

# **Advisory Report: Anti-Racism Policy**

## **Radboud University**



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## Introduction

This year the Radboud University (RU) had its second Anti-Racism Awareness Week (ARAW). The week was created and organized for the first time in 2019, then called ‘Racism Awareness Week’, by honors students under the guidance of professor Anya Topolski. Students who helped create the first campaign got together this year with other interested students to continue raising awareness for issues of (anti-)racism on and off campus. However, awareness about (anti-)racism is not enough: we need anti-racism action. Therefore, we decided that after initiating and helping organize this year’s ARAW, we wanted to encourage the university to more actively challenge racism. This report is a result of that.

The request last year, after the Black Lives Matter protests, for a statement from the RU against racism, like other Dutch universities had done, indicates that students expect the university to actively challenge racism and discrimination. The results from a recent survey conducted at the RU also support this: 90.5% of students agree that the university has a responsibility to tackle issues of racism (Bom, Elsinga, Hoeps, Van Eijden, & Van Lier, 2021).<sup>1</sup> The racism, other forms of discrimination and exclusion that Radboud students encounter on campus prevent them from benefitting fully from the education and environment that the RU provides. The university has a responsibility to ensure that all students and staff, especially those from marginalized groups, are treated equally, feel safe and can participate and thrive in the same way as other students.

This year the ARAW was coordinated by the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion office at the RU and the DEI coordinator, Rona Jualla van Oudenhoven, who was appointed in September 2020. This appointment was partly a result of students asking the university to speak out against racism and tackle issues of racism (Radboud University [RU], 2020). This year the DEI office has taken its first steps by engaging with students and staff, supporting several initiatives, helping organize several events and increasing their visibility on campus and online. While we are aware that much thought and discussion is going on to create new policies and practices, with this report we want to highlight the potential to bring about more tangible, structural changes at the university, especially related to racism.

The university is clearly committed to bringing about change in terms of diversity and inclusion. The RU has done well in combating gender inequality, in hiring in the past years. The Christine Mohrmann program has been developed by the university to achieve gender equality at all levels and positions (Radboudnet, n.d.). As a result the number of full female professors (*hoogleraren*) has increased from 22% to 30% in the last four years (Radboud Recharge, 2017; RU, 2021). The

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, we will refer to key results from a survey that was recently conducted by a group of students as part of the RU course ‘Gender and Diversity: Policies and Practices.’ We acknowledge that this survey may not be fully representable for the entire student population at RU, as it includes a limited number of participants and was spread primarily through personal networks, ARA student group (Instagram) and by thirds on social media. Nevertheless, it gives a first indication of students’ perceptions of (anti-)racism at the university, which we deem valuable. 110 students were included in analyses (79.1% white students: n=87, 20.9% POC: n = 23). More elaborate analyzed data can be provided on request.

RU plans to expand the Christine Mohrmann program to include other aspects of diversity but has no plan in place yet to implement this.

In the strategy ‘A Significant Impact’ on the theme ‘Imprinting Change’ the RU does declare the following: “Radboud University advocates for change. We embrace more diversity, equality and inclusion” (RU, n.d. a). However, diversity of students (and staff) alone does not make the university more inclusive when the main causes of the lack of diversity are not addressed. Our university should not only reflect the society we live in but also aim to ensure that social inequalities that exist in society do not go unchallenged at the university. Therefore, the RU needs to actively implement changes, programs and policies that increase racial diversity and eliminate racism at the university.

Evidently, the goal is to ensure that all students, with diverse social identities, are treated equally. While we acknowledge that DEI strategies need to target all forms of discrimination, whether based on ethnicity, gender, disabilities or other grounds, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. A targeted approach is necessary to eliminate specific forms of discrimination, such as racism. The success of the university’s targeted approach against gender inequality also demonstrates this. We would also like to point out that a sufficient anti-racism policy will apply an intersectional approach to reduce racial inequality at the university, which means that even though the focus will be on racism and obstacles students of color face, the different social identities of students, including gender identity, sexual orientation, disabilities/abilities, ethnicity, religion, will be considered. It is important to understand that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students do not face discrimination based solely on their racialized identities. Multiple forms of oppression that, for example, Black female, Black queer and Black Muslim students experience, disadvantage them in specific ways that are different from their white counterparts (Harris and Leonardo, 2018).<sup>2</sup> However, an anti-racism policy will open up new ways of addressing different forms of discrimination. Furthermore, making the university a more welcoming and inclusive place could increase the social equality of all students.

This report is divided into chapters that focus on topics or areas that we believe to be essential for an adequate anti-racism policy: diversity and inclusion, decolonizing the curriculum, safe spaces and research. The conclusion will provide an overview of the most prominent recommendations and will contain some final thoughts on the importance of an anti-racism policy. We are aware that these topics have been often discussed and that this has resulted in some false assumptions about implementing anti-racism policies at universities. Therefore we start each chapter with such an assumption and dismantle it in the chapter. Each chapter concludes with our recommendations on what issues the university should tackle and sometimes this includes some ideas on implementation. However, we believe many approaches can be taken and the university, and DEI office specifically, should find the options that work best for the RU. This report is not all encompassing, instead we just want to point out some areas and issues we believe the university should prioritize in creating and enforcing an anti-racism policy.

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<sup>2</sup> In this report, the ‘B’ in Black will be capitalized when it refers to people or cultures of African origin to indicate shared historical and/or cultural experiences. See the following source for more information: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>.

## **Chapter 1: Diversity and Inclusion**

Common assumption: *“We should not prioritize one group over the other: all groups should be treated equally.”*

Why should we focus on anti-racism policies rather than diversity and inclusion in the broadest sense? In this chapter, we will explain the differences between diversity and inclusion, the importance of the emphasis on anti-racism practices as part of diversity and inclusion management, the relevance thereof at the RU, and several approaches to enhance diversity and inclusion in order to combat racism at the university.

### **Terminology: ‘Diversity’ and ‘inclusion’**

First, it is important to explain two core terms that are often used interchangeably (Shore et al., 2018): ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’. When speaking about diversity at the university, we would like to refer to the definition as stated in the ‘Diversity, Equity and Inclusion’ (Mapping the DEI plan) working document (Van Oudenhoven, 2021): “Diversity is the gamut of characteristics that make up our identity and includes aspects such as nationality, religion, language, sex and gender identity, ability, ancestry, ethnicity, and a host of other identifiers.” Inherent to this definition is the recognition of different diversity categories that are part of each individual’s identity. In diversity management practices, the primary focus lies on increasing representation of members of marginalized groups at the workplace (Shore et al., 2018). In contrast, inclusion refers to the active process of involving members, ensuring that 1) their unique contribution are valued and 2) they are encouraged to fully participate (Barak, 2015; Shore et al., 2011). These two critical elements of inclusion, uniqueness and belongingness are essential in diversity management (Shore et al., 2011).

We argue that both diversity and inclusion practices should be implemented and improved to combat racism at RU. In the current DEI plan and progress brief (Van Oudenhoven, 2020, 2021), the RU maintains a strong focus on promoting diversity and combatting discrimination in all its forms. While it is important to continuously recognize all social categories, and their intersections, when talking about diversity, this does not effectively address the structural disadvantage as currently experienced by BIPOC. Representation of BIPOC at the university is lacking, in which diversity policies such as positive action and positive discrimination approaches can facilitate improvement. In addition, students should feel safe and included at their university and action should be taken in order to do so.

### **Diversity practices: Representation**

One step the RU can take in order to advance social justice at the university is to fully embrace the diversity in society. Therefore, we have examined whether the university is ‘diverse’ enough. In 2015/16 (latest data available), only 8% of all students registered at the RU had a ‘non-

Western' background (Wekker et al., 2016). On the national average, the share is significantly higher and constitutes 12% of university students in the Netherlands. Although Nijmegen may attract primarily 'provincial' students, as the RU has argued recently, Nijmegen is an ethnically 'mixed' city with almost 15% of all inhabitants being of non-Western origin, and in Arnhem over 20% of inhabitants has a non-Western migrant background (Gemeente Nijmegen, 2020; Gemeente Arnhem, 2021). The provincial character of the university therefore does not completely account for the lack of diversity.

Consequently, this lack of diversity might make students with non-Western backgrounds perceive the RU as less open to ethnic and racial diversity. Taking this concern one step further, lacking diversity often results in people with minority backgrounds feeling unrepresented and lacking role models (Wekker et al., 2016). Although it is difficult to find numbers on representation of BIPOC in high positions at the RU, it is fairly clear that at the RU there are indeed few people of color in high positions, for example, as (full) professors or on the executive board.

While we agree that all students should be treated equally, as stated in the assumption at the beginning of this chapter, these findings show that students of color are underrepresented at the RU and therefore structurally disadvantaged. The notion that "everyone is treated the same" is an ideal rather than a fact. A primary reason for this is that talent, leadership and excellence is not neutral, but based on Western and middle-class socioeconomic characteristics. Thus, selection processes are also subject to that as people tend to favor those who are similar to themselves which highly impacts the selections and evaluation procedures in institutions (Wekker et al., 2016). Consequently, in order to make the RU a more diverse and inclusive university for BIPOC students, we need more diversity on all levels of the University to actually treat all groups equally, particularly minority groups that suffer exclusion and discrimination.

### **Inclusion practices: Experiences of exclusion and racism**

According to the student survey, 56.5% of students of color indicate experiencing racism at the RU (Bom et al., 2021). This indicates the immediate need for targeted policies that address issues of racism for BIPOC. A sense of inclusion, improving a sense of uniqueness and belongingness, can only be accomplished through means of implementation of tailored anti-racism practices at the university.

Racism-related stress models posit that direct and indirect exposures to racism can be stressful to racial minorities and lead to negative outcomes (Harrell, 2000). As several studies reveal, perceived racism is linked to lower self-esteem, sense of coherence, physical self-perception, life satisfaction, depression and anxiety and interpersonal problems (Yoo & Castro, 2011). In addition, exposures to racism are related to higher rates of school dropout and negatively associated with school engagement, academic ability, self-concepts and academic task values, curiosity, persistence and grades (Yoo & Castro, 2011).

This is also demonstrated by the results from the UvA report, which found that Dutch students with non-Western backgrounds have higher dropout rates and slower study progress than their

ethnic Dutch peers. On average, the share of students with non-Western backgrounds that obtain their bachelor's degree in four years is 7% less than among students with an ethnic Dutch background; looking at the RU the gap is above the Dutch average with 10% (1cHO (2015/2016) (Wekker et al., 2016). Besides that, BIPOC carry an extra burden of mental and emotional stress, compared to white students, as they are often challenged because of the racism, discrimination and exclusion they are confronted with (Lewis, 2000). In the institutional context this means, if the university fails to advise, counsel and channel students' resources, they contribute to internal psychic struggles and trauma that amounts to BIPOC paying an intangible extra cost for higher education.

In university settings, young people may be more willing to unlearn old patterns of social interaction and to discover new intellectual and social evidence about their own and others' ethnicity than at any prior or subsequent time in their lives (Lewis, 2000). Yet too often, by design or omission, universities miss the opportunity to teach positive forms of interracial/ ethnic interaction and fail to help lay the groundwork for real changes in group relations and the re-distribution of power on campus and in the society. The RU has a responsibility to provide the foundations for safe spaces that allow students to learn and experience positive forms of interracial interaction and ease the negative psychological and physical effects BIPOC suffer from due to exclusion.

### **Diversity and inclusion strategies**

*Diversity.* There are different diversity strategies that are generally applicable to underrepresented groups, roughly divided into positive or affirmative action and positive discrimination. In a large study on effectiveness of diversity management, Kalev et al. (2006) showed that affirmative action plans, diversity committees and diverse staff are most effective in increasing the number of white female, Black female and Black male employees. We recommend formulating an affirmative action plan for BIPOC at the RU to encourage and support BIPOC within the university. This may include mentoring programs and training specifically designed for BIPOC, as well as encouragement of students and staff to apply for job positions within the university (Gilhooley, 2008) and promotion procedures.

Additionally, we highly advise the formation of DEI committees for each faculty with sufficient representation of BIPOC, starting with a general, faculty-wide committee which includes professors and students that have already been engaged in discussions about (anti-)racism and discrimination at the university. In order to increase the number of BIPOC employees, positive discrimination measures such as quotas are effective to make transformative, structural change (Noon, 2010). At the Faculty of Science, an extensive gender and diversity policy has been drawn up to work towards gender equality. Recommendations include targets for the percentage of female researchers, adoption of rules towards active recruitment of women scientists and policies for promotion (RU, n.d. b). We call for the implementation of similar measures for BIPOC. Before implementing these measures, we recommend starting with an evaluation to find out how many BIPOC are in high positions, as representation is currently greatly lacking.

*Inclusion.* Implementation of diversity practices solely does not suffice, as it does not address the underlying issues of exclusion on its own. Whereas diversity practices are primarily focused on increasing the numbers of BIPOC in the organization as a whole as well as in higher positions within the RU, inclusion practices focus on the workplace ‘culture,’ shaping the experiences of employees (Shore et al., 2018). In order to reach a safe and healthy working (or studying) culture, attention needs to be paid to policies and practices within the RU that require changes in order to make BIPOC feel included.

Firstly, we recommend implementing general inclusion strategies that are designed to include all students. These may involve policies to target discrimination, such as anti-discrimination guidelines along with a discrimination reporting website. Secondly, policies and practices should be implemented to make the RU an inclusive space for BIPOC specifically. Two essential inclusive practices for BIPOC involve decolonizing the curriculum as well as creating safe spaces. As we believe these practices to be of primary importance, we will discuss them elaborately in the next two chapters. A key inclusive practice to reach these goals would be the implementation of education, specifically anti-racism training for educators (Pendry, Driscoll & Field, 2007). This should be designed specifically to target biases as well as provide means to decolonize education and create safe spaces at RU. Lastly, in the student survey, 92% of all students indicated to be willing to change if needed and 85% would be willing to engage in conversations about racism (Bom et al., 2021). This shows a great willingness of students to aid in making the RU an inclusive space. In order to engage students, guidelines on positive forms of interracial interaction or interaction between students with different cultural backgrounds can be made to improve the connections between students on campus.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have discussed the consequences of a lack of representation of BIPOC as well as the harmful effects of exclusion and racism. These highlight the urgency of implementation of anti-racism policies and practices at the RU. A combination of diversity and inclusion measures should be implemented to account for structural disadvantage suffered by BIPOC. In the next two chapters, we will describe two essential inclusive policy changes that require special attention: decolonizing the educational curricula and creating safe spaces for BIPOC.

## **Main recommendations**

### *Diversity*

- Make the enhancement of diversity a priority of the university, following the latest DEI plan with long-term and short-term goals, protecting particularly people who are systematically underrepresented.
- Attract, retain, support and promote more BIPOC to increase their presence in all positions, particularly in representative bodies and higher academic positions.



- Formulate and implement an affirmative action plan for BIPOC, which can include mentoring programs and training for BIPOC.
- Implement positive discrimination measures, such as quotas, to increase the number of BIPOC employees.
- Form a DEI committee for each faculty with sufficient representation of BIPOC.

### *Inclusion*

- Decolonize curricula and make the RU a safe space for BIPOC: described elaborately in chapter 2 and 3.
- Implement training for educators at the RU to target racism and biases and learn how to achieve the previously described goals as a teacher.
- Provide guidelines on positive forms of interracial interaction or interaction between students with different cultural backgrounds to improve the connections between students on campus.

### **Recommended literature**

Noon, M., 2010. The shackled runner: time to rethink positive discrimination?

*Work, Employment & Society*, 24(4), 728-739. DOI: 10.1177/095001701038064

Shore L. M., Cleveland, J.M., & Sanchez, D. (2018). Inclusive workplaces: A review and model.

*Human Resource Management Review*, 28(2), 176–189

## Chapter 2: Decolonizing the Curriculum

Common assumption: *“We are a European university and European perspectives have the most influence in most disciplines, thus it is normal to have a curriculum that is predominantly based on those perspectives.”*

Why is it important to decolonize the curriculum? In this chapter, we will address the concern that university curricula are dominated by white, male and Eurocentric theorists and authors. It aims to debunk the assumption that the RU, as a European university, has to predominantly base its reading lists on white perspectives as they are considered more influential.

### Importance of decolonizing

There is growing impetus from different universities around the world to decolonize the curriculum and this attempt has been especially evident in former colonies in the Global South in recent years (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2019). More specifically, in South Africa, a wave of student protest action called for a wider effort to decolonize education which led to a movement known as Rhodes Must Fall in the year 2015 (Meda, 2019). At the RU, students have also expressed support for decolonizing curricula. According to the student survey, 82.6% of students of color and 47.1% of white students (strongly) agree that education should be decolonized (Bom et al., 2021).

To explain why decolonizing the curriculum is necessary, it must first be clear what it precisely means. By ‘curriculum’ we mean what gets taught at the university: the collection of lectures, readings, concepts, materials, etc. We speak of what gets taught instead of what is being taught, to stress the power dynamics that inform the particular knowledge that is being shared, and how there are implicit and presumed justifications for teaching certain knowledges while excluding others (Lindsay, 450). The hegemonic knowledge at the university that fills the curricula therefore only covers one particular, yet historically and socially powerful, view on the world.

To decolonize the curriculum means to not only teach what has been, and continues to be, presented as the hegemonic knowledge of the world but also the knowledge of those who have been oppressed, erased and/or silenced. And this is needed, because the present-day curriculum merely serves the interest of the powerful who have internalized their dominant position to the point that it has become normalized without it being questioned or considered just one among many ways of knowing, at the expense of the marginalized (Lindsay, 2020).

Furthermore, reading lists play a major role in the formation of the definition of knowledge and curricula. If not meticulously considered, they may reinforce white/western dominance and privilege in education (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2019). The knowledge taught at universities should not be in service of perpetuating the status quo, where racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, etc. prevail but should challenge and question what we do and do not know, how that came to be, and how we are able to change that. Decolonizing the curriculum is

therefore concerned with including pre-, de-, and post-colonial expertise, alongside the predominantly white, male and European perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

This is also important because colonial curricula can lead to disconnected feelings with BIPOC students' realities as they feel underrepresented (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2019). Their histories are excluded from the mainstream academic discourse, and thus decolonizing the curriculum will facilitate as a tool to represent students' perspectives, histories and interests (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2019). The university and its professors have to reflect critically on the predominantly Eurocentric and Western perspectives they include in their curricula, while not providing their students with the opportunity to engage with different knowledge systems (Meda, 2019).

### **Rethinking curricula**

Decolonizing the curriculum essentially comes down to rethinking the way in which curricula are created and structured. We want to highlight three important aspects to decolonizing the curriculum. First, its integration throughout the whole curricula, which is necessary because providing a decolonial perspective should not merely be an afterthought. Having one lecture at the end of a course where, for example, feminist perspectives are presented, begs the question of why they are not considered as important as what got taught before. Why are the male/non-feminist perspectives taken as the norm, while the feminists are pushed to the sidelines? Imagine being in a one-hour meeting with nine men and one Black woman and not allowing her to speak until the 59<sup>th</sup> minute, would that be considered fair? We certainly think not.

The second aspect is creating more awareness about inequality and discrimination. Aside from the content of the curricula, this is important because currently the power structures that inform most of the curricula at the RU do not allow for more awareness about inequality and discrimination. This ignorance contributes to the perpetuation of this traumatizing and unfair treatment (Milazzo, 2017). For this reason, encouraging a more diverse and inclusive environment (as mentioned in the previous chapter) is essential. Different perspectives can help raise more awareness for this.

Finally, addressing and questioning the implicit justifications for teaching particular knowledge while excluding others is essential because what gets taught is never a given, so we should always be reflecting on what it means to study any discipline. For example, the question of what is philosophy often merely refers to its method or canon, but the question of why studies on gender, race, disabilities, etc. are often excluded and pushed towards other departments remains unaddressed. And if, for instance, the art history department does not have the space to address non-European art history then the question of why it is so Eurocentric should be acknowledged.

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<sup>3</sup> We speak of both de- and post-colonialism to designate both the reflective stage on colonialism (post-) as well as the critical stage on colonialism (de-). It is important to note, however, that the line between these stages is blurry, so something can be both a reflection and a critique on colonial times.

## **Rebuilding curricula**

Decolonizing education is defined as the rebuilding of the education system for it to support and represent all students, staff and professors (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2019). Decolonizing does not equal regressing to less complicated times. It simply means that academics should challenge the dominant ways of thinking to engage with other knowledge systems and technological advancements (Meda, 2019). This process entails the confrontation of colonizing practices that are instilled within the educational context and which have influenced education in the past and are still present today.

Faculties and study programs can start by looking at their curricula and reflecting on the scholars, authors, theories, and methods that are on there and the ones that could be on there. Decolonizing the curriculum goes beyond that and should also include classes during which several issues are discussed, such as the background of scholars on the curriculum and the sociohistorical context of texts and theories (Lindsay, 2020). In these class discussions, students should be allowed to critically and constructively participate and give feedback, without expressing (implicitly) racist and/or white supremacist perspectives. These classes or class discussion should be added to syllabi.

This integrative approach that promotes the plurality of knowledge should be applied in hard sciences and not just in humanities and social sciences. The challenge that comes with decolonizing the curriculum should concern every discipline, and the academics involved should address the misrepresentation and discrimination of BIPOC within their field. Medical faculties, for example, would significantly benefit from decolonization. Starting with the lack of images of black and brown skin in medical literature. The inability to identify a rash on black and brown skin made it challenging for dermatologists to recognize it as a Covid-19 symptom on their Black patients (McFarling, 2020). It is obvious that the medical field should address racial bias by adequately representing patients of color, as the aforementioned example is a common occurrence. Skin cancer, inflammation, immunologic diseases (e.g. lupus) and other diseases that manifest themselves on the skin are often misdiagnosed for the same reasons (McFarling, 2020).

Although the vast majority of curricula at the RU still have to be decolonized, there are some good examples. In the research master Philosophy, there is an 'Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy' course, which acknowledges that the curriculum mostly represents white perspectives. The readings in these courses are from the Black canon or relatively new works that discuss race and racism under the prism of intersectionality. In addition, the American Studies bachelor has included and integrated literature from Black, Indigenous as well as white female authors in the curriculum which exposes students to multiple perspectives and experiences.

## **Conclusion**

The belief that it is logical or not out of the ordinary for the curriculum to be largely based on European perspectives does not hold up as it robs students of the opportunity to learn different perspectives, theories, and ideas. Furthermore, the globalized world and diverse Dutch society

demand students to be aware of inequalities in their work field and beyond. Decolonizing the curriculum should evidently be a priority for the RU. In the next chapter, we will focus on important policy changes regarding the creation of safe spaces for BIPOC.

### **Main recommendations**

- Integrate perspectives, knowledge, theories and ideas from the Global South and BIPOC scholars throughout curricula and ensure that reading lists are not exclusively filled with white, male, European authors.
- Promote decolonizing curricula at the Faculty of Law, Faculty of Science and the Medical Faculty to ensure all students receive quality education and are adequately prepared for the work field.
- Interrogate the canon – its historical contexts, dominant thinkers and theories, assumptions and ideas.
- Introduce courses or classes that critically reflect on the syllabi of the specific course and the study program in general, stimulating students to critically acquire new knowledge as well as allowing them to give constructive feedback.

### **Recommended literature**

Jansen, J. (Ed.). (2019). *Decolonisation in universities: The politics of knowledge*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. doi:10.18772/22019083351

Krouwel, N. (2021, March 22). De RU moet verder kijken dan witte, ‘westerse’ wetenschappers. *ANS*. <https://ans-online.nl/opinie/de-ru-moet-verder-kijken-dan-witte-westerse-wetenschappers/>

Muldoon, J. (2019). Academics: it's time to get behind decolonising the curriculum. *The Guardian*, Universities. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/20/academics-its-time-to-get-behind-decolonising-the-curriculum>

## Chapter 3: Safe Spaces

Common assumption: *“Safe spaces are divisive and a threat to free speech.”*

Why is the concept of safe spaces generally perceived as divisive and threatening? ‘Safe spaces,’ despite their long history, have recently become a controversial concept, especially in educational context. In this chapter we’ll discuss the vital importance of safety and safe spaces at the RU, and what we can do to turn our campus into a safe space.

### Terminology: ‘Safe spaces’

The term ‘safe space’ is regularly used as a shorthand for ‘modern day segregation’ and frequently implied to be part of an attack on free speech and diversity of thought. The concept of a safe space, however, is actually rather broad and encompasses a variety of different meanings. In the broadest term, a safe space is “a place or environment in which a person or marginalized group can feel confident that they will not be subjected to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other type of emotional or physical harm” (Lexico). An entire community institution, like a university or college, can serve as a safe space. Yet the term ‘safe space’ can also be interpreted as a literal designated space, like a room, in which marginalized groups have created an environment for themselves, where there is complete inclusivity and comfort for the individuals.

### Importance of safe spaces

Critics tend to argue that it is not necessary for marginalized groups to create a ‘subaltern counterpublic’ on college campuses because universities and colleges have pretty much moved passed (racial) inequality.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the higher education enrolment rate of students of color has been on an upswing for much of the past century supposedly confirms this narrative. Unfortunately, this is not entirely true and the RU serves as a good example of that. It is true that the college enrolment rate of BIPOC students at the RU has slightly increased over the past couple of years. Though the university might have made itself a bit more attractive to students of color, it has not succeeded in making itself more inclusive. Many BIPOC students still experience racial bias and microaggressions from professors and peers on a daily basis and only 8.7% of students of color find the RU to be a safe space (Bom et al., 2021).

Since the RU is a predominantly white institution (PWI), students of color also have to deal with challenges that come with attending a less compositionally diverse university. For example, many students of color often feel a sense of social alienation and ethnic isolation due to the lack of diversity (Ball State University, n.d.). Furthermore, many students of color at PWIs experience ‘hypervisibility,’ meaning they are overly visible to the white majority. Hypervisibility ensures

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘subaltern counterpublic’ refers to parallel discursive arena where members of marginalized social groups invent and spread a way of thinking that opposes the official or institutionalized discourse, which in turn enables them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990).

that students of color are unvoluntary thrown into the spotlight, acclaimed as diversity tokens and treated as the main representatives for their community (The Butler Collegian, 2021). As a result, BIPOC students experience a lot of pressure to (over)succeed and constantly present themselves in the very best way.

All the above mentioned factors prevent students of color from feeling comfortable, accepted and valued on campus. It is therefore necessary for PWIs, such as the RU, to move beyond just numerical diversity and actually cultivate a more inclusive and safe environment for students of color. And this can be done by means of safe spaces.

### **Creating a safe university environment**

A way in which the university can create a more inclusive and safer environment is by establishing a physical safe space, like a room, for students of color. This safe space will enable students of color to have a reprieve from racism and discrimination, share stories about the discrimination they have faced and find understanding and support. Moreover, this designated space will provide inclusivity that is otherwise not felt by BIPOC students on campus. The university and the DEI office specifically can organize this, so it is not dependent on individual students or student organizations and students of color will always have a safe space to come together.

An important thing to note is that a physical safe space does not enforce uniformity and exclusion. It is not an act of oppression, but rather a response to it (Blackwell, 2018). It is an opportunity for students of color to be with people who share a similar cultural background and/or support them in their cultural identity. Safe spaces are also not meant to advantage or favor certain (marginalized) groups over others. Instead, they serve as an attempt to equalize the existing inequality in higher education. It is also important to bear in mind that individuals of dominant cultures have “identity policies” too, even if they do not admit it as such (Crockett, 2016). For instance, in terms of racial(ized) groups in academic institutions, white students tend to socialize mostly with other white students. Yet, no one is concerned about or alarmed by the mostly white student associations and sororities all over campus.

As mentioned before, the term ‘safe space’ can also expand to the entire university. The university as a whole - campus, faculty buildings, lecture halls – could also serve as a safe space in itself. A way in which the RU could potentially do this is, is by enabling students to easily and quickly report harassment. In order for that to be effective, the university must ensure that their complaints procedures are clear, well-known and offer effective redress. The university should also establish a separate procedure for complaints concerning racism which is monitored only by advisors who have extensive knowledge of how racism operates and affects BIPOC. These changes will help combat racism and discrimination, which will in their turn make the campus a safe(r) and more inclusive space.

### **Creating safe classrooms**

A way in which the university can cultivate a safer and more inclusive environment in the lecture halls is by placing ground rules for discussions (also known as ‘rules of engagement’) that draw the line between free speech and hate speech. This will allow healthy and kind discussions to take place. Moreover, these ground rules will build the confidence of otherwise quiet students and ensure that they will speak their minds without the fear of being spoken over or the possibility of assertive yet ignorant speech to be imposed on them (OxfordUnion, 2017). A standard ‘rules of engagement’ section could be formulated by the DEI office or per faculty and should be implemented in all syllabi across faculties. It can then be slightly adjusted by professors for their courses. Professors should also be stimulated to provide trigger warnings and content notes at the beginning of the course. This allows students of marginalized groups to opt out of engaging in something that they might find traumatic. The DEI office or faculties could provide examples of these as well and sent them to study program coordinators or directly to all professors.

Opponents of safe spaces tend to argue that these policy changes are a barrier to free speech. However, these changes will not prevent debates or discussion. They will simply allow students affected by both direct and indirect discrimination to decide whether they want to participate in the discussion or not. It’s also important to note that free speech, in its definition, does not encompass harmful or distressing language. By imposing limitations and boundaries on discussions, they will happen in a more dignified manner and ensure that equal weighting is given to each participant (OxfordUnion, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Safe spaces are legitimate and necessary components of higher education. They are not divisive or a threat to free speech. Instead they provide inclusivity that is otherwise not felt by the students of color and help students (of color) engage with issues in a way that makes them comfortable. It is essential that the RU improves the safety of all students by implementing measures that contribute to a more inclusive environment. In the final chapter, we will discuss the need for more research on racism that can help create a more inclusive campus and society.

## **Main recommendations**

- Designate a physical space on campus, like a room, for students of color to come together, support each other and freely express and be themselves.
- Make reporting racism and discrimination more accessible to students by finding a more prominent place for filing complaints on the RU website, making the procedure easier, establishing a separate procedure for reporting racism that is only monitored by advisors with sufficient knowledge on (combatting) racism.
- Create a standard format for ‘rules of engagement’ and make it compulsory for all courses to include this in their syllabi.
- Stimulate professors to provide trigger warnings and content notes at the beginning of the course.



## **Recommended literature**

- Blackwell, K. (2018, August 9). *Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People*. The Arrow. <https://arrow-journal.org/why-people-of-color-need-spaces-without-white-people/>
- Crockett, E. (2016, August 25). *Safe spaces, explained*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/5/11949258/safe-spaces-explained>
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## **Chapter 4: Research on Racism**

Common assumption: “*We should not decide which research areas and topics deserve more attention but should let researchers decide this.*”

Why is it important for universities to encourage and promote research into (anti-)racism and issues concerning racism? In this chapter, we will elaborate on the importance of more research on (anti-)racism and the role of the university in this.

### **Importance of research on (anti-)racism**

As the attention for racism and racist experiences has grown since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, it is clear that racism is still a significant issue affecting every member of our society and university. Yet, we still know relatively little about racism and its social, political, cultural and historical processes or its (mental) health effects on both white people and people of color. Extensive (sociological) research into racism in the Netherlands as presented in Philomena Essed’s *Alledaags Racisme* (1984), Essed’s and Isabel Hoving’s *Dutch Racism* (2014) and Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence* (2016) are few and far between. These books, written by Dutch academics, have proven to be crucial in providing a discourse to discuss racism in the Netherlands and demonstrate the importance of investing in research about (anti-)racism.

Similarly, much about the Dutch colonial history is only recently starting to be uncovered by researchers. Last year the city of Rotterdam, for example, financed a remarkably large-scale research into the city’s involvement with the Dutch slave trade and researchers discovered that the city council and merchants had been closely involved in the operations of slavery and colonialism (Habiballah, 2020). A considerable amount of research is being done on racism and discrimination in society, for example, on the job or housing market, however, it can be difficult for researchers to provide a good assessment of the extent of the problem (Vissers, 2020). This signals that more money should be invested to improve research into current issues of racism.

### **Contributing to research on (anti-)racism**

We are aware that the university is not in charge of all funding for research conducted by researchers at the RU. However, the money that the university is able to invest in research projects at the university and its research institutes should go more often towards research into (anti-)racism. This also connects really well to the university’s strategy on ‘Imprinting Change’ and supporting more diversity, equality and inclusion. In the RU’s statement on 9 July 2020, the university indicated that it wanted to engage in discussions about racism and discrimination in relation to their research, among other things (RU, 2020). The university claims it wants to contribute to a society that offers equal opportunities to all and that it has a part to play in this (RU, n.d. a). One way of doing this is investing in research that can contribute to more

knowledge on how to understand and challenge racism and its history in the Netherlands and globally.

External funding and grants for research projects at Dutch universities are extremely important for many researchers at the university, and although the RU has less influence on how that funding is spend, it can encourage researchers of relevant disciplines to study the different ways in which racism has manifested itself. The RU can also stimulate research into (anti-)racism at the university by hiring diverse professors who already do research in these areas. Other ways in which the university can be conscious of racism and discrimination is by encouraging its researchers to critically examine the research, theories, methods and language they use as well as being mindful of diversity in the selection of human subjects and assembling diverse research teams (if relevant).

### **Researching racism at the RU**

The RU can and should fund research into racism, discrimination and exclusion at the university. If the university is serious about becoming more inclusive and offering equal opportunities to all then it should at least have a baseline study conducted, which can inform the strategies, methods and the programs of the DEI office as well as faculties. It also allows the DEI office to effectively measure their progress and changes at the university in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The University of Amsterdam (UVA) did something similar in 2016 with the *Let's Do Diversity* report. UVA installed a diversity committee and funded their research into diversity at the university (University of Amsterdam, 2016). The report did not only offer great insight into (the lack of) diversity and processes of exclusion and inequality at the time but also provided recommendations for approaches, programs and policies the university could implement to improve the situation. This is exactly what is needed at the RU, so it can have a clear path forward to an inclusive university with equal opportunities for all its students.

### **Conclusion**

A university that highly values change and progress in terms of diversity, inclusion and equality should advocate for research that can contribute to that. The university has to invest, in different ways, in research and researchers that can provide invaluable insights and uncover crucial information needed to bring about a more inclusive, safe and equal society and university.

### **Main recommendations**

- Invest more money in research projects about (anti-)racism and colonialism at the university.
- Encourage researchers across disciplines to study processes of racism and exclusion and their effects on society.

- Encourage all researchers to reflect on the research, theories, methods and language they use as well as ensuring the diversity of human subjects and research teams (if relevant).
- Have a baseline study conducted to gain more insight into the extent of racism, exclusion and inequality at the university and create DEI strategies, methods and programs based on that. This study should preferably be conducted by a DEI committee that is appointed and funded by the university.

### **Recommended literature**

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## Conclusion

Although we acknowledge and appreciate the efforts the RU has taken so far to make progress on diversity, equality and inclusion at the university, we believe more tangible changes are required to make actual progress. We strongly advocate for an anti-racism policy that is implemented and enforced, starting next academic year.

In this report, we have outlined what policy changes we believe the university needs to make and want to emphasize our most important recommendations once more. We urge the university to:

- bring in and support students and staff of color (in different positions) by implementing an affirmative action plan and installing a diversity committee for each faculty;
- provide training for educators at the RU to target racism and biases and guidelines on interracial and intercultural interaction to improve connections between students;
- rethink curricula by including and integrating perspectives, theories and methods from the Global South and BIPOC scholars and adding courses or classes that allow students to reflect on the content of their study program;
- make reporting inappropriate behavior at the RU more accessible to students and establish a separate procedure to report racism;
- formulate a standard 'rules of engagement' section which will be a compulsory part of all course syllabi at the university and encourage professors to provide trigger warnings and content notes in their classes;
- stimulate researchers at the university to carry out research on racism and exclusion in society and, furthermore, install a diversity committee to conduct a baseline study on racism, exclusion and inequality at the RU.

We truly hope you will consider each of our recommendations and start creating, implementing and enforcing an anti-racism policy that addresses and tackles issues of racism at the university. Diversity, equality and inclusion will not be achieved without action and the RU has a part to play.

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