

Knowledge Exchange Programme

**Creating an
Inclusive
Environment in
Higher Education**

16 March 2023

Panel Discussion Report

Introduction

On 16 March 2023, the Knowledge Exchange panel discussion about creating inclusive environments in higher education took place at the British Council in Amsterdam. Various Diversity Officers from both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were invited on a panel discussion to share their experiences with each other and the attendants, consisting of educators, students and others working in higher education. This report will provide a brief summary of the common challenges discussed, as well as practical ways forward to make higher education more inclusive.

The event included a screening of one of the Five Films for Freedom, “Eating Pawpaw on the Seashore” (2022). Five Films for Freedom is a British Council partnership with BFI Flare in which people are encouraged to watch the films in solidarity with LGBTIQ+ communities, particularly in places where freedom and equal rights are limited in recognition of the fact that Love is a Human Right.

Panel members

- Dr Machiel Kestra, Central Diversity Officer, University of Amsterdam
- Dr Khadija Mohammed, Associate Dean of EDI, University of the West of Scotland
- Jill Stevenson, Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and Director of Student Services, University of Stirling
- Elena Valbusa, Diversity Officer, Hogeschool Utrecht

Moderator

Struan Campbell, Head of Education, British Council

Report writer

Vicky Pinheiro Keulers, ECHO Ambassador and Student at Utrecht University

Common challenges

White universities

To make environments in higher education more inclusive, we first may ask ourselves what kind of environments we are currently in and who we ought to include. The institutions of the panelists and attendants were typically described as ‘white’ universities, with a mostly white staff and/or student population. Some participants vocalized the struggles of being the only Black or person of color in the room at their institutions. The lack of representation is a problem for both racialized students and staff. Some mentioned how this lack of diversity makes it hard to see yourself reflected in the institution. Yet, ‘institutional whiteness’, as one participant termed it, is often not addressed, nor are its implications. In fact, the denial of racism is very strong at the institutions, and typically the discussion tends to dwell on the topic of polarization rather than the problem of institutional racism. Dr Kestra noted the persistence of the dominant idea that the university is a meritocratic institution where discussions of identity do not really matter, which he sees as a myth that perpetuates a false reality.

Engaged students and staff have long been pushing for more inclusive higher education, as was for example the case with the student occupation of the Maagdenhuis at the University of Amsterdam in 2015. This urged the Board of Directors to install a Diversity Commission and subsequently led to the appointment of Central and Faculty Diversity Officers and its first official Diversity Policy document. However, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020 after George Floyd’s murder was recognized as a universal turning point in which a lot of realizations took place and many doors opened to further potential institutional change as it made many HE institutions aware of continuing racism.

Measuring diversity and inclusion

How we measure diversity and inclusion is a complexity in and of itself, both methodologically and conceptually. The statistical data we are allowed to collect about such target groups varies per country. In the UK, one is able to collect data about gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and socioeconomic background. In the Netherlands, there is a structural barrier when it comes to obtaining quantitative data. Dutch participants explained how the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) collects demographics, but will not supply information on ethnicity and racial background to institutions if the population being researched is less than 250, which is typically the case for minorities at universities or for certain ranks or for staff of institutes within universities, for example. The discussion of collecting data highlighted that depending on the type of situation, diversity officers can meet different resistance to research on cultural diversity, and can be compounded by lack of institutional support for the cultural barometer, this means that such research then does not become possible. This was regretful because, as one participant noted, data can truly help to create the sense of urgency to undertake action where it often lacks.

We may also question how we engage D&I conceptually. With Sara Ahmed’s work in mind, Dr Mohammed also noted that diversity as a term can be problematic. The box-thinking and box-ticking that diversity and inclusion typically invokes can neglect the lived experiences and layered identities we are dealing with. Ms Valbusa mentioned that intersectionality is complex and hard to grasp sometimes, which is partially why people tend to resort to thinking in boxes. While it seems much easier to want to target ‘the refugees’, or ‘the LGBTI+ community’, such

categories do not reflect the reality of complex and layered identities. The challenge becomes how to measure diversity and inclusion without resorting to essentialist categories and stereotypes.

Dialogue

One of the biggest challenges that was discussed was the lack of open and productive dialogue about diversity and inclusion. Participants described how debates tend to centre around 'freedom of speech' or 'academic freedom' and have become worryingly polarized. Some also noted that people say they fear to say the wrong thing nowadays. On the other hand, the discussion tends to get stuck at whether racism and other exclusions exist at all at the institutions in question. While engaging with one another is essential for diversity and inclusion, the question becomes: how? How do we organize time to slow down and listen, given our restricted schedules? And what are universities doing in response to any (verbal) abuse and harassment that may take place?

Good practices and ways forward

Centring lived experience and facilitating safe spaces

In order to avoid the essentialist traps of diversity work, several participants suggested to focus on lived experiences. Intersectionality is merely a frame to grasp the complexity of identity; if we wish to move away from box-thinking in practice, we must continuously be in touch with various populations and individuals to invite and allow them to self-define. We may evoke personal narratives by facilitating safe spaces that are informal, regular, and accessible, in which listening is prioritized. Especially taking into account the polarized discussions we are often faced with today, organizing dialogue that promotes mindful listening, learning and responding is vital.

One participant mentioned the use of 'dialogue tables' during one of their projects, in which discussants were given various options as to react (verbally, written, typed, anonymously or not), and in which discussants were given time to think about how and what they will answer. The results were that they were able to get around the 'shouting', fragility and defensiveness often encountered in sensitive discussions, and were instead able to achieve genuine engagement and exchange, as well as a much larger response rate.

Dr Kestra also shared his experience as co-founder of the Keti Koti Table with organizing conversations on our shared colonial and slavery past in ways that promote listening. In this format, moments of silence were put in place to give time to reflect after someone speaks. Additionally, everyone was given an equal amount of speaking time. The response from students and staff that engaged with this format was confronting and confirmed the efficacy: many said they had never actually listened that carefully to someone.

Qualitative and participatory research

Another way around box-thinking as well as unproductive conversations is to focus on the data

and what it can tell us about systemic problems. As one participant noted, we need data to build informed practices. Where collecting quantitative data may not be possible, we may acquire qualitative data. Qualitative data can give us more insights into the problems people run into, even if we do not have statistical significance to go off of. Several participants also mentioned the need for action or participatory research, in which target groups and lived experiences directly inform our research. Ideally, however, we would make use of diverse data methods. As Ms Stevenson put it: we need different things up our sleeves to create the sense of urgency for D&I. Some stakeholders are more influenced by numbers, whereas others are more persuaded by qualitative data. Making use of mixed methods may increase engagement and willingness to undertake action.

Fostering critical awareness and taking accountability

For both critical dialogue and action, we must also always be prepared to take responsibility and accountability. Ms Valbusa emphasized the need to get comfortable with the uncomfortable, in the sense that we need to not only understand the Other, but to understand our own positionality as well, as D&I is always about power and influence. In discussions we must lean into the discomfort, and afterwards we should practice what we preach.

Dr Mohammed mentioned the importance of talking to staff about both their curriculum and their pedagogy. Not just what are you teaching, but how are you teaching? How do you deal with the lived experiences in your classrooms? What knowledge are we prioritizing and whose voices are heard more than others? While educators often panic at the thought of having to change their curriculum, Dr Mohammed said it is important to frame this as a request to critically review their teaching, as that is essentially what it is.

Participants also agreed that it is important to create space for (racial) identity development among students; to facilitate their learning and understanding of complex power systems and their position in them; to give them the space and tools to make sense of their lived experiences.

Platforms for exchange

Finally, participants expressed the desire for more platforms for exchange of good practices, such as this one. By creating and making use of umbrella organizations and partnerships, we would be able to hear much more about different institutions, their experiences and what there is to learn from them. These platforms for exchange can function not just for knowledge exchange, but they could also be a source of emotional support for diversity officers. Several participants shared that they would benefit from a space for vulnerability that would enable opening up about mental health and the personal challenges that come with occupying positions such as diversity officer.