

Dear DEI committee, dear colleagues,

First, many thanks to the DEI committee for their report and for all the work they put into it! There are some very good and useful suggestions in it, but also some points that we as MT have some reservations about. Particularly, we believe that several issues are better addressed within the sections. Below we respond point by point to each of the proposals.

The report, plus this response, are on the agenda for the upcoming staff lunch meeting on the 6th of June. We ask everyone in the department to go through the report and our response so that we can have a broad and open discussion about it during the lunch meeting.

1. Community building and transparency

a) Senior staff meeting

We are unhappy to hear that a sense of hierarchy, a lack of transparency, and non-inclusiveness emanates from the so-called senior staff meeting. We point out however that the goal of such meetings is not to take decisions purely based on hierarchy, but rather to benefit from the broader span of control that more experienced colleagues have, in particular full professors, in order to take consensual decisions. The senior staff with a broad management history acted as an advisory board to the MT.

Based on the recommendations of the DEI report, our proposal would be to rename the meeting as "Section Head Meeting". The agenda will be shared with everyone in advance via the department's Teams page, and the (anonymized) minutes will be shared afterwards as well. Furthermore, we also go along with the proposal to give section heads the freedom to send another representative from the section whenever the topics to be discussed justify it.

b) Staff lunch meeting

We agree with the DEI committee that the agenda for the staff lunch meeting should be shared in advance, and indeed this has been the case for the last few staff lunch meetings. The agenda is always shared in advance through the department's Teams page. It can and may also be responded to via Teams. If subjects are not on the agenda that someone expects or thinks should be on it, or if topics are not of interest, the discussion can take place in the Teams environment and the agenda can be adjusted if necessary.

We see less added value in rotating the chairperson role. We are not unsympathetic to this, but do not see any added value in it. Sharing the agenda in advance and having the topics up for discussion the week before the staff lunch meeting ensures that the topics discussed at the meeting are those relevant to the department. Moreover, because of the structure of the meeting (one or more people present a topic), the chairperson role effectively already rotates within a meeting. The presenting staff introduce the topic and lead the discussion on it. The chairperson of the meeting then only monitors the allocated time.

Furthermore, we share the DEI committee's proposal not to have scientific research talks during the lunch meeting. These can and should be held at another meeting, and including junior researchers would make the talks more interesting. If there is support for such a meeting, we invite anyone to volunteer and organize these meetings.

c) Community building activities

In the new SWT building, there will be shared coffee areas. Unfortunately, as we will be divided over three floors, there will be three of those. This is not to say that we cannot organize set times on one of those floors for the whole department to get together and strengthen the feeling of belonging. Furthermore, we try to enhance the feeling of belonging also via activities organized for the whole department (our tree-climbing activity and barbecue in July for example, a dinner in December and the department retreat, which we will have again in June 2024 at the same venue of the 2022 one).

We agree that the digital community on our Teams page should be further advertised, and we also agree that we should lead by example. We are doing our best already, but there is always room for improvement.

Lastly, concerning this point, we would like to address the departmental colloquia. We do not share the DEI committee's proposal to enforce participation for PIs. We do, however, want to emphasize that we encourage all scientific personnel to attend the colloquia. This said, PhD candidates' attendance to the departmental colloquia will be made compulsory since it is part of their graduate school requirements.

2. Hiring, onboarding, mentoring, and promoting PIs

a) Onboarding

We agree with the proposal made by the DEI committee. All relevant information, not only concerning onboarding, but all relevant pieces of information should be added to the department's Teams page. We would like to ask for two volunteers (e.g., recent hires in the department) to assess the current information and make suggestions for improvement, either because information is missing or because information is in not easy to find and should be replaced within the Teams page. Our secretariat can assist in compiling all these links and documents.

b) Grant support

We do share the statement that every staff member should get assistance in drafting grant proposals. However, this is something that must be done (and it already happens in many cases) at the section level, as the knowledge to provide relevant feedback that improves the proposal can be typically found within the section. We encourage all sections to make sure everyone within the section receives the help they need to draft proposals. We also note that the VU has a dedicated grants office that provides support to all staff applying for grants.

c) Promotions

We disagree with the proposal made by the DEI committee to create a standing BAC to evaluate promotions. Although we share the DEI committee's concerns of bias in promotions, we believe that our current process of promoting staff members mitigates this risk to a considerable extent. For completeness, let us summarize the current process:

- i. Informal conversations between employees and line managers throughout the year. In these conversations, in our view, the supervisor acts as the coach for the employee, helping to meet the requirements for the upcoming step/promotion.
- ii. The abovementioned conversations are formalized in the yearly performance appraisal talks (Jaargesprekken). From these, it should become clear at what level the staff member is performing and what needs to be done to take the next step. We encourage colleagues to use the criteria that the faculty uses to evaluate promotions and how these are translated into the specific requirements of our department. These documents can be found on the department's Teams page.
- iii. The annual performance appraisal talks form the basis for the manager's assessment ahead of the MT's annual *vlootschouw*. The managers' input is discussed by the MT, together with the HR advisor, during this *vlootschouw*. After the *vlootschouw*, the MT discusses the outcome with each section head. From those discussions, a conclusion is drawn as to a promotion and, if so, when. It is important to mention that, in addition to the input from the manager, the input from the onderwijsdirecteuren, HR (regarding completed courses such as the BKO or SKO) and research output (bibliographic estimators, grants secured), are also considered.
- iv. Staff members who qualify for a promotion are then presented to the BAC, who provide formal advice to the FB. The FB decides whether to approve a promotion. We emphasize that this last step is not a mere formality.

Given this procedure, we think that the risk of bias is mitigated. However, it does not completely prevent difficult interpersonal relationships between staff members and their direct line manager. To overcome this, there is always the possibility for staff members to inform the MT of this problem and eventually to request a change of line manager. There is no set process to address this, but of course the MT will take these signals seriously and acts accordingly.

d) Mentoring

Even though it may not be formalized, we think that a structured mentoring program is in place. Every new staff member is offered a mentor. Everyone (not only new staff members) wanting a mentor will get a mentor. We will publicize this option so that all interested staff can benefit from it.

3. Affirmative action plans

a) Promotion policies

We encourage everyone to assess all departmental policies in place. Therefore, we encourage the DEI committee to review the promotion policies and make suggestions for improvement. However, regarding the promotion policies, we follow the criteria set by the faculty for a large part. Which is not to say that we cannot make proposals for improvement to the FB.

b) Hiring guidelines

It is true that, currently, no hiring guidelines exist. However, good practices in hiring are part of the course on supervising PhDs. Also, there are best practices available at the faculty level. We will add

these to our Teams page, so that they are easy to find for everyone. Therefore, we think no additional guidelines are needed.

c) *Parental and sick leave*

Parental and sick leave policies are available at the university level. We have no policies at the department level, as we must follow the university's policies. We will also make these policies available on the Teams page, so that they are easy to find.

Although being sick for a longer period or having children may be detrimental to one's career (this is something that may occur and in that case is inevitable), we want to emphasize that the time off for parental or sick leave is never input in discussions about promotions. These are based on the staff objective performance, as explained under 2C. It may, in the case of parental or sick leave, take longer to meet the criteria, but the fact that it took more time is never part of those criteria.

We hope to have provided all of you with a proper reaction to the proposals made by the DEI committee. As said, the report and this reaction will be discussed during the upcoming staff lunch meeting and are therefore, by no means, a final decision. Please read the report and this reaction and form your own opinion on the topics in the report. Your input is highly relevant during the discussion.

Best,

Johannes, Juan, Rick, Jordi