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THE UNIVERSITY CREATES MORE DIVIDES
THAN SOCIETY PERCEIVES

DEBATING DEVELPOMENT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The University as an Ivory Tower. It is a pretty metaphor, but it also reminds us of the Disney movie Tangled: are we trapped or safe in the tower? We are more convinced about the first option. It is important that we stay directly in touch with society and the associated societal problems. That way, we can recognize and anticipate these problems, and try to avoid them in the future.

Our group is very diverse, which means we have a lot of different insights on topics like diversity itself, but also inclusion (or exclusion), and practically every other theme of the debates. Not only does everybody follow a different educational program, we also differ on subjects like gender, nationality, cultural background, and even the willingness to study abroad ourselves. It was remarkable that the group was divided between people who were very enthusiastic about international experiences (the men), compared to the women who did consider it, but were more held back. One of the reasons was that they did not feel very safe as a woman in a foreign country. This brings us to the main topic that we have chosen from all of the debates: The University creates more divides than society perceives.

In the following section, we will give examples of societal problems in relation to the University. The societal problems we know and new problems we didn't even think we had, will come to the surface more clearly and urgently. We will then have to find solutions to cope with or even, try to solve those problems with our limited academic knowledge. We believe that the University, or rather the people who work and study here, have a responsibility in the process of social change. In fact, we are even going to imagine a world

where the Ivory Tower is demolished and everyone has to start anew.
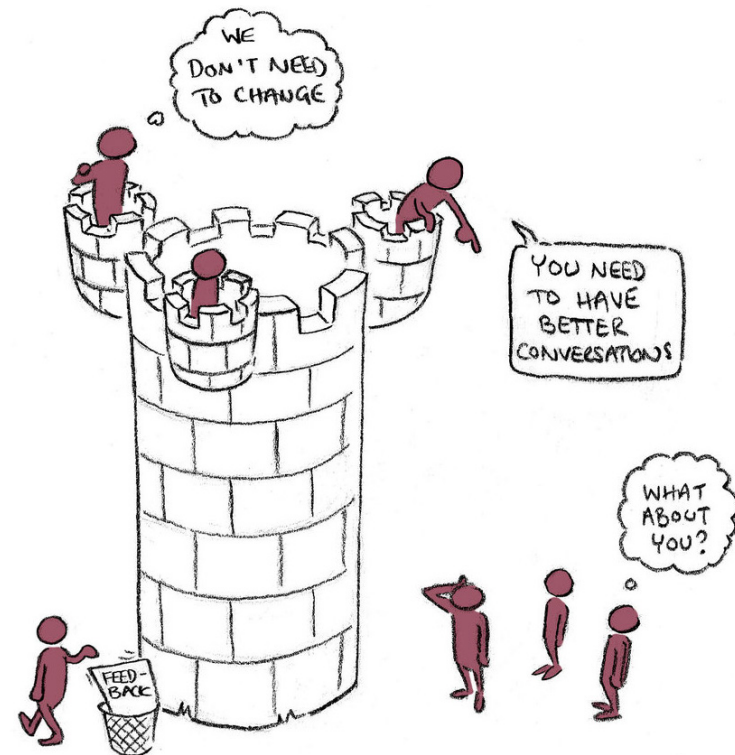
THE QUEER COMMUNITY IN THE UNIVERSITY

Being queer, for most people at least, is not really a part of your identity that is easily identifiable by others if you are not telling them about it. Thus, when it comes to being a queer student, for most of us, there is not really any direct discrimination. However, the way the university acts and speaks out for certain things determines whether the university becomes a safe space where we feel comfortable expressing who we are. I want to share some of my personal experiences that give a clearer view on this.

One of the most obvious places where the University was present for the queer community would be during Pride parades. I had heard through a friend that the University had a wagon in the parade in which you could stand on if you signed up. I found it a bit odd that I had to be told by a friend and that this was not really known by me or by anyone else I talked to. I thought I might have just looked past a mail that was sent out about it, but after trying to find the mail and coming up empty, I was left to wonder why the sign-up sheet was so hard to find. Onto the event itself, when me and my friends got to the place we were supposed to meet up, we were presented with a cap from the university we had to wear before getting on the wagon. This made me feel like they are using us as walking promotion, but I let it slide without thinking too much about it. When we eventually got to the wagon something really started to feel off as the logo of the university was plastered all over the outside of the wagon and the only pride cheer that could be seen, were the people inside and the music that was playing. My friends and I were of seemingly few students in attendance which made me feel even more uneasy. The picture that they posted on their Instagram (as seen on

the right) after the event did not even look like it was taken during a pride parade and I am certain people that were not in attendance had to look at the caption if they wanted to know the context. Seeing this picture appear on my feed really made me feel that I was used as a promotion tool by the university, who could not be bothered to add a little touch of queerness to their wagon besides the people in it. So just like Breeze and Leigh I was sort of doing their unpaid labor without realizing it.

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It is not just in instances like this, but also within classes that these things tend to happen. I remember one instance from more than a year ago in my philosophy class. There was something about the rights of gay people and I think pride parades came up. There was one person in the class that questioned the professor on why there are pride parades and why we needed these rights. Instead of taking this as a valuable lesson for everyone, the professor just seemed to end the conversation as fast as possible so he could go on with the rest of his class. This really made me feel that a lot of professors do not really bother making their classroom feel like a safe space for their students.

SPACE INVADERS

In the so called diversity action plan (DAP), drafted by the University of Antwerp, a concrete manual for the university to work towards a more inclusive policy is typed out. I have to say, I was quite surprised, positively surprised that is, to read the proposed methods. The manual was constructed out of four main "strategical objectives": a broadening of the diversity culture, the development of a diversity-oriented organizational structure, the commitment to diversity-supportive and diversity-sensitive education and increasing the diverse influx and realisation of a qualified outflow. The plan acknowledges the role of higher education in the increase of inequality and in the epilogue written by the university headmaster, the lack of diversity in the university compared to that in the society in which the university operates is noted. Over the different faculties that make up the university an average of just below 20% of students having a migration background (at least one parent was not born in Belgium) is reported. The general population of the city of Antwerp however, consists of more than 50% of people with a migration background. The plan mentions the absence of data surrounding the diversity and knowledge regarding diversity among staff members. Thus emphasizing the need for action.

My surprise regarding this plan can only be credited to the fact that I have not noticed any of the proposed methods and to the fact that the general stance towards diversity and racial inequalities within the university taken in the DAP is very different from what I have experienced on campus. The different faculties are free to choose any of the methods described in the DAP according to their respective needs and requirements surrounding diversity. As a student at the

faculty of applied engineering I can only guess that the faculty that is supposed to be looking out for my wellbeing on campus chose no method whatsoever. I did not research any of the initiatives organized by the faculty because I think that as a student with a migration background, these initiatives, if there are any, should have found me. They did not. The only initiative I ever heard about was the renaming of auditorium A.143 in the former colonial college to "Aula Patrice Lumumba", after the first democratically elected prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo who was assassinated with the help of Belgian special forces. To me, this was a completely empty gesture, a strategic move to buy some time, save face and promote an image of inclusivity and decolonisation. As described by Dounia Bourabain, a part of the smokescreen of equality. At this point it may be worth noting that I am of Congolese descent. Due to my lived experience on the campuses of the University of Antwerp I actually took the renaming of the auditorium as an insult. I have always felt out of place and feel I have often been treated differently than my white peers.

As a means of not letting this feeling of not belonging affect my motivation to study, I have been looking at myself as an academic underdog and I have been seeing my presence on campus and in auditoria as an act of rebellion. Remi Joseph-Salisbury gave me the language to very accurately describe this feeling. He defined universities as de facto white spaces, which makes everyone who is not white a Space Invader. The term instantly resonated with me. Nonetheless, the absence of representation in higher level university staff has greatly demotivated me towards an academical career. I have been engaging

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myself to be a representative of the Space Invaders by
representing my study, faculty and occasionally even
university at recruitment events such as the SID-IN
and university open days. At these events I interacted
with upper level staff members on a more personal
level and was oftentimes greatly disappointed by their
shortsightedness when their views on societal matters
both within and outside of the university became clear.
The combination of the lack of representation and the
narrow perspective of who would be my prospective
allies, or even better accomplices, made it clear to
me that the higher levels of the university are not a
space in which I could function without having to
sacrifice a significant part of my identity. All the while
the university boasts the fact that one out of five staff
members has come from abroad.
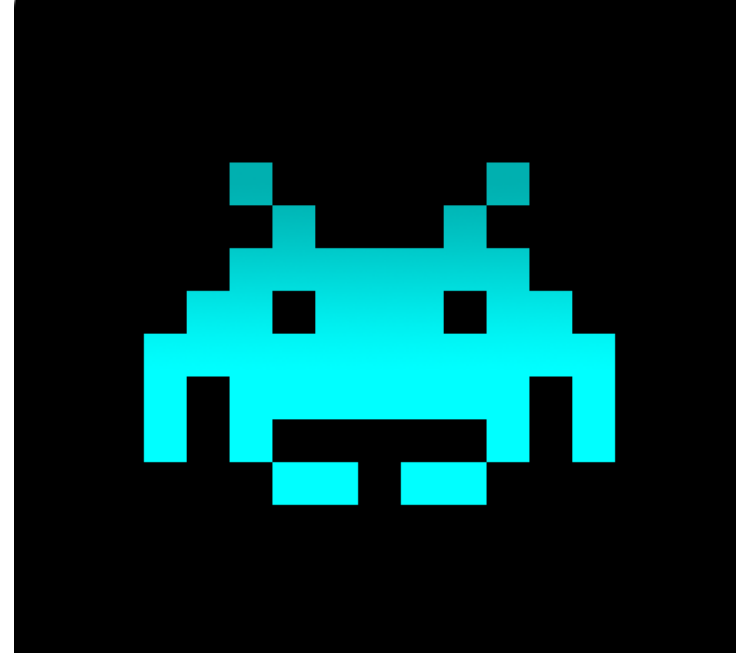
INTERNATIONAL VS LOCAL STUDENTS

I am an international student from Singapore on Student Exchange Programme here at the University of Antwerp. Coincidentally, when I first met my group members on the 24th of October, I was the only international student in the entire group and I did not recognise any of my other group members. During our interaction, we realised a problem within the University that has not been raised up during any of the debates thus far; the divide between international and local students.

As seen in the picture above taken from the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) of Antwerp's Instagram, from the moment international students enter the school, events were organised for them to get acclimated to the school as well as to get to know each other. Following the Icebreaking Week, there were weekly events catered towards only international students, with the November calendar being provided on the right as an example. However, other than the members of the ESN Antwerp team (only 14 members) which consists of local students, there were no clear opportunities for international students to interact with local students. Moreover, it could even be said that the activities being organised by the University were actually promoting the segregation between local and international students, since the international students will not see a need to go out of their way to interact with local students when they are already comfortable with the people they have met.

Thus, even though the intentions behind the ESN events were good, as they probably wanted to ease international students into the University, the unintended consequences are far-reaching and quite serious. After all, the intention of the Eramus program

is to "improve language skills, gain self-confidence and independence and immerse yourself in a new culture" as stated by the Erasmus+ page on the European Commission website. How is it possible to immerse yourself in a new culture when international students are not even given an opportunity to interact with local students? The ESN team is clearly not representative of the entire local student population of the University of Antwerp, hence, there should be events organised for both local and international students to encourage interaction.

The University of Antwerp may not be representative of all the other universities in the world, however, if this segregation between local and international students is happening here, it could be happening elsewhere as well. In fact, in my home university, The National University of Singapore (NUS), the same problems are taking place. Throughout my 2 years there, I have not interacted with a single exchange student and the only way I know of their existence is through the email that my university sends encouraging us to sign up to be their buddies. Consequently, a program that is meant to promote embracing diversity and new culture is now encouraging divides instead. This is a very pressing issue that we believe Universities should address.

GENDER DIVIDE

The gender imbalance in certain academic fields at higher education institutions, such as the university, has deep historical roots and can be attributed to various social, cultural, and structural factors. Until the 1990s, the university operated as an independent republic, predominantly governed by male professors, as emphasized by Willem Halffman. He noted that professors often displayed unfair and unreasonable behavior towards their female students. During his lecture, he talked about a professor at our own university, situated on the Stadscampus, who would have someone accompany him during oral exams involving female students due to inappropriate conduct. This incident sheds light on the pervasive issue of abuse within our institution, a problem that has gained attention in recent years.

The republic of professors

Throughout history, women have faced systemic discrimination in both education and employment opportunities. Barriers such as the illusion of equality, daily replication, patronization, and paternalism have

hindered the advancement of women in academic careers. In the debate on November 21st, Dounja Bourabain, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Hasselt, delves into the topic of gender equality. She underscores that the journey towards equality has been fraught with obstacles over the years. In her lecture, she specifically addresses the four barriers mentioned earlier.
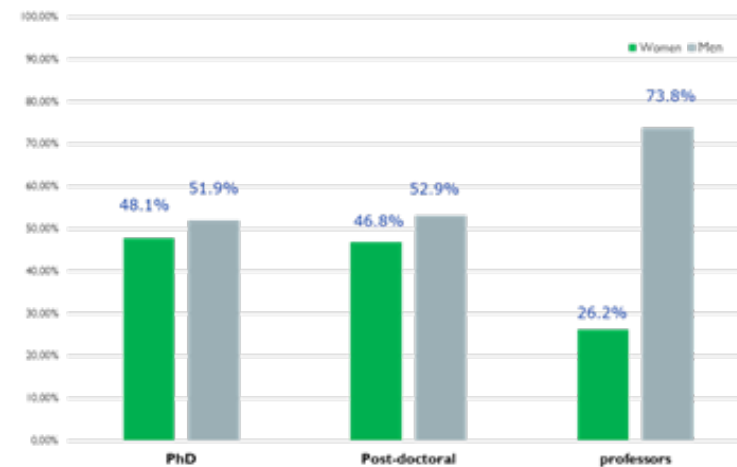
Examining the academic landscape reveals a reversal in the student gender balance, with more women graduating than men. Despite these advancements, a persistent "leaky pipeline" exposes the underrepresentation of women in higher academic positions. How is it that women tend to disappear at the higher levels of our institution?

Higher education institutions can be viewed through
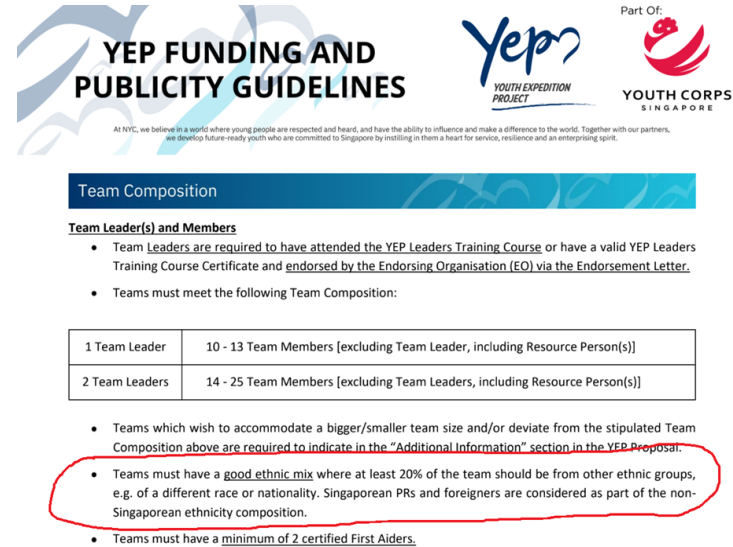
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the lens of "inequality regimes," a concept developed by Joan Acker in 2009. The university's substructure is built around an ideal employee, essentially a white male template. A privileged group of white men holds sway within the university. Looking back at the history of universities, it's evident that women were initially excluded from these institutions, often perceived as less intelligent. The fear was that if women pursued education and achieved financial independence, it would threaten the traditional family structure upon which society was built. Remarkably, this white male template still subtly influences the university today.

SOLUTIONS

One possible solution to the gender and racial divides that we mentioned above would be to implement quotas. In other words, to control the amount of each race/gender that we allow into the university. However, this solution has been done before, and despite the implementation of diversity plans, their effectiveness is often called into question. Diversity efforts may be perceived as mere checkbox exercises, lacking genuine commitment. Institutional resistance and willful ignorance further impede progress. All these were brought up by Bourabain during her lecture.

I have personally experienced these checkbox exercises back in Singapore. As Singapore is constantly being flaunted as a multi-cultural and multi-racial country, there are many rules and regulations that we have to abide by, to fit this perception. For example, I was the Project Director of an overseas volunteering project back in NUS and we are funded by an organization known as Youth Expedition Project (YEP). One of the requirements, as seen by the circled portion below, is "a good ethnic mix". This led to us having more difficulties during our recruitment process as we now had to judge our potential members not on their love for volunteering or their experiences, but also on their ethnicity. This meant that we had to reject certain qualified members just because we needed to hit the ethnic quota to receive our funding, thus making it feel like a literal checkbox exercise.

Justificatory logics are frequently employed to legitimize non-performative diversity work, including normalizing gender-racial inequality and asserting that achieving equality is only a matter of time. Bourabain challenges these notions, advocating for a transformative shift toward a fair and equal university. This involves embracing principles of decolonization, anti-racist feminist governing, and collectivization. These strategies represent the next crucial step in dismantling systemic barriers and cultivating a truly inclusive academic environment.

In the early 2000s, the Iton network's report was published, marking a pivotal moment that urged universities to address gender disparities. This led to the formulation of diversity plans and campaigns, exemplified by initiatives like #IMAKEKULEUVEN

in Flanders. However, recent headlines in Belgian newspapers have brought attention to a darker side, with universities grappling with sexual harassment claims and instances of dismissals due to harassment. Throughout all the debates this semester on equality within our institution, we've increasingly resonated with the points raised by Maddie Breeze during the second debate. Breeze, a Senior Lecturer in Sociology & Public Sociology at Queen Margaret University, has been focusing on the neoliberal management model in connection with goals in equality, diversity, and inclusion. In her presentation titled "Inclusion against the neoliberal university: Making manifestos, making demands, making knowledge," she contends that there may be a necessity to move beyond the hope of fixing the university and instead consider the dismantling of it. This leads us to our next solution, destroying the University completely and starting afresh.

CONCLUSION

Our group has reached the conclusion that prompts a thorough reevaluation and a fresh perspective on the university. During our discussions on the various debates of this semester, it has become evident that the existing university structure, instead of fostering inclusivity, tends to exacerbate feelings of alienation among students who deviate from the stereotypical model student image.

This realization has led us to consider a radical proposition – the dismantling of the current university and its reconstruction with a new outlook. While this idea sparks contemplation on the evolving role of universities in society, particularly in the context of cities becoming majority-minority, it also underscores the pressing need for transformative change. As our societies grow increasingly diverse, traditional universities grapple with challenges in adapting to this shifting demographic landscape.

The call for reform in higher education is not unique, with ongoing discussions shedding light on the outdated nature of traditional universities. Within the sphere of diversity and inclusion, our group has zeroed in on these challenges, specifically addressing background, gender, and sexuality. The perpetuation of the stereotypical image of the model student, predominantly associated with a white male, contributes to feelings of inferiority, underrepresentation, and alienation among those who do not conform to this mold.

In our assessment, prevailing development initiatives, including diversity training, mentorship programs, student support services, and efforts toward representation in leadership, fall short of adequately tackling the underlying issue of inequality. We are of the opinion that the university's existing admissions policies are insufficient in effectively addressing the current problem. Considering this, a more constructive approach might involve dismantling the university and adopting a new strategy expressly centered on mitigating biases and dismantling stereotypes.

Our proposal advocates for a fundamental reevaluation of the university's existing admissions policies. Rather than opting for incremental changes, a more constructive approach involves the dismantling of the university and the adoption of a new policy explicitly designed to reduce biases and stereotypes. This new policy should incorporate specific quotas for diversity, sexuality, and gender equality, ensuring the genuine representation of all students.

Crucially, the university must actively engage in fostering connections between local and foreign students. This involves supporting associations that promote international collaboration and celebrate diverse cultures. The ultimate objective is for the university to authentically mirror our society, where every student feels genuinely represented within the institution. This paradigm shift aims to cultivate an environment where inclusivity becomes an intrinsic part of the university's identity and mission, transcending superficial representation for marketing purposes on websites and social media.

RECOGNITION OF GROUP MEMBER'S CONTRI-BUTIONS

Everybody always attended the meetings we planned together and during those meetings, everybody gave useful input, after which we divided the tasks.

Alexy wrote the part 'Space invaders' and did research work around alternative learning spaces.

Emma wrote the part 'The queer community within the university' and wrote the script for the video explaining our vision board.

Jaren wrote the part about 'International vs local students' and the solution portion, combined the parts into one complete essay, and recorded the final video.

Margaux wrote the piece 'Gender divide' and the conclusion. She also started with the vision board and created the layout for the paper.

Yenthe started the essay by making the introduction about our group and our essay.