Diversity

A healthy university is a university in which diversity is a matter of course. This may come to pass, but for the time being we will have to rely on a raft of initiatives, polices and services, and above all on passionate people, to bring about a climate of thriving diversity. These are rarely short-term initiatives, but mostly long-running projects which usually cross into other domains, and it is not uncommon for them to affect the university as a whole. This makes diversity an extremely fascinating, but also complex, rapidly evolving and demanding subject. The following summary covers the initiatives of the last four years. The majority cannot however be described as 'complete' but must also be kept in focus in the coming years, whereas new initiatives are also needed.

KU Leuven seeks to establish a culture of diversity, supported by the wide university community. The aim is to allow the talents of all members of that community to develop, while paying particular attention to socially vulnerable groups. For this reason we have developed a policy of inclusion, designed to address the broadest possible cross-section of the university community, and one which also identifies specific thresholds for specific target groups.

1. Diversity Policy Structure

The Diversity Policy Office, headed by the Vice Rector for Diversity, has an important role to play in designing and coordinating the many policy initiatives in this area. Staff are represented in a number of boards and bodies at KU Leuven. Some departments and divisions also have local staff with diversity-related topics among their tasks. There is an enrolment counsellor in Marketing, for example, a care coordinator in Student Services, experts in digital accessibility in ICTS, and so on.

By analogy with the Education Council and the Research Council, a Diversity Council has also been set up to offer advice for the Academic Council. There are permanent working groups (Interculturalism, Digital Accessibility, and Physical Accessibility) and ad hoc working groups dedicated to specific problems. The diversity teams have the job of embedding diversity policy in the faculties in a decentralised manner. Several Reporting Desks have also been set up for diversity-related activities. We have the Gender and Diversity Reporting Desk and the Unacceptable Behaviour Reporting Desk, and so on.

The diversity policy at KU Leuven is, of course, part of the wider world, of the higher education landscape of Flanders and the university landscape of Europe. Regular contact with relevant discussion partners from these environments provides inspiring input. Policy is discussed with our colleagues from the LERU on a regular basis. Exchanges of knowledge and information are always extremely useful. It would seem that KU Leuven, in comparison with other LERU universities, has strong diversity structures. On the other hand, our proportion of women professors is still too low by LERU standards, despite the positive change. The LERU is also a potential source of useful inspiration when it comes to integrating gender themes in research.

2. Policy Priorities

At the beginning of the 2013-2017 policy period, 10 policy priorities were identified. These priorities reflect the choices facing the policy team in the field of diversity. In most cases they are long-term processes. And they will be very important priorities in the future. We cover them schematically.

a) *Collection and analysis of data* on a variety of themes from the student world, and (above all) on gender among staff are of obvious importance. The collection and monitoring of data will be a constant focal point. *Data digging* in an innovative computer environment offers new prospects, in the automation of monitoring, for example. The process of recording diversity characteristics takes place in a more optimised manner, and in collaboration with actors from across the whole Flemish higher education spectrum.
The figures are important, but purely indicative and cannot carry weight where funding is concerned. This is because they are, to a certain extent, affected by the policy choices. For example, a university with a substantial inclusive policy will track a relatively smaller number of students with limiting factors. This could lead to a drop in funding for disadvantaged groups. And this decision would be a mistake, because an inclusive policy too can (or will) have financial repercussions. Also the monitoring of data on staff will certainly have to continue, across all divisions.

b) Resources provided through the Incentive Fund have increased participation by students from disadvantaged groups over a number of years. However, these resources are put towards the general operation of the higher education institutions. KU Leuven took the opportunity to develop an *institutional diversity policy of its own*. In other words, our university opted to follow its own course and will continue to do so in future.

c) The third policy priority is the *inclusive diversity policy*. Everyone must be able to feel at home in the university community. This means that the needs of certain target groups must be given particular attention. This is why we now have a number of exam accommodations for students with physical disabilities. In the meantime it has become clear that the lecturers have something to gain from awareness-raising on diversity-inspired exam accommodations: they have to know what is needed, permitted and possible. Needless to say, the adaptations must be *reasonable*. Each faculty has its own list and does a feasibility assessment. Lecturers are given information on students in need of particular facilities. It is not just examinations which have highlighted the need for certain facilities. People with a learning disability often need special access possibilities in relation to the study itself. Reading and dyslexia software have become much more prevalent, for example. The libraries offer scanning, so that the study material can be digitised.
Where staff diversity is concerned, we have tried to better coordinate staff policy on disadvantaged groups or staff with specific needs. The HR Policy Working Group on Disadvantaged Groups is finalising a policy text, among other things, on how staff members with a disability can communicate their needs through KU Loket. This was also done by means of several questions in the 2015 Satisfaction Survey, which gave us a better insight into the number of staff with a migrant background or disability. With this information we can implement a more proactive policy for members of staff with a disability or migrant background.
Religious diversity also leads to certain rules (or derogations from them) in the context of religious holidays.

d) The ***accessibility of specific buildings*** plays a major role in practice in literally 'letting people in' to events, workshops and so on. The information on accessibility is collected and presented in the *KU Leuven Access Guide*. It tells people with a disability in advance exactly what kinds of problems to expect when attempting to access buildings, above all in the city centre. This makes it easier to ask more questions and request appropriate support. This inclusive approach gives people with a disability greater freedom and more options. The *Access Guide* is part of an *Accessibility Master Plan*. It is the next step towards an integrated approach to the access issue.

e) We would describe the fifth policy priority as the ***democratisation of higher education***. Financial, social and cultural thresholds still make access to higher education more difficult than it needs to be. Although it has progressed in leaps and bounds in the last few decades, the democratisation of higher education is not yet, by any means, an acquired right. Clear plans with operational objectives, reliable figures, participation by all target groups: these are just a few of the points of attention. Democratisation is partly a matter of finance. Hence the maximum invoice project, as a means of saving expenditure by making a detailed list of the costs associated with each course. There may also be factors of a cultural nature which get in the way of democratisation. The so-called *first-in-family students*, the first students in their family to attend university, can be better integrated into academic life through induction days and special welcome meetings. The effect of general education measures on disadvantaged groups must be closely monitored if we are to continue to guarantee democratic access to our university. As is the case, for example, with the 30% rule.

f) Hospitality is immensely important in an environment of ***international students and researchers***. International students, and equally so, first-in-family students, have much to gain from a tangible sense of hospitality. The Interculturalism Contact Point, the successful Welcome Days in the faculties, a Religion or Ideology Contact Point and the activities of the enrolment counsellor contribute to the growth of a hospitable and accessible environment. In the Marketing department we have an enrolment counsellor whose job it is to increase the intake of students with an immigrant background. Targeted visits to secondary schools have been planned with this specific goal in mind. These visits often involve the *Ambassadors*, KU Leuven students, usually with atypical backgrounds. The removal of financial and other thresholds and the contribution to successful interculturalism is still a major point of attention.

g) The ***Gender Action Plan***, set up in 2014, aims for a balanced male-female composition of the university's boards and committees and seeks to ensure that, on average, 50% of the newly recruited staff are women. We also promote gender-related competencies and knowledge. This is intended to lead to a more gender-conscious university. The under-representation of women in academic careers is, of course, not confined to Leuven. Our university is tackling the low participation of women with a series of measures, the results of which were presented in late 2016, in a report entitled *Wie zal haar vinden?* (Who Will Find Her?). An important milestone was reached in the last round of nominations for the 2015-2016 academic year, when the target of at least 50% female nominations in the Senior Academic Staff (ZAP) was achieved. Gender bias requires our continued attention and we are tackling it by placing gender vanguards in the assessment committees. Search committees must work energetically in tracing suitable female candidates. The assessment procedures are also gradually becoming more qualitative in their approach, so that non-academic experience and career breaks are assessed in the right way. We will also use mentoring to work on the assertiveness of female academics.

h) Diversity also plays an important role in education. Here, **collaboration with Educational Policy** is indispensable if the concepts of diversity are to flourish in education. This can be done in two ways. We have *education on diversity*, which can be covered in various course units, programmes, work placements and university-wide initiatives. *Diversity-conscious education* aims to establish a basic contemporary attitude, in which we acknowledge that everyone has subconscious prejudices. The Programme Committees (POCs) have been given the important role of collaborating with the diversity teams to apply these ideas in their faculties. There is still certainly plenty of scope for competency development among the lecturers. They play a leading role in the university's handling of diversity, and the opportunities and difficulties particular to it.

i) The **integration** in 2013-2014 brought with it a number of structural changes. The structure of diversity services was compared against the new reality: in addition to a diversity team and faculty point of contact (across the campuses) we have a diversity team and faculty point of contact on each campus.

j) The last policy priority is by no means the least important. Diversity-related **research**, funded through various channels, gives the policy a firm foundation. Not only does a Senior Academic Staff member 'Gender Studies' provide gender research, but also plays a role in training the gender vanguards. Many research initiatives have been taken in relation to interculturalism and disability. Considerable value can be added across all disciplines by introducing the diversity factor in the research. For this reason we lend our particular attention and support to research on diversity and diversity policy. We must also ensure a balanced gender composition in the research groups. A gender-balanced policy is also recommended when it comes to research funding.

3. Activities and Actions

The policy priorities outlined above can be felt in various ways in the everyday life of the university - sometimes in isolation, sometimes jointly, sometimes in interaction with other spheres. Diversity policy never exists in its own bubble, that much is certain. Below we list several initiatives: some complete, some of a permanent nature. Some relate directly to diversity. At first sight others may not appear to, but appearances are deceptive: diversity policy relates to a great many aspects of university life.

The pressures of working and living in close proximity are healthily offset by the provision of **quiet spaces**. The staff have access to the House of Silence (Stiltehuis) and the forest of Egenhoven. Every campus will have a quiet space for students and staff. These already exist in the Agora and on the Arenberg Campus.

Quietness is a real link, a **link to sustainability**: quietness makes many things possible. KU Leuven aims to be a sustainable university, and therefore a diversity-conscious university. Sustainability and diversity policy are separate domains, but go hand-in-hand. In other words, a healthy approach to work and life will bring diversity to our attention on a regular basis. This link incidentally also inspires greater student involvement in the diversity policy. As the sustainability policy and Green Office have taught us, student involvement increases when students are given the opportunity to help define the policy, through a *diversity desk*, for example.

An **inter-philosophical dialogue** goes a long way in helping to create healthy diversity. At our university, religious communities have access to an area for group religious practices and prayer services.

The Student Mosque, which has existed for decades now, underlines our religious openness. The religious diversity we find in Leuven does, of course, differ from that in cities such as Brussels and Antwerp. Policy adaptations for each campus take this into account.

It it clear that many aspects of the diversity issue have to be properly **communicated**. This is done through various channels - digitally, workshops, round table discussions, etc.

A good **understanding of the Dutch language** is important in everyday life, and also of course for productive study. For this reason the Dutch Language Proficiency working group, which falls under the Education Council and Diversity Council, is preparing recommendations on a coherent, thorough and integrated language policy at KU Leuven. Help with language proficiency is a part of the broader hospitality by which diversity policy at KU Leuven can be recognised.

KU Leuven joins other partners to take part in diversity initiatives relating to **social outreach**. Here, we would mention the 'Create Education Together' project (Samen Onderwijs Maken, SOM), which aims to improve the overall dynamic of education at KU Leuven. Laboratories can be set up to investigate all kinds of learning and educational forms. The *Buddy* project is designed to provide help with studies after school. KU Leuven participates in this project by promoting the recruitment of buddy volunteers from among its university students. The Teacher Training Course also has a particular interest in this project. A special buddy structure has been set up to help a number of child refugees in the Carthusian Monastery.