

Introduction

Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, a group of Forest and Nature Conservation and Policy (FNP) group researchers came together to discuss whether and how we need to explore and fight discriminatory practices in our own institutional context. This document reports on our findings from a survey that ran over the summer 2020 (n = 44 responses from BBN and MFN students and FNP staff), and a workshop held on October 22nd with FNP staff (n = 16). In our survey, we openly asked about: 1) experiences of discrimination in WUR; 2) social comfort within our chair group; and 3) possibilities for FNP to address discrimination and enhance inclusivity. During the workshop, we asked staff members to reflect upon the survey results and brainstorm ways forward.

This report highlights experiences of discrimination and explores ideas to enable change related to four main themes that we identified as crucial within our group, and WUR more broadly:

1. Student learning environments
2. Staff-student interactions
3. Gender related concerns at work
4. Positive or “invisible” discrimination

We illustrate each theme by means of a ‘dialogue between sources’. First, we present a selection of quotes from survey respondents. This is followed by a short overview of FNP group member reactions to these quotes posted anonymously via Mentimeter during the workshop. Lastly, we present ‘possible steps forward’ which follow from focus groups in the workshop.

This report surfaces many painful realities that people have experienced at WUR. In writing this report, we explicitly chose to not shy away from this pain. Thus, we anonymously share people’s direct experiences through their own voices.

We see that ‘diversity’ language is becoming increasingly prevalent across WUR and internationally, and how this positive language can bring many people together to take action. Yet, we share the concerns of the scholar Sara Ahmed that this positive ‘halo’ of diversity language can also overlook critical and structural issues that continue to harm minority groups. We therefore invite people to sit with the discomfort they may feel while reading this report and reflect on how these concerns can translate into meaningful tangible steps forward.

From our own perspective at FNP, we share some positive bottom-up ideas we generated to move forward within our chair group, science group, and university level. We invite others to consider how we can build complementary ‘bottom-up’ processes across WUR that can activate, complement and reinforce actions at the university level ‘top-down’.

We hope that by sharing these experiences and our reflections on them, we can build our collective motivation to take direct actions that actively address discrimination and foster a supportive culture for all within the university.

Theme 1. Student learning environments

Respondents have experienced discriminatory situations in diverse learning environments, i.e. in classroom situations or within particular educational contexts. We consider it extremely important to provide our students with a safe and nondiscriminatory environment so that they can flourish.

Survey quotes

1.1: "In the case of group work for courses, there are two ways of making groups. Either the course coordinators do so, or the students themselves. When students do it themselves it often seems like everyone clusters to what they're familiar with. Dutch go with Dutch, Asian with Asian etc. Of course it does kind of mix, but there will always be one or two groups that you know are just international students that did not know that many others and lack a mixed skillset in the group. I always find this group-making quite stressful and by letting students pick themselves, groups can turn out very un-diverse. I feel that it is much easier if diverse groups are selected before by course coordinators."

1.2: "We have to work about two times per week in a group assignment. I was the only non-Dutch speaker. At the beginning everything went ok, but a group member kept speaking in Dutch (she was not comfortable speaking English), pushing everyone else to do the same. It was like a snowball, because it happens a little at the beginning but then it was something that happens all the time. Besides feeling isolated, it affected my performance in the work, because I was unable to understand what it was already discussed. I should have spoken up, but I didn't (many reason that could explain it)."

1.3: "I sat down in class, watching presentation from another group of students. The presenter was an Italian girl I believed. I remember she was very active and delivered many great opinions during the class. However, three Dutch students that sat next to me, they kept discussing how thick her Italian accent was, and how they hated it. Moreover, they continued discussing about other students in class who spoke with accents in a very condescending manner. I was very uncomfortable and tried to break the 'discussion' by saying that there was nothing wrong with accents and the content was what mattered. Obviously they didn't stop and continue laughing. They even went further saying that they wished they didn't get in the same team with these people."

1.4: "In class some professors illustrate some of their bad experiences by sharing examples from Africa, mostly from Africa. This may amplify a belief by those who have never been to Africa that society is still primitive there. Unfortunately, there's usually no possibility to correct them live."

Anonymous FNP reactions

“1.3 raises for me the role of teachers in speaking out”

“I recognize all of these from my own master program. This is really happening a lot.”

“Recognition, there’s no evaluation on discrimination in class, neither within the content of the courses”



“Group work is always tricky. With corona it also helps students can group up with people they know.”

“1.4 – a guideline could be that we ‘always’ have cases from both Europe and outside – so that students don’t feel discriminated against that good/bad examples only form one continent place”

“Thinking about what teachers and course coordinators can do, like making this issue explicit or discuss dynamics of group work, or provide ways for students to approach”


Possible steps forward

- Teachers need to be careful about group formation. Pre-selected groups can help mixing and students getting used to other cultures, perhaps particularly in random group allocation.
- Teachers need to actively stipulate that the main language is English, both in plenary sessions and in group work.
- A course in intercultural skills is likely to benefit students and student-student interactions, especially at the beginning of the masters.
- Discrimination needs to be openly addressed within classes, to open up the conversation with students.
- Teachers must include issues of discrimination in the evaluation form of the course.

Theme 2. Staff-student interactions


Respondents commented on a variety of discriminatory experiences in accessing particular educational opportunities. These experiences primarily related to thesis research, course enrollment and intercultural communication skills.

Survey quotes




2.1: "One particular one stands out where I was discouraged in carrying out fieldwork in a developed country that I was interested in. I was informed that I needed to do research in my "own" country (developing country). It was quite confusing to me as my colleagues from Europe were not given any restrictions as to where they could conduct their fieldwork."

2.2: "I have experienced my friend being denied enrollment in courses because he registered after the deadline. This is fair, but not when some of our other classmates were also late to enroll and they did get enrolled. When I talked to him about if he thought it could be because of his race or sexuality (since he is a non-straight, non-white person)."



2.3: "My main concern is with the treatment which is given via supervision to students. We come from different backgrounds, where research is not done as in WUR (following the same structure, way of writing etc.). We are also required a proficiency test in English. However, I have heard that my English is very bad and have had supervision in ways that are predominantly demotivating and corruptive of my self-confidence... A more efficient and respectful way to address culturally diverse backgrounds is dramatically missed. Professors need training to relate to diversity and communicate in pro-active ways that build confidence to the student, that help them sufficiently to understand what he needs to do, instead of putting most of the pressure and responsibility on the student."



Anonymous FNP reactions

“2.1 this is definitely discrimination- its not in our thesis guidelines”

“Makes me think about ways in which the same event may be interpreted entirely differently by student and staff member”



“It is a big assumption that a non-European student will always go to their home country and is not interested in exploring other locations”

“what role does intention play? what role does personal experience play? and how to counter unconscious discrimination”


Possible steps forward

- Teachers and study advisors could explore and be aware of their biases.
- Diversity awareness training is a good idea to develop shared norms at WUR.
- We must treat students as individuals and create opportunities to speak to them individually to find out more about their interests and concerns.


Theme 3. Gender related concerns at work

Respondents reported practices of discrimination related to gender, in particular for senior or ambitious positions.

Survey quotes



3.1: "In WUR I have experienced indirect discrimination related mainly to gender. For example in the tenure track procedure where an "ambitious" research vision and VENI proposal by a woman is seen negatively, whereas from men it is seen positively. This is I feel associated to (predominantly Dutch) cultural norms about the roles of women. WUR has consistently NOT been open when it comes to getting data on how women perform in the PhD and tenure track process e.g. salary differences, career progression - despite having a gender strategy."



3.2: "Yes, for me it's mainly gender based discrimination towards women. It's not too obvious though, it's more the subtle comments in which women are being questioned in their intelligence, their ability to be objective et cetera. It's also the small things like dismissing/laughing away opinions or comments made by women."

Anonymous FNP reactions

"I recognize this comment myself!"

"That hit so close to home!"

"A subtle way of discrimination is interrupting women or persons of colour, it often happens"

"I think providing some transparency on career progression and wages for males and females would be very welcome"

"If you don't want to be like 'most men' and take your responsibilities for care of your children and parents it's very difficult."



"I recognize this. Also in graduation ceremonies for example, mostly male professors are handing out diplomas that are received by many talented young women. They do not see a representative example of career opportunities."

"I have not experienced this myself so far (as a woman) but can imagine this gets more difficult when it comes to leadership positions."

"Curious to hear more about what WUR does/does not do in relation to gender discrimination."

"relates maybe also in wider sense to family life and work/life balance issues in science"


Possible steps forward

- Reflect and be critical of on how committees are selected and organized (positive discrimination can help here).
- Scrutinize bias in valuation of capacities and how these are worded and framed in R&O evaluations, and funding and job applications.
- Adopt 'non-masculine' qualities in job quality & functioning assessments ,funding applications, and possibly also teaching evaluations.
- Have a position of a WUR ombudsperson created.
- Seek transparency on salary and compensation within WUR and assess if there is gender bias, in order for it to be corrected.
- Attend to the value of care responsibilities for all employees.
- Reflect on how course curriculum is gendered, enhancing gender diversity in authors and topics covered.


Theme 4. Positive or “invisible” discrimination

Respondents reflected upon their own positions and the advantages they experienced because of gender, race and sexual preference.


Survey quotes



4.1: *“I noticed that I was subject to a kind of ‘positive discrimination’. I was placed in an advice group because of my gender and age, not based on the useful contributions I might give to the group or on my experiences or whatsoever.”*



4.2: *“I haven’t experienced it personally in FNP, but do feel that we have had to raise issues of systematic discrimination biases (and also the need to positive discrimination) in recruitment processes or PhDs, staff and the chairs, whereas this kind of awareness (e.g. from the BAC committees and HR) should be built in.”*



4.3: *“No. But then again, I am white, male, straight and mostly busy with whatever is going on in my head, so I am neither in a group that often gets discriminated against nor someone who would easily notice if someone else is during a class.”*

Anonymous FNP reactions

“I think having meetings like and hearing about experiences of people from different backgrounds and with different orientations helps to increase sensitivity to discrimination”



“4.1 - I am for positive discrimination - it's a way to make the “not normal” more normal... even if it feels weird at first that you are invited because of who you are (ie sex/specific colour) AS well as what you know”

“There is perhaps a need to emphasize the value of diversity”

“I have mixed feelings. I think positive discrimination is sometimes necessary but I don't like to be asked because of my gender”

“Also positive discrimination can have negative impacts”

Possible steps forward

- This theme cuts across all others, as it further stresses the need to make different forms of discrimination more visible in ways that cultivate everyone's responsibility to create change.
- Progressive forms of positive discrimination can be challenging to get right, but there are many examples around the world that FNP/WUR can potentially learn from.
- More nuanced forms of language to talk about cultural differences in courses/academia is needed, beyond “developed vs. undeveloped” or “global North vs. South”.
- Role-plays that put people in the shoes of others who commonly experience forms of discrimination in WUR may be a powerful method to raise awareness and dialogue.
- There needs to be mandatory well-facilitated exploration of discrimination among students and staff so that efforts do not only attract people who are already concerned, while others who are more blind to discrimination fail to see the relevance to them.

Overall discussion and conclusion

With regards to Theme 1 (Student learning environments), the quotes show that students regularly feel discriminated against by their peers, particularly in the formation of group work and language used during interactions. Both survey and workshop recommendations focused on the role of teachers. We conclude that teachers need to take an active role to: 1) address this topic openly in class; 2) enforce/remind students that English is the main language; 3) carefully consider the process of student group formation; 4) scrutinize course content. This working group – among groups in other WUR chair groups – has started taking actions on to further each of these points.

On staff-student interactions (Theme 2), most of the areas where discrimination was experienced were in access to opportunities for the thesis as well as (perceived) double standards when it comes to guidelines and deadlines. Discussions during the workshop highlighted the importance of intentionality as well as how an action could be multi-interpretable depending on the sender and the recipient dynamic. We conclude that FNP teachers and study advisors would benefit from raising diversity awareness in general trainings, and we would like to take proactive steps within our group.

Gender related concerns at work (Theme 3) show that gender related discrimination is experienced in different ways, which we clustered into three focus areas. First, there is the experienced subtle and often implicit discrimination in day-to-day interactions. Second, there is the experienced structural gender inequity as it is institutionalized in WUR and wider academic culture. This may involve factors such as unequal (or gender-neutral) compensation and an emphasis on predominantly masculine leadership and evaluation criteria. Finally, gender discrimination can also be thought of as the lack of room for caring responsibilities (for both women and men); for example, in the expectation that work need to be prioritized over caring for children or parents. Men may also be experiencing negative discriminatory consequences from gender inequity too when there are gender biased expectations about how men in academia should function, profile themselves and choose their priorities.

Across the surveys, 41% of people reported experiencing or observing no or positive discrimination (Theme 4). Given the inherent and often invisible ways that people in privileged categories (e.g. “white, male, straight, abled”) regularly benefit from positive biases and discrimination, we identified a need to make these issues more visible, and to prioritize commonly disadvantaged groups. This also necessitates reflection on discriminatory structures that remain implicit in the culture of university work and education, such as ableism: the discrimination and social prejudice against people who are, or are perceived to, be disabled or less abled due to physical appearance or mental difference. Fighting ableism should go beyond making the university wheelchair friendly, to include sustained consideration of how to foster an inclusive and supportive climate for students and staff with mental health conditions as well as cognitive and physical differences. Our analysis suggested that mandatory sessions are needed at all levels to raise awareness beyond those already engaged.

With the survey, workshop and this report, we reflected upon our responsibility for acknowledging and intervening in processes and practices of discrimination. We concluded that we are all inherently implicit in discriminating structures, whether we intend to or not. The coming months, we will follow up on the action points described in this report and further strategize for future actions. **The FNP diversity group considers this report as one step in a journey towards a supportive, fostering and decolonized university for all.**