

Amsterdam, May 15, 2023

To the Management Team of the department of Physics & Astronomy:

Dear Johannes, Juan, Rick, and Jordi,

In the Fall of 2022, the DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) committee organized compulsory training workshops for our department staff. The workshops, led by expert trainer Esther Mollema, took place on November 14 and December 8, 2022, and saw the participation of most staff. Additionally, a third session was organized on February 1, 2023, during which the outcome of the previous workshops was discussed and condensed into specific actions aimed at improving departmental aspects related to DEI topics.

With the present document we summarize these proposals and their elaboration within our committee. We have identified three main themes of intervention: 1) community building and transparency, 2) hiring, onboarding, mentoring, and promoting PIs, and 3) affirmative action plans.

We hope you will find these suggestions useful!

Sincerely,

The DEI committee

(Andrea, Mara, Charusheela, David, Max, and Melike)

1. Community building and transparency

The D&I workshops identified several opportunities of intervention related to improving the sense of inclusion and belonging of the P&A staff. These can be divided into three areas of intervention: a) the senior staff meeting, b) the staff lunch meeting, and c) community-building initiatives within our department.

a) The **senior staff meeting** is seen as hierarchical, not inclusive, and an obstacle to the transparent flow of information to all staff members. Two proposals were made:

- i. **Eliminate** the senior staff meeting entirely and include its agenda topics into the staff lunch meeting.
- ii. **Change** the senior staff meeting into a "Sections' meeting" to which one representative from each section (i.e., not necessarily the section head) is invited. In this case, the agenda of the meeting should be shared in advance with all staff so that each section can identify the best person to attend the meeting. Additionally, the minutes and major outcomes of the meeting should be made available to all faculty and linked to our Department Resources URL.

b) The **staff lunch meeting** is perceived as a one-directional flow of information that misses the opportunity to gather valuable feedback from (all) staff members. Several improvements were proposed:

- i. Distribute in advance an **agenda** with discussion items and intended outcome. For example, if we are going to discuss the topic "Developments ME (Mechanical Engineering) UT-VU program relevant to the department", add what kind of feedback is requested from the staff. Each staff member can propose an agenda item to the MT. The meeting chair (see below) works with the MT in drafting the meeting agenda. Limit items that are exclusively "for your information" and do not necessitate participation and feedback from staff. These can be communicated through one of our many channels (Teams, department resources URL, emails, ...).
- ii. The preliminary discussions leading to the agenda should be made on the dedicated **Teams** channel, not via email. For example, the preliminary agenda points and requests for feedback are posted a week in advance. This allows for asynchronous discussion, clarification of questions ahead of time, and will allow the meeting organizers to manage the meeting time in a more focused and productive manner.
- iii. To signify that this is the "staff meeting" and to boost participation among all members, transfer the **chair** role to a staff member outside the MT. This can be a rotating role changing every meeting or, for example, once a year. The chair oversees the goals detailed in the agenda, keeping the scheduled times, and moderating discussions (raise hand then speak, do not interrupt, be mindful of cultural differences, be respectful, ...). This role would be a recognized administrative task.
- iv. If the senior staff meeting is canceled (see above), the **frequency** of the staff lunch meeting can increase to once a month.
- v. To further contribute to building an inclusive and interactive research community, **scientific research talks** given during staff lunch meetings should instead be directed to the whole department, including junior researchers. This will allow for broader overviews and more discussion of the research, while also allowing the staff lunch meetings to focus on faculty specific issues (teaching, research, management, etc.) To

this end the colloquium committee will begin incorporating internal senior speakers into the rotation.

c) Many staff members in our department feel isolated and lack a sense of belonging. The MT should help create and foster **community building** activities:

- i. Make sure that in the SWT building there will be a **department-wide coffee area**. This is currently done at the section-level, which prevents interaction opportunities among staff, postdocs, and PhDs. If possible, it would be great to have such a room already in the WN building.
- ii. Advertise the use of our **digital community** platform Teams to all staff and lead by example. Transfer the one-directional flow of information from the staff lunch meetings to Teams, where specific channels address different issues.
- iii. Enforce participation in the **department colloquia** for all staff: PIs, postdocs, and PhDs. Lead by example.
- iv. The 2022 department **retreat** was received very positively and should be organized regularly (at least every other year).

2. Hiring, onboarding, mentoring, and promoting PIs

Hiring new team members and ensuring their success is a key mission for our department. Starting a new job can be stressful and challenging, so we strive to provide a supportive, safe, and inclusive work environment for all. Our goal is to acknowledge and empower the diverse backgrounds and expectations of our team members and provide equal professional opportunities for all, in line with the vision expressed in the "Erkennen & Waarden" document. To achieve this, several proposals related to recruitment, career support, and promotion within the department have been made.

a) Add an **onboarding** section in the department resources URL with useful, practical information for newly hired people, such as who to contact for various tasks (project control, budget questions, purchasing questions, etc.), contacts of the grant office, structure and management of the department, teaching duties, and budget management guidelines.

b) **Grant support**. Staff should receive assistance in forming discussion groups to gather feedback on their proposals. The staff lunch meeting could be used to offer a platform to people preparing proposals to pitch their ideas (1 slide, 1 minute) and assemble a "feedback committee" among the interested PIs present. This would have the additional advantage of sharing valuable information among the staff (which proposals are in the pipeline), helping the creation of a sense of community. Postdocs writing proposals such as Veni or MSCA (Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions) can be invited to pitch their ideas as well and recruit their feedback committee. A list of accepted proposals in the last ~5 years could be maintained in the Files section of our "03. Funding" Teams channel, so that staff members know who to reach out to for advice and discussion on various funding opportunities.

c) A proposal has been made to have staff **promotions** evaluated by a dedicated standing benoemingsadviescommissie (a promotion BAC, or pBAC) in coordination with HR. The members of the pBAC would be nominated within the department staff, including representatives at all levels (UD, UHD, and HL). The pBAC would be installed for a fixed period,

e.g., one year, and rotate at the end of the period. This approach would be more efficient in evaluating candidates for promotion and would mitigate the risk of bias or difficult interpersonal relationships negatively impacting the evaluation. For this reason, the section head can be consulted but should not have a decision role in the promotion evaluation. The pBAC should publish a yearly report to be shared with all staff, with statistics of promotions by gender and nationality. The pBAC can also proactively identify promotion opportunities that can mitigate potential biases at the department level. Of course, staff members serving on the pBAC should be recognized for their work. Note that the pBAC is different from the individual BACs assembled for staff recruitment processes.

d) Explore the possibility of setting up a structured **mentoring** program for junior PIs in which, upon recruitment and as part of the onboarding process, junior recruits are given the opportunity to pair with a senior mentor from outside their section/research project, to support their development of academic leadership skills. The mentor role should be recognized as an official task within the department and the mentoring program should have a clear agenda, structure, and list of goals. Similar mentoring initiatives should be devised for PhD candidates (within the graduate school) and postdoctoral researchers, to prepare them for their professional future inside or outside of academia.

3. Affirmative action plans

A core mission of our Physics and Astronomy department is to ensure that all staff members have the same career opportunities, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, language, abilities/disabilities, sexual orientation, parental and socioeconomic background, or country of origin. However, safeguarding diversity, equity, and inclusion cannot be left only to our goodwill and needs targeted strategies to mitigate the effect of explicit and implicit biases intrinsic to our society, upbringing, and human nature. Proposals for fair and simple affirmative actions have been made to tip the balance back towards equity in three areas: a) promotions, b) hiring, and c) leaves.

a) Assess our departmental documents "[Career Tracks at the Physics and Astronomy department](#)" and "[Procedure for internal promotions](#)" vis-à-vis the position paper "[Erkennen en Waarderen](#)". These **promotion** policy documents are a very welcome addition to our department life and a big step forward in terms of transparency. With a clear mandate from the MT, the DEI committee can take the lead in reviewing these initial recommendations and sending comments back to the MT.

b) Currently, there exist no departmental guidelines for hiring new team members (PhDs, postdocs, UDs, ...). Adopting uniform and transparent hiring rules can be a key step to ensure equity in the selection of a diverse and excellent workforce. The MT should set up a dedicated committee (like the ones for DEI, the department seminars, and the graduate school) that, together with HR, will draft specific **hiring** guidelines. These need not be a series of strict rules and procedures, but rather a list of tips and best practices such as (but not limited to) how to:

- de-bias job ads and reach the widest and most diverse pool of applicants;
- interpret cover letters and curricula (for example, how to account for care roles);
- select the best applicant among the ones interviewed;

- set up an external observer of the hiring process to help identify possible blind spots;
- ...

While this task may fall within the scope of the DEI committee, this currently does not have sufficient members to carry it out.

c) **Parental** and **sick leave** can be detrimental to the career development of our staff. Simple actions can be taken to mitigate the damage to scientists who need to be absent because they are sick or must care for children and elderly people at home. The MT should review our existing parental and sick policies, inform staff about them, and clearly advertise them online, for example on our department resources URL, our Teams channel, and/or on our website. These policies should include aspects related to:

- what are the rules for taking parental and sick leave;
- what can be done to mitigate their effects on the research and teaching tasks;
- how to arrange replacements;
- what financial support is available, if any;
- ...