

Diversity Action Plan - part 1:

Actions to promote the intake, advancement and outflow of students from disadvantaged groups

1-What is the Diversity Action Plan?

The Diversity Action Plan (DAP) is an internal document written by and for the University of Antwerp, providing both a clear vision and definition and describing nineteen actions to promote the intake, advancement and outflow of students from disadvantaged groups¹. Faculties can choose freely which actions to implement, according to their own faculty needs.

2-Reasons for the Diversity Action Plan

CeMIS² conducted a study on socially vulnerable students showing that these students are under-represented, exhibit lower performance and experience more trouble in finding their way to the labour market. The actions described in this Diversity Action Plan are meant to create an environment in which every student can successfully access and go on to complete higher education.

3-Who is the Diversity Action Plan intended for?

The Diversity Action Plan is inclusive, meaning that the majority of the actions will benefit every student, but in particular students from disadvantaged groups.

4-Action objectives

- To add depth to the culture of diversity: these actions contribute to the creation or confirmation of a base of support for diversity-related issues with regard to students, as well as within faculties, programmes and/or central services.
- To elaborate a diversity-based organisational structure: these actions describe the possibilities and opportunities for formally anchoring the diversity policy in sustainable organisational structures within the University of Antwerp, thereby achieving a strong network.

¹ Students with a disability, students from migrant backgrounds, newcomer student, non-Dutch-speaking students, multilingual students, working students, students with a study allowance, students from low-educated or middle-educated environments

² Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies

- To work towards diversity-supportive and diversity-sensitive education: these actions are focused on the advancement of students from the perspective of diversity. Advancement is defined as ‘all possible intermediate steps that individual students can take from the start to the end of their educational careers’.
- To increase intake diversity and ensure qualified outflow: these actions direct attention towards the further optimization of the intake and of a diverse group of students at the University of Antwerp.

5-Actions

Objective 1: To add depth to the culture of diversity

5.1 Focus-group sessions with students from disadvantaged groups

Besides their academic challenges, many disadvantaged groups also face financial, administrative and other challenges (e.g. in terms of well-being) that make their lives as students more complex and that have an impact on their educational careers.

Entering into dialogue with students from disadvantaged groups helps faculties and study programmes to obtain a better understanding of the experiences and personal situations of these students. Faculties can utilize this information to enhance the academic and social integration of these students.

This action can result in a list of concrete improvement initiatives, opportunities or policy recommendations that could promote both student intake and advancement.

5.2 Professional-development track in diversity

Conducting focus group sessions makes it possible to map out the needs and sensitivities of UAntwerp’s staff members in terms of diversity. We also talk with students from diverse backgrounds about their experiences at UAntwerp and, more specifically, within their faculty.

This information is then used to list significant diversity competences, that can constitute a framework for a professional-development track, possibly in the form of a tailor-made training, a workshop or intervention by internal or external experts.

The professional-development track is intended to provide customised support to faculty staff members with regard to enhancing their expertise and deepening their understanding of diversity matters.

5.3 University of Antwerp ambassadors

Faculties invest in a series of portraits representing the existing and the desired diversity composition. They collect testimonials and visual material from a diverse cross-section of students and alumni. This collection should represent all disadvantaged groups. The students' stories are documented, focusing on their educational career.

These images and testimonials can be used in communication campaigns, at fairs, in pamphlets and brochures and on the website. This action can be elaborated through video and photo reports, audio testimonials, social network campaigns, et cetera.

The goal here is to create inspiring role models for the University of Antwerp and its respective faculties, since potential students are more likely to make the step towards the academic world if they can recognize themselves in the university and its students.

Objective 2: To develop a diversity-based organisational structure

5.4 Centre of Expertise on Diversity

In the next few years, the Diversity Team will be developing into a centre of expertise with regard to Diversity, serving as a clear point of contact for faculties and departments for all questions relating to diversity within the university.

5.5 A diversity specialist as a bridge between faculty and central management

Every faculty will appoint a diversity specialist, who will serve as a bridge between the involved faculty and the Centre of Expertise on Diversity and who will keep both entities informed about each other's activities. This staff member will also facilitate the diversity policy within the faculty and is able to roll out, support, guide and monitor diversity-related actions.

5.6 Peer-support group for Diversity

Led by the Centre of Expertise on Diversity, the peer-support group will bring together all diversity specialists. If every faculty appoints a diversity specialist, the peer-support group will consist of nine members, possibly supplemented by diversity specialist from the central departments.

This peer-support group will give the diversity specialists the opportunity to share their expertise, knowledge and experiences on the subject of diversity in an academic context. The goal here will be to obtain a more elaborate and overall supported policy on diversity. This peer-support group will also keep an eye on developments throughout the university: the members will know what is going on in their faculties in terms of diversity and inform

each other about relevant activities and actions. They will motivate each other to keep prioritizing diversity.

5.7 Student diversity panel

The student panel will gather feedback on the diversity policy and the actions taken by the University of Antwerp at central level or by the faculties at their own level. The student panel will not merely pass on information: the panel members will also be asked for their own opinion and experiences, and the panel will be used to generate new ideas. The use of student panels stimulates the bottom-up participative process, emphasizing the student's voice in outlining the policy.

Objective 3: To work towards diversity-supporting and diversity-sensitive education

5.8 Mentoraat Plus

The mentoring initiative '*Mentoraat Plus*' offers support to academically at-risk³ first-time students⁴ during their first year of higher education. This diversified support track particularly focuses on the social and academic development of students. On the one hand, *Mentoraat Plus* organises group meetings to formulate individual study objectives, programme-specific knowledge, study methods and skills. On the other hand, students are assigned a faculty mentor who follow their progress through set mentoring sessions at crucial moments throughout the academic year.

Strong emphasis is put on an increased academic and social integration within the study programme, faculty and university of the academically challenged student. Improved social integration and a stronger embedding within the academic culture at the university leads for many students to better study opportunities, a smoother advancement and a lower drop-out rate.

5.9 Course scan

The course scan is a tool for analysing the success rates of the total student population per course unit, without any causal explanation of the results. This action makes a distinction between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students, enabling us to map out a (potential) performance gap between disadvantaged groups and other student populations.

³Academically at-risk students are students who have at least three of the following characteristics:

- non-corresponding prior education (e.g. graduates in secondary art and technical education and general secondary Human Sciences education, adapted to programme-specific guidelines);
- migrant background (determined according to the parents' and grandparents' nationality);
- non-Dutch-speaking or multilingual (language spoken in the home is not or not exclusively Dutch);
- low-educated and middle-educated environments (neither parent has completed a degree in higher education);

- academic delay (determined according to age).

⁴ A first-time student is someone who enrolls in the first year of higher education for the first time on a Bachelor programme taught in the Flemish Community.

The course scan is intended to generate insight into any gaps in performance and the possible challenges that disadvantaged groups may face in certain course units. This will provide the different study programmes with insight into which course units might be obstacles for disadvantaged students.

Education committees can use the course scan to come up with solutions, such as organizing practice examinations, introducing intermediate feedback sessions and implementing a wide range of teaching and evaluation methods.

5.10 Diversity in the composition of student groups for groups assignments

Generally, students are free in their choice of group members for group work assignments. This usually results in homogeneous student groups, making it often difficult for disadvantaged students to connect. As a result, there will be less interaction between students from different backgrounds, even though group assignments offer particularly good opportunities for bringing these students together.

Composing more diversified student groups will help to reduce the incidence of social exclusion amongst disadvantaged students, while enhancing the students' diversity and intercultural competences, thereby contributing to increased academic success.

5.11 Transparency of course components

This action focuses on a transparent communication about the expectations of lecturers towards their students. Which competences should students acquire? How will these competences be evaluated?

'Transparency' can best be described as clear communication towards students with regard to:

- the competences to be acquired and how they are related to the scale of points (e.g. which level of knowledge, skills or competences corresponds to which grade on this scale);
- forms of evaluation (e.g. open-book exams, multiple choice);
- evaluation criteria (e.g. must the answer be written in correct Dutch or will points be deducted for grammatical errors, the relationship between interim assignments and the examination with regard to the final result);
- the course of the examination (e.g. what can students bring to the exam, how long will the examination last).

Transparent communication gives students a better understanding of what is expected of them, enabling them to study more efficiently.

Specifying explicit evaluation criteria also makes it easier for lecturers to give feedback to their students, departing from these criteria. We will also make continued efforts in giving feedback to students.

5.12 Information sessions for first-time students and their parents

This action encourages faculties to organize a faculty information session at the beginning of the academic year, directed inclusively towards all first-time students and their parents, but explicitly aimed at reaching students from low- and medium-educated environments⁵ along with their parents.

The information sessions offer students and their parents an insight into how the university, faculty or study programme operate, along with an overview of academic and student guidance possibilities (both at central and faculty level) and a general realistic picture of student life (e.g. through student testimonials). In addition, the sessions can be used to inform parents about the role they should and should not take as their children pursue their studies. There will also be room for questions and interaction.

Information sessions for first-time students and their parents offer an excellent opportunity to cultivate the involvement of parents and enhance a greater sense of belonging on the part of students. By creating a customized information session for this target group, we can respond more specifically to the needs and expectations of first-time students and the challenges they face in their transition from secondary education to the academic world.

5.13 Kick-off for new students

A faculty kick-off is an introductory and support initiative for new students (spread across one or multiple days). Students receive an orientation to the faculty and the study programme, which contributes to their academic and social integration. This kick-off can take place before the start of the academic year or during the first weeks, taking up a part of the day or spread across multiple days.

Transitioning from secondary school to higher education can be particularly challenging for students from disadvantaged groups, due to the need for major social adjustment, the great amount of new information they have to process at the start of the academic year and the administrative pressure that goes with it.

Faculty kick-offs are designed to prepare new students for academic life and to make them feel at home at the university.

More specifically, this involves:

- Providing each student with a clear overview of all (support) services, funding channels and extra-curricular and para-curricular activities;
- Having each student complete the required study-related paperwork before the

start of the courses (e.g. enrolment for seminars);

- Introducing each student to some of their fellow students in an informal way.

⁵ Low-educated and middle-educated environments: when neither parent has completed a higher education degree

In addition to these substantive goals, kick-off sessions also aim to provide students with the so-called *sense of belonging* or to strengthen the mutual involvement of students, for example by organizing specific activities to introduce the students to each other (and, by extension, to staff members) and encourage social interaction.

5.14 Interim feedback and examination inspection

Although examination inspection sessions constitute an excellent learning moment for all students, not all students find their way to such initiatives.

Through this action, the faculty operates an active, accessible and targeted policy to encourage students from disadvantaged groups to use their right to inspect their exams. Firstly by raising awareness concerning these sessions within this target group and sensitising students to the benefits of these sessions as a learning opportunity.

Besides planning examination inspection, faculties can also set up interim feedback moments, for example to give students pointers on completed assignments. Timing these moments properly can help to build a learning environment in which there is time to absorb and process the feedback before the examination or an assignment that must be completed. Ideally, the focus here should be on qualitative feedback, without attaching a summative judgement to it (i.e. a grade).

This action is intended to increase the number of disadvantaged students participating in examination inspection sessions and to help students benefit from additional and well-timed feedback, thereby giving them a clearer picture of their scores and of their strengths and weaknesses.

5.15 'Monitoraat op Maat' – support for Academic Dutch

The '*Monitoraat op Maat*' initiative assists study programmes in their efforts to provide language development and support to students, with specific attention to students from disadvantaged groups and students from non-Dutch-speaking backgrounds.

'*Monitoraat op Maat*' supports students who struggle with academic language skills, and helps to increase their likelihood of academic success.

Objective 4: To increase intake diversity and ensure qualified outflow

5.16 Optimisation of placement tests and follow-up tracks

A large amount of information can be extracted from optimised and customised placement tests for new students, for example threshold course components, competence profiles within study programmes, and the overall association with academic success at individual student level. Furthermore, a follow-up track can be outlined from these tests.

The predictive validity of placement tests with regard to academic success can differ for students from disadvantaged groups and those from non-disadvantaged groups. Analysis of

the results of placement tests can make it possible for them to be used in a targeted manner as tools for guaranteeing improvements in the advancement of students from disadvantaged groups.

5.17 Inter-faculty brainstorming process on diverse student recruitment

By bringing together faculties with similar needs, objectives or challenges with regard to intake, they can become a more efficient source of inspiration for each other and exchange expertise in a more targeted manner. In this brainstorming process there is room for formulating and elaborating faculty-specific intake initiatives.

Inter-faculty brainstorming encourages cooperation and exchange of expertise across faculty boundaries. In this way, it serves as an initial sounding board for recognizing and charting similar needs within the faculties

5.18 Tailoring of lecture content to our diverse society

By introducing scientist or role models from the cultural backgrounds of these potential incoming students (e.g. Averroes, a prominent Arabic philosopher and scientist from the 12th century), the University of Antwerp could strengthen their intellectual and intrinsic motivation for these study programmes.

Although this action is proposed primarily as an intake initiative for activities in which study programmes focus on secondary education (e.g. open lecture days, information days and sessions, school visits, et cetera), it can be applied onto disciplinary content of the actual courses.

Lecturers are encouraged to devote deliberate attention to non-Western philosophers in their curriculums.

By devoting attention to scientists from diverse backgrounds, the university acknowledges the existence of other role models besides the Western scientists. This can contribute to an increased and more diverse intake of students into study programmes that generally attract a lower number of students from migration backgrounds.

5.19 Understanding the outflow of students from disadvantaged groups

Students from disadvantages groups are more likely to encounter more obstacles to finding a good job. Faculties can stay abreast of developments according to the following questions:

- Who's having trouble in seeking employment?
- Which problems do they encounter?
- How can University of Antwerp contribute in resolving these problems?

Faculties keep in touch with outflowing students and obtain further information during in-depth interviews, focus groups or surveys about their experiences with transitioning to and operating on the labour market. This outflow analysis devotes particular attention to disadvantaged groups, such as students with migration backgrounds, LGBTQ+ students,

multilingual students, et cetera.

The obtained data generate insight into how the University of Antwerp could bridge the gap between the university and the labour market, with the ultimate goal being to achieve further professional development in the outflow policy in order to prepare students as well as possible for the transition to suitable employment.

6-What is expected from the faculties?

Faculties are expected to choose a number of actions to get started with.

The central management, including the Diversity Team, will guide and support the faculties in implementing the actions where necessary and possible.

The Diversity Action Plan is not mandatory. Nevertheless, it is widely supported by all governance levels and it has the full support of Herman Van Goethem, head of the University of Antwerp.

7-What's in the future?

In the near future, the Diversity Team shall actively approach all faculties and also elaborate a new plan focusing on increasing diversity amongst the staff members of the University of Antwerp.

The full DAP part 1 is only accessible for UAntwerp staff members:

https://pintra.uantwerpen.be/webapps/ua-pintrasite-BBLEARN/module/index.jsp?course_id= 50_1&tid= 28794_1&lid= 28824_1&l=en_us

For all questions about the subject of diversity or regarding the Diversity Action Plan, please

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