwback event Diversity, Equality and Inclusion.](#)

publications, and members' attendance at other organisations' meetings illustrate the members' understanding of their role, which focuses on setting the agenda, driving progress, and fostering connections.

2.5 Advising and informing the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

'I would like the committee to provide advice to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) on its own initiative and unsolicited, responding to current key developments in higher education and research. This may sometimes be quite ad hoc, making it difficult to be a genuine player in current debates on these issues. Alongside more long-term projects.' (committee member, 2022)

In discussions with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and in response to questions from the (Education Committee of the) House of Representatives, the advisory committee has, in line with its aim and assignment, sought over the past six years to contribute as effectively as possible to informing the debate and policy on diversity, inclusion and equality in higher education and research. As mentioned above, the first topic addressed concerned the 2020–2021 discussion of launching the national action plan and establishing the advisory committee (see 1.2). The Minister was also asked questions in 2023 in response to the NWO initiative 'Advancing Equity in Academia' (see 2.2). The advisory committee highlighted the importance of diversity, inclusion, and equality in preparing the Administrative Agreement that the Minister concluded with VH and UNL in 2022. Committee members participated in discussions at the Ministry on discrimination in work placements and at DUO, in connection with that organisation's investigation into student finance fraud.

Finally, the advisory committee drafted a response to the mid-term evaluation of the national action plan and the proposed improvements, based on that evaluation, to the organisation of policy steering relating to the national action plan. At the time of writing this final report, the final evaluation of the national action plan, which 'expired' in 2025, was not yet available. The advisory committee therefore cannot comment on it. We regret this. As one of the respondents to the survey for this final report remarked: 'A process has been set in motion, but I am concerned about how that process will continue once the programme ends. Will the institutions really take this on themselves?' We will discuss the advisory committee's views on this in more detail in the following section.

3 Conclusions: diversity and inclusion in higher education and research

3.1 Discussions within the advisory committee – a review

‘I’m not entirely clear on the goals we’ve set ourselves. I’d like to discuss that with everyone. I think that, in any case, we should strive to achieve those goals and, if we don’t achieve them, consider what a possible alternative route might be.’ (committee member, 2022)

In 2021, in the advisory committee’s second year, time was reserved on the agenda to take a step back. The committee worked in line with the Minister’s objective and assignment in the establishment decree: to promote diversity and inclusion in higher education and research, and to support the five objectives set out in the national action plan. Because committee members served for varying terms, the advisory committee always had sufficient time to build shared expertise and regularly receive fresh input from new perspectives. The agendas of the meetings held between 2020 and 2026 highlight the key topics that were discussed and the way in which the committee sought to identify ‘possible alternative routes’ – as one of the members put it – when certain objectives did indeed slip out of sight.

Over time, the advisory committee has not only developed further in terms of professional expertise, but has also positioned itself ever more emphatically, both strategically and organisationally, within the broader landscape of diversity, inclusion and social safety in education and research. The discussion shifted from initially policy-based discussions to a stronger focus on practical applicability and implementation; in other words, how policy can be carried out and safeguarded in practice. This focus was reflected in the attention paid to guidance documents, implementation strategies, communication plans, governance structures, monitoring, interactive documents and the website. Particularly on themes such as collecting diversity data to enable monitoring, age discrimination, inclusive curricula, social safety and physical accessibility, the committee sought to bridge the gap between policy development and practical implementation.

During the 2025 partner meeting, ECHO’s director, Mary Tupan-Wenno, stated: ‘What we need is for people to see themselves reflected in it. Society is so diverse, so how do you get everyone on board? We need to think strategically about how we can make that connection and be realistic about what is and isn’t possible.’ The theme of discrimination regularly came up in discussions. Discrimination is, as it were, the ‘opposite’ of positive terms such as recognition, diversity and

inclusion. The conversation on this topic, and the development of policy recommendations to combat discrimination, begins with the courage to name it, as was the case in discussions about discrimination in work placements, discriminatory algorithms in DUO's student finance policy, and person-targeted inappropriate behaviour, ableism, and racism.

'The advisory committee must seek ways to advise and inspire the education sector to gain an understanding of the impact of discrimination in its various forms...' (committee member, 2022)

Another theme concerned freedom of education and research. Members of the advisory committee observed that polarisation within higher professional education and academic institutions, particularly around issues such as mistrust of science, 'woke science', 'activist academics', boycott movements, and pressure on funding, could also undermine diversity policies. In line with this, the committee also discussed the experiences of diversity officers and other professionals in this field within their institutions. The role puts a heavy responsibility on individual staff members who, at times, have to swim against the tide and do not always receive support. The committee observed many people dropping out or changing jobs after a short employment. In relation to this theme, the committee discussed the terminology of diversity, inclusion and equality in relation to the concept (and growing policy area) of social safety. In October 2025, Marieke van den Brink and Ea Høg Utoft presented an overview of this to the advisory committee, based on the initial findings from their research 'Social safety in Dutch higher education – An exploration of its "discursive politics" and (dis?)organization'.³⁸

The advisory committee notes a significant increase in political support for placing diversity policy under the umbrella of social safety (linked to combating inappropriate behaviour). The problem with subordinating diversity policy rather than treating it as a parallel or even overarching concept is that the perception of a socially unsafe environment may be driven, on the one hand, by discriminatory sentiments of resistance to increasing diversity and, on the other, by a fear of even mentioning the concept of diversity at all. On the one hand, the committee took a pragmatic approach: as long as diversity policy and social safety policy reinforce one another in creating space for inclusion, equality and justice, it may be sensible to operate under the umbrella of social safety. However, the committee was, and remains, wary of a scaling back of diversity policy and of raising the barriers to explicitly addressing discrimination and racism in particular.

38 Research project Exploring 'social safety' discourses and practice' (Radboud University Nijmegen). See also: Zakia Essanhaji and Marieke van den Brink (2021). Naar het inclusiever (her)maken van het hoger onderwijs: een review naar ongelijkheidspraktijken (in Dutch); Ea Høg Utoft and Marieke van den Brink (2026). The New(est) Kid on the Block: The Discursive Politics of Social Safety at Dutch Universities.

A final recurring theme concerns categorisation and self-identification. Examples from abroad were discussed, including a Diversity Minimal Item Set (DiMIS) developed as a tool to help surveys ask participants how they would like to describe themselves.³⁹ Based on the principle of intersectionality, participants can tick multiple categories and also suggest one or more categories themselves. The adaptation of DiMIS to the Dutch context and to terms commonly used in the Netherlands (in response to a query on this matter from the Ministry) was reflected, amongst other things, in the advisory committee's *Guidance for navigating GDPR and equality data in higher education and research*.

3.2 Experiences among the partners and within the institutions

Between 2020 and 2026, higher education institutions (both universities and universities of applied sciences) and other partners in the national action plan have, in various ways, been involved in developments in diversity, inclusion, and equality. It is an area of academic research, practical experience, and policy in which professionals in education and research, support roles, governing bodies, and students are active. As the effectiveness of the policy has not yet been measured, we can only rely on perceptions gathered from staff satisfaction surveys, the National Student Survey and other monitoring tools, such as those from LNVH and PNN⁴⁰, as well as on policy initiatives by organisations such as the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

The advisory committee regularly discussed critical academic reflection on the practice of inclusion policy in higher education and research. The committee also discussed research findings from the United States during a meeting with NIAS fellow Frank Dobbin, which attracted considerable interest from institutions, as evidenced by around forty attendees and lively discussion. The discussion centred on Dobbin's long-term research (spanning two decades) across six hundred universities, which showed that, in the US context, policy choices, such as making active bystander training compulsory, had counterproductive effects. In contrast, financial incentives or other 'awards' had a positive impact. The question was whether the same would hold in higher education and research in the Netherlands.⁴¹

Taking stock of the advisory committee's six years of work, we note that, on the key themes

³⁹ Gültzow et al. (2026). [The Dutch version of the Diversity Minimal Item Set \(DiMIS-NL\)](#). OSF.

⁴⁰ LNVH publishes the annual [Monitor on Female Professors](#) (in Dutch). PNN publishes, amongst other things, the Monitor on Terms of Employment and the Monitor on PhD Students on Scholarships. An overview of publications is available on [the PNN website](#).

⁴¹ Frank Dobbin. [Getting to Diversity: What Works and What Doesn't](#). See also: Sara Ahmed (2012). [On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life](#).

of diversity, inclusion and equality, the committee has gathered information in many different ways and has passed this on to the Ministry and its partners regarding developments in academia, politics and the management of the institutions. However, the advisory committee is concerned about the impact of prevailing political scepticism regarding diversity, inclusion and equality. Colleagues working on diversity issues face pressure. There are also concerns about instances of (institutional and/or algorithmic) exclusion of students, including the persistent problem of discrimination in the allocation of internships.⁴² The advisory committee also recognises how difficult it is to develop coherent, effective institutional policies on social safety, diversity, and inclusion, while continuing to recognise the various forms of racism and perceived ethnic and religious intolerance. Current geopolitical developments and internal institutional conflicts make explicit diversity and inclusion policies necessary for a balanced teaching and research environment. On a slightly different note, this also applies to the budget cuts currently being implemented across many areas of higher education and research. Diversity, inclusion, and equality have been placed on the policy agenda of the partners involved in the national action plan. There also appears to be sufficient support for the recommendations issued on that agenda. That is positive. However, in carrying out its advisory role, the advisory committee cannot ignore that this agenda is under pressure, that professionals working in the policy field of diversity and inclusion sometimes reach their limits, and that it is not easy for the partners to continue working together. Regarding a follow-up to the national action plan, which is still under development at the time of finalising this report, the advisory committee sets out several considerations below.

42 See, for example, the research by the Knowledge Platform for Inclusive Living (2025), Discrimination against interns in higher education. (in Dutch)

4 Considerations for next steps

Above, we have already included several quotes from the short survey the advisory committee conducted in the summer of 2026 among its current and former members, partner representatives, and other stakeholders. In four open-ended questions, they were asked about the advisory committee's most significant contributions, their views on the current situation regarding diverse and inclusive higher education and research, what changes are still needed, and recommendations for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.⁴³ The preceding chapters incorporate reflections on the advisory committee's work.

Virtually all participants expressed concern about the continuity of policy and action in diversity, inclusion, and equality, now that the National Action Plan for Greater Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Research 2020–2025 has ended and the advisory committee's term is drawing to a close. Respondents fear stagnation or even regression. These concerns stem from a perceived lack of intrinsic motivation and urgency within institutions, a changing political climate that values diversity and inclusion less, a lack of ownership of this policy area, and the impact of budget cuts on diversity offices. The key message that recurred throughout the responses was: the work is not yet complete and much remains to be done.

'Seeds have been sown and have sprouted here and there, but have not yet come to fruition across the full width and depth of academia. This applies to both diversity and the focus on inclusion.' (survey respondent, 2026)

Respondents felt the most urgent changes concerned the structural and sustainable embedding of diversity, inclusion, and equality within organisations and, linked to this, the need for comprehensive cultural change rather than isolated initiatives. Individual members of the higher education and research community within the system also have a responsibility of their own in this regard. The question is who should lead this effort in higher education and research.

'Executive Boards should play a leading role in creating the right conditions. If the initiative does not come from the Board, it becomes much more difficult to bring about lasting change.' (survey respondent, 2026)

43 The survey was completed by nineteen people: eight (former) members of the advisory committee, eight representatives of a partner organisation and three representatives of other stakeholders.

In accordance with respondents' comments, the advisory committee wishes to convey to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science that structural attention, funding and monitoring are necessary to achieve truly diverse and inclusive higher education and research. The promotion of diversity, inclusion and equality must be viewed as an integral part of quality and treated as such in policy. This also highlights the importance of collaborating with experts with experience. The Ministry is called upon to lead in this regard and to demand the same from institutions' governing bodies.

'We desperately need the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to keep up the pressure, to ensure that partner organisations meet the minimum requirements for equal opportunities and inclusion (...). To move towards a higher education system of truly equal opportunities, the top management of these organisations must be made aware of their responsibilities and the gaps that exist. Especially since these senior leadership teams rarely include people from marginalised groups.' (survey respondent, 2026)

The advisory committee discussed the survey results from members, former members, and partners at its last meeting on 17 September 2026. It endorses the messages set out above and adds the following.

- Promoting diversity, inclusion and equality is an ongoing process that requires constant attention and thus continues to develop and evolve in line with the times and prevailing circumstances. This endeavour rests on prioritising diversity and inclusion in core processes: the curriculum, the organisation of the research landscape, and the learning and working environments of all those involved. The trend appears to be towards embedding diversity policy within existing systems and programmes. The advisory committee recognises the rationale behind this, but also emphasises that promoting diversity, inclusion, and equality requires separate, ongoing, specialised attention within quality cycles that enable institutions to monitor and improve the effectiveness of their diversity policies continuously. Examples include a system-wide agreement on monitoring using diversity data (DiMIS), the introduction of assessments for study programmes with an inclusive curriculum as a quality criterion, gender equality policies based on intersectionality, and combating institutional discrimination and racism that affect students and staff and influence their development.

- The advisory committee is aware of the heterogeneity of the institutions and organisations involved in the national action plan. The follow-up to the national action plan must, of course, account for this heterogeneity. Matters such as requesting diversity data sometimes require administrative courage and agreements. The advisory committee recommends that the follow-up to the national action plan provide institutions with frameworks to give concrete shape to policies on diversity, inclusion, and equality at the institutional level, in dialogue with the other organisations involved.
- Over the past five years, a solid foundation has been laid upon which the partners can build. The advisory committee urges that its own publications continue to play a role in this regard. These publications address gender equality, social safety and intersectionality, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and diversity data, and inclusive curricula. To this end, the information the advisory committee has made available on the website must remain accessible.
- About the institutional embedding of a follow-up to the national action plan, the advisory committee recommends that the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, in line with its responsibility for the system, remains involved in a clearly defined manner, so that it is clear what can be expected from both sides. In addition, senior governing bodies of institutions and organisations must specifically assign responsibility for designing and implementing diversity policy. The advisory committee also highlights the European administrative dimension of this. Whether an advisory committee has a role is a matter for the partners, who will jointly formulate the follow-up to the national action plan.

The advisory committee thanks the partners and all other stakeholders for their cooperation and constructive dialogue over the period 2020–2026.

Appendix

Number of meetings

Between October 2020 and September 2026, the advisory committee met thirty times, five times a year.

Other meetings

The advisory committee organised three partner meetings on 2 November 2022, 20 April 2023, and 27 June 2025.

On 9 January 2025, the committee organised a debate with Frank Dobbin for the partners.
On 9 February 2026, the committee organised a focus group meeting on inclusive curriculum.

Secretary to the advisory committee

- Coco van Beveren, MA (November 2020 - December 2023 & October 2025 - October 2026)
- Mala Paltoe, MA (December 2023 - October 2026)
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Members of the advisory committee

- Prof. Dr Vinod Subramaniam, also Chair, 2020-2026
- Prof. Dr Judi Mesman, 2020-2026
- Dr Susanne Täuber, 2020-2026
- Prof. Dr Marieke van den Brink, 2020-2024
- Dr Fadi Hanna, 2020-2023
- Prof. Dr Alexander Serebrenik, 2020-2023
- Prof. Dr Semiha Denктаş, 2020-2022
- Domenica Ghidei Biidu, LL.M., 2020-2022
- Meredith Overman, MSc, 2020-2022
- Dr Corrie Tijsseling, 2020-2021
- Mohamed Badaou, 2020-2021
- Prof. Dr Susan Legêne, 2021-2026
- Khaled Tamimy, 2021-2023
- Milly Kock, MSc, 2022-2026
- Dr Claartje Vinkenburg, 2022-2026
- Eline Pollaert MA, 2022-2024

- Ercan Büyükçifçi MSc, 2023-2026
- Isis Freitas Vale Germano MA, 2023-2026
- Naznin Musa, 2023-2024
- Assamaual Saidi Rabah, 2023-2024

- Dr Steven Arisz, 2024-2026
- Elijah Alvares BA, 2024-2026
- Akram Achahboun, 2024-2026
- Alihan Uzun, BSc, 2024-2025

- Veronika Vygon, BSc BA, 2025-2026



Advisory Committee
Diverse and Inclusive
Higher Education
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