

Vision: Towards a globally engaged inclusive university

The vision underlying this Action Plan was first and foremost inspired by our urgent concern for our *common home*. The metaphor of a common home evokes two associations. First, the idea of creating a home together through sharing, caring, distributing, and co-living in a shared web of meanings and interdependence. Second, it ties in with the idea of the *Commons*, i.e. the 'shareable resources of nature or society', as Kate Raworth put it in her analysis of our current economic system (Raworth 2017: 82). While natural commons (e.g. grazing land, forests, fisheries) are essential for sustainable development, cultural and intellectual commons sustain a community's language, heritage, traditional knowledge, etc. Digital commons refer, for instance, to open-source software, social networks, and online education. The idea of the Commons raises questions about the role of power within co-living arrangements, about the production processes and ownership (e.g. of knowledge), and about the role of the university as an *intellectual common* in today's increasingly globalising and diverse society. As a commons, a university can have huge potential for distributed ownership (e.g. access to education, open access journals, open data) and thus realise its mission as a 'driver of change' to contribute to an inclusive and sustainable society for all, founded on human rights and democracy.

Today, the shared future of all countries and their people must lie at the heart of our attention, *inter alia* expressed in Agenda 2030 and its 17 interconnected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have been adopted internationally. As the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe stated during the Debating Development series 'Post-development and Decolonial Perspectives' (20 October 2020): 'Today, it is life itself which is at stake', by which he implied that on top of the destructive consequences of historical and on-going colonisation – by which the life of many has been at stake for a long time already – today all natural and human life is threatened. At a fundamental level, the deep and wicked challenges of Agenda 2030 transform all nations of the world into interacting 'developing countries' faced with deep systemic socio-ecosystem conundrums, albeit with unequal past and present responsibilities, power and resources. We thus move away from the earlier focus on development and poverty reduction in the so-called 'Global South', as was tantamount in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) process from 2000 to 2015. This implies a shift from an almost exclusive focus on Southern problems, which often ignored Northern co-responsibilities and/or implicitly presented the North and West as the model for development, to an encompassing global perspective. This perspective expresses care and shared responsibility for our common home, which is threatened by our current unsustainable and inequitable global 'development'. Therefore, a shift is required from a 'development cooperation' perspective to a comprehensive 'global engagement' perspective.

Given the deep and fundamental nature of the challenges, Agenda 2030 calls to open up even more (as a society and as a university) and to intensify the interactions between a more diverse range of academic and non-academic knowledges in multi-stakeholder networks. It motivates UAntwerp to embrace diversity as well as multiperspectivity, multi- and transdisciplinarity as crucial values added to all our academic endeavours. This should be done by cultivating a self-confident awareness of the inescapable positionality and situatedness of all knowledges and practices, allowing UAntwerp to reaffirm and reproduce its identity as an active pluralist university promoting active, value-based, tolerant and mutually engaging dialogue to engender sufficiently shared, connected 'actionable' knowledges that support a transformation to sustainability and inclusiveness. Our university should be a common home, but also an open home. It should be an inclusive institution, stimulating equality, cooperation, interdependence, reciprocity, and empowerment through education and research. In addition, our common home should be an ecological one. The word ecology can be taken literally (when referring to the natural environment) or as a metaphor for balance (e.g. in social, political,

cultural, and academic contexts). In both cases, diversity is crucial to achieve sustainability. First and foremost, however, our university should be a safe and just place for all. Achieving justice might require more than increasing diversity and inclusion, yet the goals of diversity, inclusion and decolonisation sometimes intersect, and where they do it is important to promote these goals at the same time.

In our concern for our common home we cannot forget about the on-going issues of persisting inequality and injustices in the context of historically and contemporary uneven relations with the – often previously colonised – countries of the Global South. Also, the crisis of the current economic and societal model can be analysed along different axes, one of which highlights the historical roots of modern states in colonialism. The former colonisers in the West no longer control the colonial matrix of power, yet it would be unfair not to acknowledge the historical responsibility they bear for worldwide inequalities which *inter alia* are exacerbated by the climate crisis, with its transboundary effects, and has already and will further impact the world's already disadvantaged places and peoples disproportionately. Repairing this injustice as part of 'decolonisation' is an on-going concern. It remains a pending moral duty. Moreover, it is also a condition to create better opportunities for adequate joint knowledge generation and subsequently effective collective action on wicked problems faced by our common home.

In this document, we use the terms 'Global South' and 'Global North' as imperfect but commonly used shorthand for lack of better terminology, and we recognise the internally diverse nature of different countries or groups considered to belong to these broad catch-all categories. In particular, we are aware that these concepts both retain something of the contested linear hierarchy of 'developed' and 'less developed countries' (within an implicitly universal model of development and modernity for the entire world). Yet at the same time, we challenge it by using a more neutral (but not always accurate) geographical connotation where countries are compared through multiple standards of a planetary 'pluriverse' rather than the usual linear metric of income and GDP of the mono-modernist 'universe'. We are also aware that these concepts tend to suggest thinking in terms of nation-states only, whereas it might be necessary to consider internal groups in terms of different positionings vis-à-vis the currently dominant development model (including Global North and Global South realities within both Southern and Northern countries). Clarifying this conceptual conundrum will be a part of the process of decolonisation, which we understand as a complex variety of emancipatory processes, originating at different places, which challenges hegemonic power (especially from Western countries) in its historical and contemporary contexts and which aims to create a new balance, based on global justice, solidarity and mutual interest. Due to its unavoidable connection to historical injustice and the need for repair, 'decolonisation' is inevitably a complex, contested and emotional term (and process), but we all need the courage to confront this painful legacy and overcome it together. If we manage to overcome the hurtful legacy of colonialism, it will finally become possible to construct 'after colonial' futures.

Within the university, decolonisation should be understood as an on-going dynamic process of opening up and levelling playing fields within university practices. As a process, it first and foremost requires stimulating open dialogue and reflection within the university community and its networks. There should be respect for the diversity in contextualised starting points, personal experiences and background (e.g. culture, gender, race, age, geographical origin), 'mental models', and disciplinary backgrounds is vital, but at the same time this should not be abused to shy away from critical questions about inequality and injustices rooted in power. Advancing on the route to decolonisation is a precondition for an inclusive globally connected university which contributes to the global citizenship of its members and beyond. It also is a very important precondition for the capacity of academia to

contribute to effective and creative pathways out of the complex, interrelated global and systemic challenges of the SDGs. The latter requires the mobilisation and interaction of all available knowledge to find viable routes for sustainable and just global change.

The challenge of academia thus becomes to transform our practices in order to contribute better to the aspired emancipatory changes in societal processes. The first transformation relates to the **impact of the 'cognitive empire'**, i.e. the prevalence of problematic claims or the 'natural' acceptance of the superiority and universalism of 'Western' knowledges (scientific and other). This power-based process has resulted and often continues to result in epistemic violence and othering, i.e. the destruction and/or the hindering of the development of non-Western knowledges and/or the denial of legitimacy of those alternative knowledge frames. In other cases, it also implies the 'plagiarist' appropriation without recognition of non-Western knowledges by the 'West'. In many instances, this causes **deep epistemic injustices**, denying the right of existence or recognition and the right to be heard to many peoples on the planet. Besides that, it implies a loss of alternative perspectives which might be needed to allow for 'effective and equal encounters' in order to jointly address the crisis of the current societal model, deeply inspired by Western modernity. This should not be understood as an ideological anti-Western stance nor an argument to replace its knowledges with better, alternative ones. Western perspectives, paradigms and theories should not be discarded, but their historical, philosophical, geographical, and socio-cultural situatedness must be acknowledged and the idea that the inventory of Western knowledge constitutes a universal, unified *canon of knowledge* should be rejected. The dominance of Western knowledge production should be challenged in favour of epistemic diversity. As Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Chair of Epistemologies of the Global South at the University of Bayreuth, pointed out, 'decolonisation is the liberation of reason itself from colonisation', as it brings previously invisible and invisibilised knowledges to the global table and liberates 'Eurocentric-Western' knowledges from the violence of their – often interested – claims of automatic universality. This brings the principle of a global 'herrschaftsfreier Diskurs' ('power-free discourse') (in the spirit of Habermas, in which discrimination and domination are reduced and no one has to renounce their values, knowledges, traditions, etc.) closer to reality. A process of decolonisation should thus allow us to transform the negative dimensions of excessive, unidimensional 'Eurocentrism', while safeguarding the space for 'Euro-open' UAntwerp contributions to global reflections.

Furthermore, all too **simple binaries** must be avoided, and the terminology of 'Western' and 'non-Western' knowledges (even if plural) must be qualified by underlining the variegated and not necessarily fully articulated nature of both these catch-all categories. The key point is that both historically and currently certain **power dynamics** tend to create a distinction between accepted mainstream and alternative knowledges, pushing the latter into the abyss of delegitimation, neglect and invisibility. As a result, they risk closing down too quickly on incumbent and often unfair ways of doing things, and thus also fail to sufficiently open up for the identification of better, innovative solutions. As an inclusive global academic institution, UAntwerp must therefore embrace **global multiperspectivity**, develop sensitivity for (often unconscious) power dynamics and withstand the marginalisation of epistemic resources caused by unequal power.

The second issue relates to the **material processes of inequality, exploitation and extractivism**, both historically and on-going, which characterise the relationships and the transactions between the Global North and the Global South. These are deeply and intrinsically linked with the first issue of epistemic injustices, which construct the narratives and ideological justifications that enable unequal and exploitative processes, and often problematically frame them as the natural and only way to 'civilisation', 'modernisation' or 'development'. Recognition of material inequality and injustices gives

rise to calls for reparations (between societies), while also being the historical foundation of North-South solidarity and support for global justice. These unequal and unjust material processes inevitably also condition and shape academic practices of interaction and cooperation with the Global South. First of all, there is the problem of possible **academic complicity** with extractive, exploitative processes at the economic and societal level. In this perspective, some predecessors of the University of Antwerp clearly have a share of historical responsibility for the Belgian colonial project. Even today, academic activities risk being connected to unequal, exploitative or extractive processes in the Global South. Besides this, also within the academic cooperation process itself, similar unequal, exploitative or extractive practices often continue to prevail, if only because institutions in the North concentrate most resources. After centuries of historical privileged development, they are generally also better organised and can take advantage of the cooperation outcomes. Hence evolving towards adequate **'mutual benefit sharing'** at the level of academics, academic institutions and the societies in which they are embedded, requires redistribution and reparation in order to level the playing field. Nevertheless, here it is an error to fall into excessive and massive binaries about Northern and Southern academic institutions and academics. Ideas and practices are not necessarily or automatically 'colonial' because they are geographically situated in Northern countries, and vice versa there are no guarantees that location in the South automatically produces an anti-colonial or 'after colonial' perspective. In the variegated realities of both, there is also space for alternative practices and **solidarity**, even when these are inevitably shaped within an unequal global academic context, and therefore also need to be understood as challenges within an on-going process towards more balanced relationships and cooperation. Even so, UAntwerp is aware that achieving equal relationships and true mutual benefits in cooperative relationships with the Global South is not a simple endeavour. Therefore it opens itself up to scrutiny and implements actions aiming to redress persisting inequality and imbalances in a spirit of solidarity and mutual capacity building. With its strong tradition of 'academic cooperation with the Global South, the University of Antwerp remains well-placed to take further steps on this route, in line with shifting away from the problematic and implicitly Eurocentric idea of 'development cooperation' to an idea of **global engagement and solidarity to achieve an inclusive and sustainable society for all.**