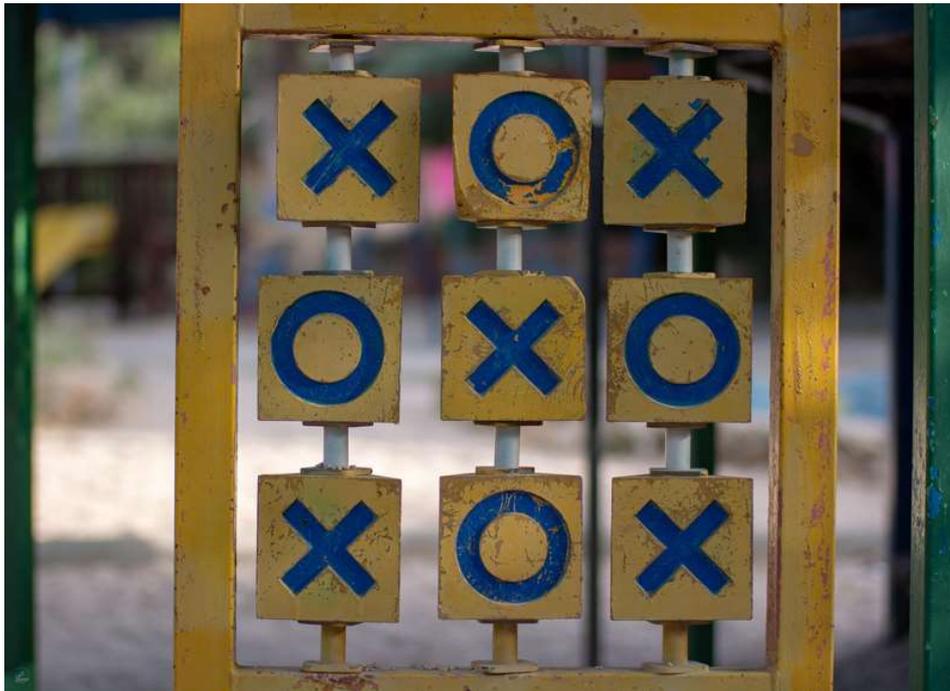# Exclusion in Dutch Academia

Systemic Barriers and the Need for Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms

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September 2025

Introduction

Academia is often presumed to be a meritocratic space where knowledge, expertise and performance determine success. However, structural inequalities persist, marginalizing individuals based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, nationality, and the like. Exclusion in academia manifests itself in various forms such as discrimination, nepotism, unconscious bias, and systemic barriers that hinder equal opportunities.

This report is based on two workshops held at the University of Amsterdam on November 5 and December 3, 2024. Seventeen scholars and policy officers from various levels and functions participated, representing four higher education institutions in Amsterdam: the University of Amsterdam (UvA), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA), and In Holland University of Applied Sciences.

The first workshop aimed to identify the causes, manifestations, and mechanisms of exclusion within Dutch academia that affect faculty members. It also sought to examine the broader implications of these exclusionary practices, including their impact on career advancement, access to research opportunities, professional networks, representation in leadership roles, well-being, and the overall quality of education. The second workshop focused on reflecting on the findings from the first workshop and formulating actionable policy recommendations to address the identified challenges.

This report provides a summary of the key findings and insights that emerged from the two workshops. The draft version has also been shared with multiple individuals—including those who did not take part in the workshops—and their feedback has been integrated into the final version. The analysis is presented across three main sections, each focusing on both the challenges and the corresponding actionable strategies for change:

1. **Mechanisms of Exclusion** – detailing how systemic and structural barriers operate within academic institutions to disadvantage certain individuals and groups.

2. **Barriers to Accountability** – exploring the challenges individuals face when raising concerns, including weak oversight, institutional resistance, and power imbalances.

3. **Challenges in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Efforts** – highlighting limitations of current DEI initiatives and the implications of exclusion for individuals, institutions, and the broader academic ecosystem.

This report should be regarded as a living document, open to refinement and continuous updating as new experiences, insights, and perspectives emerge.

Priorities for Action

While the recommendations in this report are broad and interconnected, leadership may benefit from clear starting points. To avoid paralysis and foster momentum, three immediate actions might be prioritized:

1. **Improve transparency in decision-making** (e.g., committee composition, promotion processes, complaint handling) to build confidence in fairness.
2. **Strengthen independence of accountability mechanisms** (e.g., Ombudsperson, HR, confidential advisors) to ensure impartiality and trust.
3. **Protect complainants from retaliation** through concrete safeguards that guarantee social safety.

These actions can serve as a foundation for further reform, demonstrating institutional commitment and creating trust that more comprehensive changes will follow. Longer-term, a phased strategy might focus first on urgent protections, then on structural reforms, and finally on cultural transformation. Increasingly, voices across academia are also calling for *the establishment of external, independent complaint mechanisms outside of higher education institutions*, recognising that genuine accountability cannot rest solely within the same structures where abuses have occurred.

Why This Report Matters

This document was created out of a shared sense of responsibility to address unfair treatment and systemic injustice in academia. As members of the higher education community, we believe higher education institutions must take a leading role in Dutch society by advancing diversity, equity, and justice—particularly at a time when DEI efforts are increasingly undermined and attacked by powerful forces worldwide. Institutions cannot credibly advocate for equality, critical inquiry, and social responsibility while tolerating exclusion and discrimination within their own structures.

Mechanisms of Exclusion

The academic environment may perpetuate systemic inequalities, resulting in the exclusion of certain groups and individuals in hiring and career progression processes. These mechanisms may operate at various levels, often implicit, and deeply ingrained within the institutional culture and structure. They represent potential patterns of exclusion, with various ones active to differing degrees across program groups, departments and institutions.

I. Opaque and Arbitrary HR Systems for Recruitment and Promotion

Opaque and Inconsistent Promotion Criteria: Promotion pathways in academia might lack transparency, with criteria that vary across individuals, departments, and institutions. Inconsistencies in how formal requirements are interpreted or applied may create uncertainty for faculty seeking advancement. In some cases, additional or ad hoc expectations are introduced selectively and informally, leading to an uneven playing field and potentially reinforcing systemic barriers.

Strategies

a. **Standardize and Publicize Hiring and Promotion Guidelines**: Develop clear, written criteria for hiring and promotion at all levels (e.g., develop a detailed rubric outlining expectations for research, teaching, management, social impact). Require hiring and promotion criteria (as an addition to the UFO criteria) to be *documented, public, and consistent* across all staff members within the same department and the faculty.

b. **Implement Bias-Resistant Evaluation Process**: Reduce subjectivity by structuring deliberations around measurable benchmarks. Where possible,

incorporate blinded file reviews to minimize identity-based biases in initial assessments. Evaluation committees should work collaboratively to ensure that transparent and equitable standards are applied consistently across all candidates.

c. **Annual Promotion Info Sessions**: Organize yearly workshops where HR and leadership explain promotion pathways, answer questions, and clarify expectations.

d. **Mentoring Committees for Career Advancement**: Establish formal mentoring committees for early- and mid-career academics to guide them through promotion processes and help them meet the criteria.

e. **Audit of Past Promotion Cases:** Ensure adherence to transparent criteria by monitoring outcomes and addressing disparities. Conduct *anonymous and regular* audit of past promotion decisions (by gender, ethnicity and department) to identify and rectify inconsistency in criteria application and identify disparities.

Preconstructed Narratives to Justify Decisions: Hiring, promotion, and leadership appointments are sometimes informally decided in advance, with formal selection procedures functioning more as symbolic gestures than genuine evaluations. To preserve the appearance of fairness, tailored narratives are constructed to legitimize these decisions, framing them as merit-based. Criteria may be selectively applied or interpreted differently depending on the candidate, allowing decision-makers to reinforce preferred outcomes while sidelining equally—or more—qualified individuals.

Strategies

a. **Require Justification Reports for All Hiring/Promotion Decisions**: Selection committees should be required to submit written justifications, explicitly linking decisions to stated criteria and evidence, and showing how each candidate meets or does not meet the established criteria.

b. **Ensure fairness in recruitment materials:** Vacancy texts might at times be written in ways that make favoured candidates—such as close associates of a department chair—more eligible for a position. To address this, all vacancy texts should be reviewed and approved before publication by a diverse selection committee representing multiple perspectives.

c. **Limit Informal Decision-Making**: Discourage preselection and preconstructed narratives by requiring anonymized longlisting of candidates and structured interviews with standardized evaluation rubrics.

d. **Diverse and Rotating Committees**: Ensure selection committees are diverse in terms of gender, background, and academic perspective, and rotate their composition regularly to prevent entrenched decision-making dynamics. In cases of potential conflict of interest—for example, when a former PhD student of a professor is applying for an assistant professor position—that professor should not serve on the selection committee. Each committee must include at least two external faculty members (from other faculties or universities) and maintain at least 50% female representation.

e. **Bias Awareness Training for Committees**: Provide mandatory training on cognitive and structural biases for all members of selection and promotion committees, with real-case scenarios for reflection. This can include training on how preconstructed narrative operate and how to spot and resist biased storytelling in academic decision-making.

f. **Third-Party Observers in Selection Committees:** Include trained, impartial observers in high-stakes selection and promotion committees to flag premeditated decisions and enforce fair process.

g. **Appeal Mechanisms for Candidates:** Introduce formal channels through which candidates can request clarification or challenge procedural irregularities in selection outcomes.

Disregard of Existing Procedural Faculty Regulations: Existing criteria for selection and promotion may be overlooked or deliberately disregarded when leadership seeks to favour specific candidates for various reasons, such as institutional loyalty, personal connections, or strategic interests. This selective application of regulations allows preselected individuals to advance, while other qualified candidates are unfairly excluded from opportunities.

Strategies

a. **Create an Independent Oversight Body**: Establish a committee outside the hierarchical structure to monitor adherence to HR and academic regulations with the authority to intervene in cases of procedural violations.
b. **Mandatory Procedural Audits:** Require regular audits of selection and promotion processes to verify that regulations are followed consistently. Publish audit summaries to enhance transparency and accountability.
c. **Procedural Checklists and Sign-Offs**: Introduce standardized procedural checklists that must be completed and signed by committee chairs and HR, confirming that all steps were followed according to policy.
d. **Anonymous Reporting Mechanism**: Create a confidential reporting channel for faculty and staff to report procedural breaches without fear of retaliation.
e. **Whistleblower Protection and Reporting Mechanisms:** Develop confidential channels for reporting violations of procedures, with guaranteed protection from retaliation.
f. **Strengthen Complaint Registration and Data Retention:** Ensure that all complaints related to selection and promotion processes are formally registered, regardless of whether they lead to formal investigations. Extend data retention to enable the identification of patterns and potential repeat offenders.
g. **Sanctions for Non-compliance**: Introduce meaningful consequences for departments or individuals that bypass or disregard agreed-upon procedures.

Homogeneity in Selection Committees: Selection committees might include a recurring group of individuals, limiting the range of perspectives in hiring and promotion decisions. When the same people oversee these processes repeatedly, there is a risk of reinforcing existing (personal) preferences, unconscious biases, and institutional norms. This can affect diversity in recruitment and career advancement, making it harder for new voices and perspectives to be recognized.

Strategies

a. **Diversity and Rotation Mandates**: Set rules that limit repeated participation on selection committees and require gender, disciplinary, and ethnic diversity.
b. **Randomized Committee Selection from a Diverse Pool**: Use randomized selection from a vetted pool of eligible faculty to avoid entrenched group dynamics.
c. **Bias Training for Committee Members**: Require recurring training on unconscious bias, cultural competence, and inclusive evaluation practices.

II.   Administrative and Managerial Power Dynamics

Inequitable Access to Coordination Roles: Coordination tasks and responsibilities can enhance visibility within a program group or department, fostering collaboration and professional recognition. However, access to these roles is not always equitable. Leadership may allocate coordination positions based on personal affiliations rather than merit. International staff, for example, are sometimes excluded due to (perceived) deficiencies in Dutch language skills—even when the relevance of such language skills for the specific coordination role is questionable.

Strategies

a. **Transparent Call for Coordination Roles:** Require all coordination related positions (e.g., committee leadership, track coordination) to be advertised internally with clearly stated selection criteria and expectations.
b. **Equitable Rotation System:** Implement a system of rotating coordination roles across staff of different backgrounds to avoid concentration of influence.
c. **Language Inclusion Review:** Re-evaluate the necessity of Dutch language proficiency for coordination roles and offer language support or co-coordination models where feasible.

Inequitable Access to Management Roles: Management positions carry significant institutional power and such roles are important for career advancement, grant acquisition and professional growth both within and beyond academia. However, such roles might be inaccessible to individuals outside established inner circles. The selection processes for these roles may lack transparency and can favour those with influential sponsors or those perceived as a better "fit" within dominant networks. Various reasoning—such as lacking Dutch language proficiency, being deemed too interdisciplinary or having too much research time—can serve as justifications for exclusion.

Strategies

a. **Formal and Transparent Appointment Processes:** Require open calls and documented evaluation procedures for all management roles, with independent oversight.
b. **Inclusive Selection Committees:** Ensure selection committees include diverse members across gender, ethnicity, academic background, and career stage.
c. **Bias Interrogation Workshops:** Facilitate workshops for those involved in leadership selection to recognize hidden biases related to "fit," interdisciplinarity, or perceived foreignness.
d. **Equitable Rotation System:** Implement a rotation system for management roles that includes staff from diverse backgrounds, ensuring equitable access to leadership opportunities. This allows a broader range of employees to develop and demonstrate their leadership skills.

Ineffective Leadership through Prioritisation of Academic Success: Leadership appointments in academia often prioritize academic achievements—such as securing research grants and maintaining a high publication record—over actual leadership capabilities and emotional intelligence. However, academic excellence does not necessarily equate to effective management skills. This misalignment can lead to ineffective leadership, poor team cohesion, diminished morale, and an inability to foster an inclusive and supportive work environment.

a. **Democratic Elections for Higher Leadership Positions:** A transparent election system can be installed for institute directors, deans, and CvB members. All faculty will be eligible to nominate themselves, and these positions will be filled through a faculty-wide vote. Leadership roles can no longer be appointed by individuals already in high leadership, ensuring democratic legitimacy and institutional accountability.

b. **Acknowledge Broader Contributions**: Recognize teaching excellence, mentorship, DEI work, public engagement, and administrative service as valid and valuable in promotion criteria.

c. **Leadership Criteria Redesign:** Develop a competency-based leadership framework that values emotional intelligence, mentoring, conflict resolution, empathy, high sense of integrity and inclusivity alongside academic merit.

d. **360-Degree Feedback for Leaders:** Implement anonymous feedback systems that allow team members to assess leadership performance beyond research output.

e. **Leadership Development Programs:** Offer institutional training or coaching for academic leaders, focused on team building, equitable management, and inclusive decision-making.

f. **Peer Consultation:** Leadership roles require ongoing support and reflection. Introducing structured peer consultation can help leaders better understand the responsibilities of their position, navigate complex situations, and develop more effective and empathetic responses

Fuzzy Power Dynamics: Power relationships in academia are often presented as non-hierarchical, with claims of flat structures and egalitarianism (e.g., "You can call me by my first name"). However, these informal approaches obscure real power dynamics, making it difficult to challenge authority or recognize where decision-making power lies. This lack of formalization fosters ambiguity and diminishes accountability.

a. **Formal Role and Decision-Making Charts:** Map and publicly share decision-making processes and lines of authority within departments and institutions so that all staff understand where power resides and how decisions are made.

b. **Transparency in Role Expectations:** Clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and authority of leadership positions (e.g., program directors, chairs, deans) to prevent informal hierarchies from dominating.

c. **Power Mapping Workshops:** Organize facilitated sessions to identify how power flows within the institution and to demystify the informal channels of influence.

d. **Regular Town Halls or Forums:** Host structured meetings where leadership decisions and institutional developments are discussed transparently, allowing for questions and input.

e. **Regular Power Literacy Workshops:** Offer training for faculty and staff on recognizing and navigating institutional power dynamics, with a focus on how informal authority and structural inequality operate in "flat" academic cultures.

f. **Shared Governance Mechanisms:** Strengthen participatory governance by involving faculty, staff, and students in decision-making processes through representative bodies or advisory councils with real influence.

Lack of Reflexivity in Leadership
Some academic leaders demonstrate a limited capacity for self-reflection and critical evaluation of their management practices, and might react to feedback with hyper defensiveness and self-righteousness. This lack of introspection perpetuates systemic inequities, as leaders fail to recognize or address biases, power imbalances, and exclusionary institutional dynamics. An unwillingness to critically assess leadership practices fosters a stagnant academic culture resistant to meaningful change.

Strategies

a. **Leadership Self-Assessment Tools:** Introduce regular self-evaluation tools that include questions on equity, inclusion, and openness to feedback.
b. **Facilitate Peer Learning Circles:** Create confidential spaces where academic leaders can engage in peer reflection and exchange on ethical dilemmas, power, and inclusion, guided by trained facilitators where possible.
c. **Encourage Feedback and Upward Dialogue**: Create formal channels for faculty and staff to provide feedback on leadership decisions, with protections against retaliation and follow-up mechanisms to ensure responsiveness.
d. **Leadership Accountability Reviews**: Include reflexivity and responsiveness to feedback as criteria in annual leadership evaluations, with concrete expectations for improvement and follow-through.
e. **Reflective Leadership Training:** Require leadership development programs to include modules on self-awareness, bias recognition, and critical reflection, encouraging leaders to examine how their actions affect institutional culture and equity.
f. **Model Vulnerability from the Top:** Encourage senior leadership to publicly model self-reflection, acknowledge mistakes, and share lessons learned, setting a tone that normalizes growth-oriented leadership.

Bias in Leadership Values: In some academic institutions, leadership decision-making tends to focus on minimizing operational challenges, such as managing budgets, maintaining institutional reputation, and addressing immediate logistical concerns. While diversity and inclusion initiatives are often recognized as important, they may be deprioritized when competing with other institutional pressures. As a result, efforts to foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment can receive less attention or resources, limiting long-term structural change.

Strategies
a. **Integrate Inclusion into Institutional Key Performance Indicators**: Embed DEI metrics into annual performance reviews for departments and leadership. Make inclusion a core measure of institutional success, not an optional add-on.
b. **Secure Dedicated DEI Budgets**: Allocate permanent, ring-fenced funding for DEI initiatives, with transparent reporting on how funds are used to prevent diversion to other institutional priorities.
c. **Empower an Inclusion Task Force:** Create a cross-functional DEI task force with formal authority to advise on and review all major institutional strategies, budgets, and policies to ensure equity is structurally embedded.
d. **Tie Leadership Incentives to Inclusion Outcomes**: Incentivize progress on inclusion goals through tangible rewards—such as promotions, or access to special project funding—linked to demonstrated commitment and outcomes.

Lack of Awareness and Training: Another major challenge is the lack of training for leadership on recognizing and addressing discrimination, bias, and microaggressions, and for fostering inclusive and equitable work environments. Without this knowledge,

administrators and faculty in leadership roles may dismiss concerns, mishandle complaints, or reinforce systemic inequities, even when policies exist. Additionally, many leaders remain unaware of institutional DEI policies or unclear on how to enforce them, particularly in cases involving senior academics. This inconsistent application of policies allows bias, favouritism, and exclusionary practices to persist.

Strategies

a. **Mandatory DEI Training for Leadership:** Require regular, scenario-based training for all leadership roles on bias, microaggressions, conflict resolution, and institutional policy enforcement.
b. **Clear Policy Guides with Case Studies:** Develop accessible guides explaining how to apply DEI policies in practice, including complex cases involving senior staff.
c. **Accountability Dashboard:** Create a public dashboard tracking training completion, policy application, and DEI goals across departments.
d. **Institutional Courage Charter:** Develop a code of ethics or "charter of institutional courage" that commits the university to prioritizing truth, justice, and inclusion over reputation management. This can serve as a compass for leadership and oversight bodies.
e. **Monthly Bulletin:** Introduce a monthly anonymous bulletin for leadership, featuring fictionalized case narratives based on real issues. This approach can promote reflection, raise awareness, and encourage proactive responses to social safety concerns without compromising confidentiality.

III. Other Implicit and Structural Barriers

Implicit Bias and Hurdles: Policies and norms are often shaped by a dominant demographic (e.g., native Dutch, senior professors), unintentionally creating hierarchies and barriers for others. Unconscious stereotypes or attitudes about race, gender, age, disability, or other characteristics can influence hiring, promotion, and evaluation processes. Discriminatory practices may also be so ingrained in the organizational culture that they are not recognized or addressed.

Strategies

a. **Bias Literacy Training (Mandatory & Recurring):** Implement institution-wide training on implicit bias, structural racism, and intersectionality, tailored for both faculty and leadership.
b. **Bias Interrupters in Evaluation Processes:** Integrate checklists and prompts into recruitment and promotion procedures to disrupt biased decision-making (e.g., asking "Would I assess this the same way if this candidate were Dutch/male/tenured?").
c. **Diversity Advocates on Committees:** Assign trained individuals to monitor inclusion and equity during hiring and promotion deliberations.
d. **Internal Audits on Diversity Outcomes:** Regular reviews of outcomes disaggregated by race, gender, nationality, etc., to track who gets hired, promoted, mentored—and who doesn't.

Affinity Bias: Favouritism based on shared background, educational history, or social connections can influence decision-making in academic environments, creating barriers for those who lack insider networks. Both international and native Dutch staff who do not fit

into established social or professional circles may face challenges in accessing opportunities, mentorship, or career advancement.

Naivety: Implicit policies and biases within academia might go unnoticed for years, creating an environment where systemic inequities are accepted as the norm. Individuals new to the system may initially avoid questioning these biases to avoid being labelled as paranoid or disruptive. By the time the underlying bias becomes clear, it might be too late to address or counteract its effects, leaving individuals at a significant disadvantage.

Structural Racism: Structural racism might manifest through deeply embedded misconceptions, assumptions, and biases that disadvantage non-Western and minoritised employees. These systemic inequities might be perpetuated through hiring practices, promotion pathways, and everyday interactions, creating barriers that are difficult to challenge or dismantle.

Lack of Representation: Long-standing systemic barriers, such as underrepresentation of certain groups in academia, might perpetuate exclusion. A homogenous faculty body may make underrepresented members feel isolated or unsupported.

Strategies

a. **Foster Racial Diversity and Eliminate Barriers to Inclusion:** Develop and implement targeted policies to recruit, retain, and promote a more racially diverse student and staff population. This includes setting measurable diversity goals, providing mentorship and support programs for underrepresented groups, and ensuring equitable access to career advancement opportunities. Institutions must also take active steps to identify and eliminate the negative impacts of race and related differences—such as systemic bias, microaggressions, and unequal access to networks—on the experiences and trajectories of students and staff. Regular reviews of institutional practices should be conducted to ensure sustained progress toward racial equity.

b. **Gender Equity Targets and Annual Reporting:** Each faculty, institute, and department will establish clear targets for the recruitment, retention, and promotion of women at all employment levels. These targets must be accompanied by a concrete annual plan detailing the steps and strategies to achieve them, such as inclusive hiring practices, mentorship programs, and leadership development opportunities for women. Progress toward these targets can be tracked and publicly reported in an annual faculty report, fostering accountability and transparency while highlighting areas for further improvement in gender equity.

c. **Retain Talented Staff on Temporary Contracts:** Recognize that employees on temporary contracts—often from marginalized groups—represent significant talent at risk of being lost to academia. Proactively coordinate across departments to identify ongoing opportunities for contract extension or permanent roles.

d. **Pipeline Programs and Equity Hiring Funds:** Develop programs that identify promising early-career researchers from minoritized backgrounds and offer them tailored support.

e. **Visibility Campaigns:** Highlight underrepresented scholars in newsletters, panels, awards, and leadership roles.

Designed Scarcity of Senior Positions: Associate Professor and full professor positions are scarce by design of the academic system, fostering intense competition among academics. This scarcity makes the system particularly vulnerable to political manoeuvring, favouritism, and nepotism. Decisions about who advances to these coveted roles tend to lack transparency and are influenced by informal networks, undermining merit-based progression and reinforcing systemic inequalities.

Strategies:

a. **Structural Reform of Academic Advancement:** Reform the pyramid-shaped structure of academic promotion and explore alternative systems adopted in several other European countries, where advancement is based on clear, competency-based criteria rather than competition between colleagues. Transitioning toward a model where all staff who meet defined standards are eligible for promotion would reduce internal rivalry, increase transparency, and promote a more collaborative academic culture. Such models are adopted in several EU countries and beyond, including in countries with significantly lower GDPs than the Netherlands.
b. **Strategic Workforce Planning:** Encourage institutions to conduct long-term academic workforce planning to identify and address bottlenecks in promotion pathways, ensuring that structural scarcity is not used to justify exclusion.
c. **Transparent Planning of Senior Posts:** Require public timelines and criteria for when and how senior positions become available.
d. **Reform Career Tracks:** Establish clear and transparent pathways that move away from the current design of scarcity. New assistant professor hires may be guaranteed a pathway to full professorship, provided they meet explicitly written criteria.

Inflexible Career Structures: Academic career structures might lack flexibility, offering no viable pathways for those who cannot consistently dedicate extensive hours beyond standard work times. Shared or part-time senior management roles are rare, and responsibilities are seldom divided across manageable portfolios. Consequently, individuals who take time off due to burnout, illness, or caregiving often find it extremely difficult—if not impossible—to re-enter the academic career trajectory, having 'missed the boat.' Moreover, a culture of excessive overwork is not only normalized but actively praised, demanded, and rewarded, reinforcing a system that values work addiction over well-being and long-term inclusion.

Strategies

a. **Introduce Flexible Promotion Timelines:** Allow for adjusted promotion tracks that recognize non-linear career trajectories, including time taken for caregiving, illness, or burnout recovery, without penalizing candidates.
b. **Develop Shared and Part-Time Leadership Roles**: Create formal options for shared or part-time academic leadership roles, making senior positions more accessible to those with caregiving responsibilities or health needs.
c. **Normalize and Support Career Breaks:** Institutionalize policies that acknowledge career interruptions without stigma, including structured re-entry support such as mentoring, phased returns, and dedicated funding.
d. **Challenge the Overwork Ethos:** Actively discourage glorification of excessive work through leadership modelling, workload protections, and institutional messaging that centres well-being and sustainable academic life.

Divide and Rule Through Nepotism: Nepotism not only undermines meritocracy but also serves as a tool for consolidating power. Those who benefit from favouritism are often aligned with and supportive of management, creating a divide-and-rule dynamic. This strategy discourages collective action, fosters mistrust, and reinforces exclusion for those outside the favoured circle.

Strategies:

a. **Enforce Transparent Recruitment and Promotion Processes**: Mandate that all academic appointments and promotions follow standardized, open calls with clear criteria and public documentation of selection procedures and decisions.
b. **Implement Conflict of Interest Policies**: Require all committee members to disclose personal or professional relationships with candidates and withdraw themselves where conflicts of interest exist, with oversight from an independent body.
c. **Cultivate a Culture of Solidarity:** Foster environments that support peer collaboration and transparency, and recognize efforts that contribute to collective academic well-being, not just individual advancement.
d. **Protect and Encourage Whistleblowing**: Establish secure, confidential channels for reporting favouritism and retaliation, with legal protections and institutional consequences for confirmed cases.

Limited Mentorship and Support: Underrepresented faculty often face a lack of accessible mentorship and supportive networks within academic institutions. They may have fewer mentors or role models who share their cultural, racial, gendered, or socio-economic backgrounds, making it harder to navigate the unwritten rules of academia or gain insight into career advancement pathways. This absence of culturally responsive mentorship can leave individuals feeling isolated, undervalued, or disconnected from their professional community. Moreover, the limited availability of mentors from similar backgrounds often results in a disproportionate burden placed on the few who are present, as they are called upon repeatedly to support others without institutional recognition or support.

Silenced Voices: In some academic environments, not all voices are given equal weight in discussions and decision-making processes. For instance, perspectives from early-career scholars, international staff, interdisciplinary researchers, or those from underrepresented racial, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds may be overlooked or marginalized. Similarly, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, scholars with disabilities, and non-tenured faculty may experience exclusion when institutional norms prioritize dominant frameworks—such as Western, disciplinary, or hierarchical perspectives. These dynamics can contribute to a sense of invisibility.

Strategies

a. **Create Structured and Inclusive Mentorship Programs:** Establish formal mentorship initiatives that match underrepresented faculty with trained mentors based on shared interests, career goals, and inclusive practices—not just availability or seniority.
b. **Offer Cross-Institutional Mentorship Opportunities:** Partner with other higher education institutions to create external mentorship networks, especially for scholars in small departments where internal role models may be lacking.
c. **Develop Individualized Career Plans from the Start:** At the start of employment, each faculty member co-develops a personalized career plan with their leadership, outlining clear steps toward promotion. Unlike rigid

tenure-track timelines, this plan is flexible, allowing for accelerated or gradual progression based on when criteria are met. This proactive approach ensures early support, goal alignment, and structured opportunities for professional growth.

d. **Compensate and Recognize Mentorship Work**: Acknowledge mentoring as part of faculty workload in evaluations and promotion processes, particularly for those who support marginalized colleagues or students.

e. **Provide Mentorship Training:** Offer training for mentors on inclusive, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed mentoring practices to ensure supportive and equitable relationships.

f. **Develop Peer Support Networks:** Facilitate affinity groups and peer-mentoring circles (e.g., for first-generation faculty, international staff, LGBTQ+ scholars) to create safe spaces for shared experience, guidance, and community-building.

g. **Fund Mentorship and Professional Development:** Allocate funding for mentorship-related activities—such as retreats, career workshops, or conference attendance—that support the growth and retention of underrepresented scholars.

Social Capital and Informal Networks: In many academic settings, professional opportunities and career advancement can be influenced by informal interactions, such as social gatherings, networking events, or casual coffee meetings. These spaces often facilitate collaborations, mentorships, and decision-making outside formal structures. However, individuals with caregiving responsibilities, those with limited flexibility in their schedules, or those who prefer to maintain clear boundaries between work and personal life may find it harder to participate. When key discussions and connections take place primarily in these informal settings, access to opportunities can become uneven, unintentionally disadvantaging those who are less present in these spaces.

Strategies:

a. **Institutionalize Key Conversations:** Ensure that important discussions—such as funding opportunities, leadership openings, or strategic directions—take place within formal, documented meetings rather than informal social settings.

b. **Rotate Access to Informal Opportunities:** Encourage rotating invitations to informal gatherings, networking events, and conference dinners to ensure broader participation across ranks and roles.

c. **Foster Inclusive Networking Formats**: Design inclusive networking opportunities—such as events during working hours, childcare-supported gatherings, and structured networking sessions—that allow for meaningful connection without requiring extended availability or social capital.

d. **Raise Awareness About Informal Gatekeeping:** Provide training and dialogue spaces that make visible how informal networks shape access to opportunity, and equip leaders to mitigate exclusionary dynamics.

Absence of Alternative Success Paths: Academic institutions often define success through a narrow lens, prioritizing research productivity—especially publications and grant acquisition—while undervaluing other essential contributions. Teaching excellence, mentorship, interdisciplinary collaboration, management roles, and public engagement, though vital to the academic ecosystem, often receive less institutional recognition in hiring, promotions, and funding decisions. Grant acquisition tends to reinforce further grant success. This rigid framework limits professional growth, discourages diverse skill sets, and reinforces a one-dimensional model of academic success, potentially overlooking individuals whose strengths lie outside traditional research metrics.

Promote Diverse Career Pathways Through the Erkennen en Waarderen Framework: Implement the Erkennen en Waarderen initiative in a structural and actionable manner, ensuring that diverse forms of academic excellence—such as teaching, leadership, public engagement, and team science—are fully recognized as independent and valid pathways for promotion. Develop clear infrastructures, including concrete guidelines, accompanying documentation, and managerial training, to support promotions along different lines of talent, without requiring excellence in grant acquisition as a prerequisite. This requires moving beyond an "AND" model—where teaching or leadership excellence is only rewarded in addition to research excellence—toward a true alternative pathway model, where individuals can advance based on their primary strengths and contributions. Regular monitoring and accountability measures should be established to ensure equitable access to these pathways across departments and career stages.

Special Professor Appointments: In the Netherlands, individuals can be appointed as special professors (*bijzonder hoogleraar*) even before meeting the criteria for Associate Professor, creating an anomaly in academic progression. Unlike full professorships, these positions are sponsored by external organizations, allowing some to bypass traditional promotion pathways. International staff are particularly disadvantaged, as they lack the social and cultural capital to secure sponsorship, being less embedded in local networks. This results in a two-tier system, where some attain the prestigious title of "professor" without formally qualifying even as Associate Professors, further reinforcing inequities in academic advancement.

Devaluation of Certain Work: Research or teaching focused on marginalized communities, DEI or on research methods that rely on emic perspectives or interdisciplinary fields may be undervalued, or even stigmatised- and career progression of such scholars can be limited.

Strategies

a. **Multi-Track Promotion Criteria:** Introduce parallel tracks that value teaching, service, leadership, DEI, public engagement, and interdisciplinary work equally.
b. **Review Special Professor Appointments:** Conduct a critical evaluation of *bijzonder hoogleraar* practices and increase transparency and equity in nomination processes.
c. **Credit for Inclusive Scholarship:** Require evaluation committees to assess the social impact, DEI contributions, and epistemic inclusivity of academic work.

Individualism Over Collaboration: Academic culture tends to place a strong emphasis on individual achievements, such as publications, grants, and personal career advancement, sometimes at the expense of collaborative efforts and collective well-being. While independence and self-driven research are highly valued, this focus can inadvertently discourage teamwork, interdisciplinary cooperation, and knowledge-sharing.

Focus on visibility: An excessive emphasis on visibility within the organization and the Netherlands—while undervaluing international recognition—puts researchers with international backgrounds and underrepresented groups without insider networks at a significant disadvantage. Promotion committees, as well as top and middle management, might uphold this requirement, using it to justify appointing individuals with established

internal connections—often favouring those who prioritize self-promotion over delivering high-quality work.

Strategies

a. **Broaden Evaluation Metrics:** Redefine success by integrating collaborative efforts, interdisciplinary work, mentorship, and public engagement into promotion and performance evaluations. Value quality and integrity over visibility and volume.
b. **Team Science Incentives:** Offer institutional rewards—such as funding, reduced teaching loads, or recognition—for co-authored projects, shared leadership roles, and cross-departmental initiatives.
c. **Recognize International and Community Impact**: Acknowledge scholarly contributions with global or community relevance in evaluation criteria, ensuring international researchers and those with external networks are not penalized for lacking local visibility.
d. **De-centre Self-Promotion in Advancement:** Train committees to recognize diverse communication styles and cultural norms around self-advocacy, reducing bias toward assertiveness or self-promotion as a proxy for competence.
e. **Promote Collaborative Leadership Models**: Encourage shared leadership structures and team-based management in departments, shifting the culture from competition to cooperation.
f. **Cultivate Values-Based Academic Culture**: Foster spaces for dialogue on academic values such as humility, engagement, reciprocity, and service to the academic community. Encourage senior faculty and leadership to model these values.

Insufficient recognition of cultural, gender, and personality differences:
Academic environments tend to overlook significant differences in self-promotion among researchers. Individuals from collectivist cultures tend to prioritize modesty and humility, thus refraining from self-promotion and self-advocacy, which contrasts with the emphasis on self-promotion in dominant academic cultures. Similarly, women typically showcase their accomplishments and assert their professional contributions less openly than men, partly due to societal conditioning and differing gender norms. Introverted individuals also tend to highlight their work less prominently than their extraverted colleagues. These differences might be undervalued or ignored within academia, where assertive self-promotion and visibility often determine professional recognition, success in securing grants, and career advancement. Consequently, expecting all researchers to conform to the individualistic, extraversion-biased norms of self-promotion places culturally diverse, female, and introverted researchers at a systematic disadvantage in their professional growth and promotional trajectories.

Strategies

a. **Bias-Aware Evaluation Rubrics:** Include diverse communication and self-expression styles as valid ways of demonstrating competence.
b. **Self-Promotion Workshops (Optional):** Offer supportive, opt-in training for staff who want to enhance visibility without losing authenticity.
c. **Value Diverse Academic Dispositions**: Foster a culture that values diverse academic dispositions, including modesty and introversion. Recruitment and promotion criteria should recognize contributions such as mentorship, collaboration, and quiet leadership, ensuring career progression is not tied solely to visibility or self-promotion.
d. **Mentoring Circles for Women & Minoritized Scholars:** Facilitate peer support and skill-sharing among underrepresented groups.

Neglecting exit interviews: Institutions rarely conduct exit interviews with departing staff or faculty, thereby missing crucial opportunities to identify and address the root causes of attrition. Without systematically gathering feedback from those leaving, institutions remain unaware—or choose to remain unaware—of patterns of exclusion, discrimination, and dissatisfaction that drive individuals away. This lack of inquiry allows problematic practices and power imbalances to persist unchallenged, while depriving leadership of valuable insights that could inform meaningful reform. The absence of exit interviews might reflect a broader institutional reluctance to confront uncomfortable truths and prioritize the well-being and retention of their academic staff.

Strategies

a. **Standardized, Anonymous Exit Interviews:** Institutionalize exit interviews for all staff departures, conducted by a neutral third party to identify systemic issues in recruitment, promotion, and workplace culture, using insights for continuous improvement .
b. **Annual Exit Report to Leadership:** Analyse exit data yearly and use insights to inform HR policy and leadership accountability.
c. **Feedback Loop to Departments:** Share synthesized findings with departments to support internal reform and climate improvement.

Concentration of Power: Senior administrators, department heads, and influential faculty members may yield significant power over hiring, promotions, and research opportunities. The power might be concentrated in the hands of department heads, institute directors and deans. Without proper checks and balances, personal biases and interests, favouritism, and exclusionary practices might shape career trajectories, at times outweighing merit. Such concentration of power might exacerbate inequities and foster an environment where professional success depends more on aligning with influential figures than on demonstrating academic excellence.

Strategies

a. **Introduce Term Limits for Leadership Roles:** Set fixed terms for program chairs, department heads, and institute directors to prevent long-term consolidation of power and encourage leadership renewal.

b. **Introduce Shared and Part-Time Senior Management Roles:** Create structural opportunities for shared or part-time senior management positions, allowing leadership responsibilities to be distributed among multiple individuals. For instance, a rotational co-leadership model can developed allowing for two faculty members serve jointly as department co-heads for a maximum term of four years. This approach promotes staff well-being by enabling better work-life balance and reducing the burden of overwork, particularly for those with caregiving responsibilities or health considerations. Beyond well-being, shared leadership also serves as a mechanism for power deconcentration: it fosters collective accountability, ensures that concerns or conflicts can be addressed through multiple channels, and requires dialogue and joint decision-making.

c. **Decentralize Key Decisions:** Distribute authority over hiring, promotions, and research funding across diverse, rotating committees with clearly defined terms.

d. **Faculty-Led Hiring & Promotion Committees:** Require that at least 50% of committee members are elected by peers, not appointed by leadership.

e. **Transparent Decision Logs:** Publish anonymized decision rationales for major appointments, promotions, and funding allocations to ensure accountability.

f. **Leadership Evaluation by Community**: Include faculty and staff evaluations in the annual review of department heads and deans, also focusing on inclusivity, transparency, and fairness.

g. **Train Leaders in Power Awareness and Ethical Governance**: Offer mandatory training for academic leaders on institutional power dynamics, bias, and equitable leadership practices to promote ethical and inclusive decision-making.

Gaslighting and Excuses:

When concerns are raised regarding selection and promotion criteria or procedures, they might at times be met with dismissive responses that undermine credibility and discourage further discussion. Phrases such as "You don't understand how things work here" or "That's just the way it is" can sometimes invalidate legitimate concerns or grievances, making it harder to challenge unfair practices, misconduct, or systemic issues.

Culture of Fear:
Challenging the status quo in academia might carry professional risks, as individuals who speak up about injustices or systemic issues can face subtle or overt retaliatory consequences. Depending on career stage, different mechanisms might be used to suppress dissent: early-career academics could be encouraged to remain silent with promises of future opportunities, while others might be labelled as "difficult" or "troublemakers," leading to exclusion or stalled career progression. These dynamics can discourage accountability and create an environment where those in power might shape outcomes with minimal resistance.

Strategies

a. **Implement Anonymous Upward Evaluations of Leadership:** Introduce anonymous evaluations from employees—including PhDs, postdocs, and assistant professors—as part of the performance review process for leaders. These evaluations offer honest, bottom-up feedback, helping to identify strengths and areas for growth in leadership behaviour, including inclusivity, fairness, and team support. This fosters a culture of accountability and responsiveness, ensuring that early-career scholars also have a voice in shaping leadership quality.
b. **Incorporate Multi-Source Feedback into Leadership Evaluations**: Establish a system for faculty and staff to provide both anonymous and attributed feedback on individuals in leadership positions. Such feedback should be archived and used as part of annual performance reviews conducted at both the faculty management level and external institutional level. This ensures leaders are held accountable for their conduct, inclusivity, and effectiveness, and fosters a culture of continuous leadership improvement.
c. **Climate Surveys:** Conduct regular, anonymous institutional climate surveys and publish results with action plans for addressing issues.
d. **Protection for Dissenting Voices:** Enshrine protections in institutional policies for those who raise concerns, including clauses preventing subtle retaliation (e.g., withdrawal of opportunities, marginalization).
e. **Allyship and Bystander Training:** Offer workshops for staff and students on recognizing and responding to retaliation, microaggressions, and structural silencing.
f. **Awareness Campaigns on Institutional Gaslighting:** Hold reflective workshops or seminars on microaggressions and gaslighting, with real-life anonymized examples.

Hierarchical Barriers Limiting Access: Another potential mechanism might be limited or no direct access to the manager of one's manager, which can keep problems arising with immediate supervisors hidden and unresolved. Even when access is theoretically available, utilizing it might carry personal and professional risks, potentially leading to negative repercussions for the individual raising concerns. Fear of such implications can serve as a strong deterrent, discouraging some from reporting or addressing managerial issues.

Strategies

a. **Open-Door Policies Beyond Direct Supervisors:** Create structured, regular opportunities for staff to meet with leadership one or two levels above their immediate manager without having to go through a hierarchical chain.
b. **Upward Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish formal systems for providing anonymous evaluations of one's manager, which are reviewed by senior leadership and integrated into performance assessments.

Weak and Self-Protective Oversight Mechanisms: Many academic institutions have formal complaint procedures for addressing discrimination, harassment, or unethical behaviour. However, these mechanisms might lack the independence and impartiality necessary to ensure fair outcomes. When oversight remains internal—especially when leadership is directly or indirectly involved in handling complaints—conflicts of interest might arise, and institutional reputation might be prioritized. This can discourage individuals from coming forward and foster scepticism about the integrity of the process. Even when regulations exist on paper, enforcement might be inconsistent or superficial. Investigations might lack transparency, consequences might be unclear or absent, and bureaucratic hurdles can make the reporting process emotionally and procedurally exhausting. Without external scrutiny, institutions might maintain a façade of compliance while allowing systemic exclusion and misconduct to persist.

Strategies

a. **Establish External Oversight for Complaints and Leadership Accountability**: Create an independent external body, unaffiliated with the higher education institutions, with the authority to investigate complaints of discrimination, exclusion, and misconduct. This body should have mandated powers to monitor, evaluate, and intervene in cases of undesirable behaviour, ensuring impartiality and trust in the accountability process. Shifting from internal to external oversight reduces conflicts of interest and promotes transparent, fair resolutions.

b. **Establish Independent Ombudspersons**: Appoint external, impartial ombudspersons or ethics officers with authority to investigate complaints and recommend action, independent of HR or leadership.

c. **Reduce fear-driven decision-making:** Encourage institutions and management to act less out of fear of negative publicity. Overemphasis on reputation may lead to protective or defensive responses toward those in positions of power who are accused of misconduct. Instead, institutions should prioritize fairness, accountability, and the wellbeing of those raising concerns, ensuring that reputational considerations do not overshadow justice.

d. **Adopt constructive framing in communication:** Develop communication frames that replace instant defensive reactions with a more reflective and solution-oriented approach. This includes openly acknowledging the existence of discrimination (e.g., "Such issues can occur everywhere, but here we aim to recognize them and work toward change") while emphasizing the institution's commitment to improvement.

e. **Public Accountability Reports:** Require annual, anonymized reports on number and type of complaints, response times, and outcomes to be published and accessible to staff.

f. **Conflict of Interest Declarations:** Require all members involved in complaint handling to declare potential conflicts of interest, with protocols for withdrawal.

g. **Participatory Policy Development:** Involve diverse stakeholders (early-career researchers, international staff, underrepresented groups) in shaping complaint mechanisms, ensuring they are perceived as fair, safe, and transparent.

h. **Simplify and Streamline Complaint Procedures**: Reduce bureaucratic complexity by providing clear, accessible guidelines for filing complaints and ensuring timely, structured communication at each stage of the process.

i. **Provide Complainant Support Services**: Offer confidential, trauma-informed guidance for complainants, including access to independent advisors, legal consultation, and mental health support throughout the process.

j. **Link Leadership Appraisals to Ethical Oversight:** Evaluate academic leaders in part based on their handling of complaints, ethical leadership, and willingness to uphold fairness—even when it challenges institutional comfort.

Ombudsperson: The role of the Ombudsperson in higher education is intended to provide an independent channel for addressing systemic issues and safeguarding fairness. However, several challenges may limit its effectiveness and accessibility in practice. The Ombudsperson might hesitate or refuse to take on individual cases, arguing that their role is restricted to structural issues. Yet without examining individual experiences, it may be unclear how structural patterns can be identified in the first place. This threshold places an unfair burden on complainants, who may be expected to find others willing to come forward—a demand that is often unrealistic given the sensitivity of complaints and the fear of repercussions. Even when multiple complaints are filed against the same individual, follow-up might appear inconsistent and lacking in concrete outcomes. In cases where investigations do proceed, the process may be very slow, with reports delayed for long periods of time. There are also concerns that the Ombudsperson may not act with full independence, facing institutional pressures to protect reputation or powerful actors rather than advocate for complainants.

Confidential Advisors: Confidential advisors are designed to provide a first point of contact for staff and students who encounter discrimination, harassment, or other forms of misconduct. They may play a crucial role in offering guidance and emotional support, yet their ability to effect meaningful change within institutional structures appears limited. Confidential advisors often accompany complainants to meetings with management and may take notes, but they tend not to actively support or advocate for the complainant during these encounters, instead adopting a "fly on the wall" position. While they are helpful in outlining possible courses of action and mapping accountability mechanisms, their role might feel largely procedural. Advisors provide empathetic listening, validation, and a sense of being seen and heard—an important form of support, especially as complainants often experience gaslighting. However, in most cases, they may not follow up on complaints and often remain unaware of how—or whether—cases are eventually resolved. Some complainants have expressed dissatisfaction, noting that while the advisors listen and offer limited guidance, they lack the authority to intervene in a meaningful way.

Strategies

a. **Strengthen advocacy role**: Encourage confidential advisors to take a more active stance in meetings with management, ensuring complainants are not left without support.
b. **Improve follow-up mechanisms**: Develop procedures for advisors to check on the progress and outcomes of cases.
c. **Expand authority:** Consider granting advisors a clearer mandate to intervene or escalate cases when institutional responses appear inadequate.
d. **Increase capacity**: Provide additional resources and staff to reduce overburdening and ensure timely, effective support.
e. **Standardize practices**: Offer training and clear guidelines to ensure a consistent level of service across all advisors, while maintaining the empathetic listening that complainants value.

Challenges Associated with Institutional Audits: Institutional audits are essential tools for identifying exclusionary practices and structural inequalities. However, they can face several limitations. Audits may be perceived as symbolic if they do not lead to visible and meaningful change, resulting in disengagement and mistrust among staff. Internal audits, especially those led by individuals connected to institutional leadership, risk reinforcing existing biases rather than exposing them. Additionally, when findings are not

transparently communicated or acted upon, the audit process can appear more like a public relations exercise than a genuine effort at reform. Audits often rely heavily on quantitative indicators, which may fail to capture the lived experiences of exclusion, subtle forms of discrimination, or cultural dynamics within departments. This can lead to partial diagnoses and incomplete responses. Additionally, many audit units are understaffed and lack the institutional capacity to conduct regular, thorough reviews across departments, limiting their ability to identify and address systemic issues.

Strategies

a. **Invest in Dedicated Audit Teams**: Allocate sufficient staffing and resources to audit departments or equity offices to ensure they can carry out their mandate effectively.
b. **Ensure Independence and Credibility**: Engage external experts or mixed teams with diverse representation to lead audit processes.
c. **Institutionalize Regular Audits**: Mandate periodic equity and inclusion audits across all faculties and departments as part of an organization-wide accountability cycle.
d. **Ensure Skill and Specialization:** Staff audit teams with individuals trained in structural analysis, intersectionality, and organizational change.
e. **Integrate Qualitative Data**: Include testimonies, anonymous surveys, and lived experience accounts alongside numerical data.
f. **Transparency and Communication**: Share audit findings institution-wide and outline clear steps for follow-up.
g. **Link Audits to Accountability:** Develop mechanisms to monitor progress on audit recommendations, including timelines, responsibilities, and public updates.
h. **Avoid Symbolism**: Emphasize that the audit is a step toward action, not a substitute for it—ensure findings lead to structural change.

Human Resources (HR): HR departments are expected to safeguard staff wellbeing, uphold fair procedures, and serve as a neutral party in conflict resolution. In practice, however, they might be perceived as prioritizing institutional interests and leadership protection over the needs of employees who raise concerns. In conflict situations, HR might appear weak and lacking the authority to challenge or correct managerial decisions, which may leave individuals feeling unheard, unprotected, and deterred from reporting exclusion or misconduct. Beyond conflict resolution, questions might remain about whether HR consistently monitors key institutional practices such as exit interviews, annual performance reviews, or the distribution of power in committees.

Strategies

a. **Strengthen Independence:** Safeguard HR's autonomy by creating structural protections against undue managerial influence, ensuring the department can uphold institutional policies in the interest of both staff and leadership.
b. **Reframe mandate:** Position HR explicitly as a body responsible for employee wellbeing and institutional accountability, not only for managing risks or protecting reputation.
c. **Enhance authority:** Grant HR the power and resources to intervene when managerial practices breach institutional policies, ethical norms, or legal standards.
d. **Clarify responsibilities:** Assign HR a clear role in monitoring institutional practices (e.g., exit interviews, annual performance reviews, committee composition) with mandatory reporting to increase transparency.
e. **Build trust:** Improve training, communication, and reporting practices to restore employee confidence in HR's neutrality and competence.

f. **Promote transparency:** Require HR to document and disclose procedures for selection, promotion, and complaint handling, making processes visible and accountable to staff.

Informal Reporting: Those who raise concerns are encouraged to first address these through informal ways, e.g., private, individual talks rather than formal complaints, reflecting a preference for this type of sentiments: "Do not let them escalate, make them go away quietly". This approach prioritizes institutional reputation over justice, pressuring those affected to "resolve" issues quietly rather than seeking meaningful redress. Hence there is an emphasis on de-escalating and downplaying the conflicts. As a result, systemic problems remain unchallenged, and perpetrators face little to no consequences, reinforcing a culture where exclusion and discrimination persist unchecked.

Informal reporting mechanisms also prevent the creation of a documented record of complaints. Without a written record, each case is perceived as an isolated incident rather than part of a systemic broader pattern of exclusion or misconduct. This lack of institutional oversight allows repeat offenders to go unchecked, as organizations fail to recognize or address recurring issues involving particular individuals over time. Consequently, systemic problems remain hidden.

Strategies

a. **Formalize All Incidents (with Consent):** Allow informal conversations, but ensure there's an option to create a confidential written record for every reported concern, even if the complainant does not want formal action taken yet.
b. **Consent-Based Systematic Documentation:** Create secure systems for documenting and tracking complaints to identify patterns and repeat offenders, while safeguarding privacy. This enables tracking repeat offenders and systemic issues over time.
c. **End "Quiet Resolution" Culture:** Issue institutional guidance discouraging practices that aim to "de-escalate" at the cost of justice. Emphasize that resolution must centre on harm, not convenience.
d. **Regular Pattern Analysis:** Mandate annual analyses of all reports—formal and informal—to identify systemic trends, with findings shared internally and acted upon structurally.

Treating Complaints as Isolated Rather than Structural Problems: Even when formal procedures are followed and authorities are involved in handling complaints, there remains a strong tendency among institutional leadership to treat each case as an isolated incident. This approach allows institutions to avoid acknowledging deeper, systemic issues that contribute to exclusion and discrimination. By framing complaints as singular occurrences rather than interconnected patterns, leadership can deflect responsibility for structural reform, maintaining the illusion of an equitable environment while underlying problems persist.

Strategies

a. **Pattern Recognition Protocols:** Integrate formal checks in the complaints process to identify recurring issues—e.g., repeated complaints involving a department, role, or individual.
b. **Aggregate Case Reviews:** Quarterly, conduct cross-case reviews (without identifying information) to assess systemic issues and recommend structural changes.

c. **Narrative Case Mapping:** Use anonymized storytelling (e.g., composite cases) in reports to illustrate how patterns form, increasing awareness of interconnected issues.
d. **Institutional Learning Statements:** After major cases, require a published institutional response outlining what has been learned, what structural changes will be made, and how systemic change is being prioritized.

Confidentiality Overreach: Meetings, reporting or communications regarding complaints are often handled in confidentiality. Some institutions even require individuals involved in complaints to sign Non-disclosure Agreements (NDAs) or confidentiality agreements, preventing them from discussing their experiences. While confidentiality serves an important function in protecting personal privacy, overreach in its application suppresses transparency, silences victims, and allows exclusionary structures to persist unchallenged:

- This silences victims and whistleblowers, making it difficult for others to recognize systemic issues or take collective action.
- NDAs protect institutions rather than complainants, reinforcing power imbalances and discouraging transparency.
- Confidentiality often extends to concealing the outcomes of investigations, leaving complainants and the broader academic community in the dark.
- Without clarity on how complaints are resolved, perpetrators may face little to no consequences, reinforcing impunity.
- The absence of published findings or accountability measures allows institutions to claim commitment to diversity and fairness while maintaining the status quo.
- Confidentiality rules often prevent complainants from seeking peer support or discussing their case with colleagues, creating a sense of isolation and disempowerment. This can exacerbate psychological distress, as individuals navigating exclusion have limited avenues for solidarity and guidance. It also ensures that patterns of exclusion remain hidden, as individuals affected by similar issues are unable to connect and recognize broader institutional failures.
- When confidentiality is entirely managed by leadership or HR, there is a risk that cases will be framed in ways that protect those in power, rather than ensuring fair resolutions.
- Institutions can selectively disclose information that serves their interests, while keeping damaging details hidden.
- This power imbalance makes it easier for complaints to be quietly dismissed or minimized, reinforcing scepticism about complaint-handling processes.
- When confidentiality prevents open discussions about complaints, institutions fail to learn from past cases, missing opportunities for policy reforms and cultural change.
- Lack of institutional memory allows repeated issues to resurface without meaningful improvements.

Strategies

a. **Policy Reform**: Limit the use of NDAs or confidentiality clauses in settlements or complaint procedures involving discrimination, harassment, exclusion, or unethical behaviour. Ensure outcomes are communicated in a way that fosters trust, learning, and institutional accountability.
b. **Legal Review of Past NDAs**: Initiate an independent review of previously signed NDAs, with an option to release parties from them upon request where no safety risks are present.
c. **Consent-Based Confidentiality**: Ensure that the complainant—not the institution—determines the level of confidentiality, especially regarding sharing their own experience.

d. **Transparent Confidentiality Guidelines**: Develop and publish a clear policy explaining when confidentiality is required (e.g., for safety or privacy), and when it is not appropriate (e.g., to suppress public interest concerns).
e. **Anonymized Case Summaries:** Share case learnings institution-wide through anonymized summaries to educate and prevent recurrence, while protecting identities.
f. "**Right to Speak" Clause:** Include in all complaint protocols a clause stating that individuals always retain the right to speak about their own experiences, regardless of institutional processes.

Bureaucratic Inertia: Institutional bureaucracy often hinders timely and effective responses to discrimination and misconduct claims in higher education. Investigations into complaints may be delayed or drawn out, causing frustration and reinforcing a sense of futility among affected faculty. Prolonged processes can lead to emotional exhaustion, discouraging individuals from seeking redress or pushing for accountability. Additionally, overly complex reporting procedures create barriers to justice, as faculty navigating layers of administrative red tape may feel overwhelmed or dissuaded from pursuing complaints. The cumbersome nature of institutional bureaucracy serves as an unintentional—or sometimes deliberate—deterrent to addressing discrimination, allowing exclusionary practices to persist while institutions maintain the appearance of due process.

Strategies

a. **Set Clear Timelines for Complaint Resolution:** Mandate maximum timeframes (e.g., 90 days) for each stage of a complaint process, with public tracking and regular updates to the complainant.
b. **Transparent Complaint Procedures**: Simplify complaint processes, clearly communicate options, and remove bureaucratic hurdles that discourage reporting. Ensure processes are safe and confidential without suppressing transparency.
c. **Fast-Track Protocols for Urgent Cases:** Create accelerated procedures for cases involving potential retaliation or mental health risks.
d. **Simplify and Digitize Processes:** Develop an intuitive, multilingual online system for complaint submission, tracking, and communication, such as a digital application.

The Burden of Proof on Complainants: Complainants in academia face a disproportionate burden of proof, as they are expected to provide extensive documentation, witness testimonies, and concrete evidence to substantiate their claims. Institutional processes often dismiss subjective experiences, requiring proof that is difficult to obtain, especially in cases of discrimination, exclusion, or covert retaliation. This high evidentiary threshold can be emotionally and mentally draining, discouraging faculty from seeking justice and allowing misconduct to persist unchallenged. As a result, many individuals abandon complaints not because their grievances lack merit, but because navigating the system becomes an exhausting, uphill battle with little guarantee of a fair resolution.

Strategies

a. **Shift to a Balance of Probabilities Standard:** Move away from requiring "proof beyond reasonable doubt" to "preponderance of evidence" in internal investigations, as used in civil rights processes.
b. **Accept Pattern and Climate Evidence:** Allow testimony, climate reports, or patterns of behaviour as valid supplementary evidence—especially in discrimination or retaliation cases.

c. **Enable Collective Complaints:** Allow collective or class-based complaints when multiple individuals experience similar harms, reducing isolation and evidentiary burden.

Retaliation Against Complainants: Individuals who bring forward complaints about misconduct, discrimination, or unethical practices often face subtle or overt forms of retaliation. For instance, filling a complaint, whether through the Complaints Committees within the higher education institutions or the Human Rights Committee (HRC), can have serious consequences, potentially burning bridges with the leadership (even with the institution in case of HRC). Hence, some confidential advisors even advice individuals against taking this path. Furthermore, instead of addressing the systemic issues being raised, institutions may *reframe the complainant as the problem*, portraying them as *disruptive* or *difficult*. This deflection not only shifts attention away from the core issue but also serves as a warning to others, reinforcing a culture where silence is safer than speaking up.

Retaliation can take many forms, ranging from professional isolation and exclusion from opportunities to negative performance evaluations or even contract non-renewal. In some cases, complainants find themselves sidelined in decision-making processes, losing access to mentorship or career advancement pathways. The psychological toll of such responses—stress, self-doubt, and professional insecurity—can deter individuals from pursuing legitimate grievances, further entrenching institutional power structures. Rather than fostering accountability, this pattern allows institutions to maintain the appearance of stability and "harmony" while suppressing voices that challenge the status quo.

Strategies

a. **Anti-Retaliation Clauses with Enforcement Teeth:** Codify zero-tolerance policies against retaliation in institutional regulations, explicitly outlining prohibited behaviours, examples of indirect retaliation, and consequences for violators.
b. **Safeguard Against Retaliation:** Develop and enforce strong anti-retaliation policies, including consequences for retaliatory actions. Monitor complainant well-being post-report and provide psychological support.
c. **Monitor Post-Complaint Treatment:** Require leadership to report on professional actions involving complainants for a year post-complaint to ensure no subtle retaliation occurs.
d. **Sanction Retaliatory Behaviour:** Investigate and sanction individuals who engage in retaliatory actions, including subtle forms such as exclusion from meetings or opportunities.
e. **Provide Legal and Psychological Support:** Ensure access to independent legal advice and trauma-informed mental health support for complainants, recognizing the emotional and professional risks involved.
f. **Train Leadership on Retaliation Dynamics:** Provide mandatory training for managers and committee members on how to avoid retaliation and how to support staff who raise concerns.
g. **Public Statement of Non-Retaliation:** Frame whistleblowing and complaint-filing as acts of courage and integrity. Publicly affirm that raising concerns is vital to improving the institution—not a sign of disloyalty.

DARVO: Denial, Attack, and Reversal of Victim and Offender: Individuals who file complaints often encounter the DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) response, a defensive tactic used to shift blame and discredit those who come forward. Institutions or individuals accused of misconduct may deny the allegations, attack the complainant's credibility, and position themselves as the true victims, painting the whistleblower as disruptive or malicious. This strategy not only undermines the legitimacy of

the complaint but can also lead to further victimization of the complainant, including professional and social isolation, reputational damage, or even retaliation. The use of DARVO tactics creates a hostile environment for those seeking justice, discouraging others from speaking out and allowing systemic exclusion to persist unchallenged.

Strategies

a. **Complaint Process Oversight Panels:** Include trained observers or ethics officers in hearings to flag DARVO, intimidation, or credibility attacks.
b. **Training on Institutional DARVO Patterns:** Offer education to staff on how DARVO operates institutionally—and how to prevent re-victimization.
c. **Right to Peer Witness or Ally:** Allow complainants to bring a trusted ally, union rep, or support person to any meeting—formal or informal.
d. **Trauma-Informed Approach in Complaint Handling:** Train investigators and administrators in trauma-sensitive interviewing and communication methods.

Emotional and Psychological Toll on Complainants: Filing a complaint in academia can be mentally and emotionally exhausting, often leaving individuals feeling isolated, discredited, and vulnerable. The process is typically long, bureaucratic, and riddled with institutional resistance, causing significant stress and frustration. Some complainants eventually might withdraw their cases, not necessarily because the issue is resolved, but due to the overwhelming burden of navigating an unsupportive system. The lack of institutional backing, combined with potential retaliation or professional setbacks, can lead to severe mental health struggles, burnout, and career instability. Without proper safeguards, *the complaint process itself becomes a form of secondary harm.*

Strategies

a. **Mental Health Support for Complainants:** Offer funded access to external, confidential counselling or therapy during and after the complaint process.
b. **Peer Support Networks:** Create survivor and ally networks where individuals can receive informal support from others with lived experience.
c. **Wellbeing Check-ins:** Assign a neutral contact person who checks in with complainants at set intervals, regardless of case outcome.
d. **Grievance Recovery Leave:** Introduce short-term, protected leave options for complainants experiencing high levels of emotional stress due to the process.

Power Imbalances: Junior faculty, and employees from marginalized groups might feel powerless to challenge senior or tenured faculty and institutional leadership. The hierarchical nature of academia—often implicit and rooted in mentorship-like relationships where junior scholars are heavily dependent on the support of specific senior academics—combined with job precarity, makes speaking up highly risky. Retaliation can manifest in the form of lost career opportunities, negative evaluations, or non-renewal of contracts. These power imbalances foster a culture of silence, where those most affected by exclusion and discrimination may feel compelled to endure injustice rather than risk professional repercussions.

Strategies

a. **Confidential Escalation Channels Bypassing Direct Supervisors:** Ensure staff can report concerns directly to independent ombuds or ethics committees, bypassing their academic line.

b. **Reverse Mentorship Programs:** Pair senior leadership with early-career or marginalized scholars to deepen understanding of power dynamics.
c. **Contract Security During Complaint Processes:** Ensure that temporary staff cannot be dismissed or have contracts altered during ongoing complaints.
d. **Leadership Training on Power Literacy:** Require academic leaders to complete annual training on power, hierarchy, and ethical leadership.

The Network of Silence and Social Isolation of Complainant: When faculty members file complaints about discrimination, exclusion, or misconduct, colleagues often remain silent, even when they are aware of injustices. This silence can stem from several factors, each with significant implications for both individuals and institutional culture.

- Colleagues worry that supporting a complainant could lead to career repercussions, such as loss of promotions, appointment to leadership roles, research funding, or even job security.
- In cases where leadership holds significant power, those who speak up risk becoming the next target of exclusion or institutional backlash.
- Some faculty feel a sense of allegiance to institutional power structures and may perceive the complainant as a disruptor.
- Others may have personal or professional ties to individuals implicated in the complaint, making them reluctant to take a stance.
- Bystanders may fear rocking the boat, and may avoid speaking out to maintain harmony or avoid being seen as disruptive.
- Those who file complaints may be unfairly labelled as "troublemakers" or "difficult," leading colleagues to distance themselves to avoid similar stigma.
- Many academics prefer to stay out of disputes to maintain collegiality, believing that involvement in complaints will damage relationships within their department.
- Academia often values professional neutrality, leading many to view complaints as private matters rather than collective concerns.
- Some faculty believe that complaints rarely lead to real change, viewing the process as bureaucratic or performative.
- A history of unresolved cases may lead to resignation, reinforcing the belief that speaking up is futile.
- Junior or untenured faculty may fear losing institutional favour, impacting their long-term career trajectory.
- Some faculty may not fully recognize the severity of the complaint or may dismiss it as an isolated incident rather than part of a systemic issue.
- Bystanders may assume that others will take action, leading to a collective inaction known as the *bystander effect*.
- A lack of diversity and inclusion training can make faculty unaware of how exclusion and discrimination manifest in academia.
- If inappropriate behaviour is common or tolerated, bystanders may view it as "just the way things are" and not worth addressing.
- Colleagues may feel pressured to conform to the majority view, especially if there is a strong cultural or institutional bias against the complainant. Colleagues may even be pressured to take part in standing up against the complainant.
- Academics may adopt a "not my problem" mindset, choosing emotional detachment to avoid discomfort.
- Witnessing exclusion can trigger moral distress, but instead of acting, some faculty choose to distance themselves to protect their own well-being.
- Colleagues may rationalize their inaction by blaming the victim or questioning their credibility.

The lack of support for complainants leaves them isolated, vulnerable, and discredited, deepening both their emotional and professional struggles. Silence from colleagues

reinforces institutional impunity. When bystanders remain silent, it sends a message that misconduct is acceptable or will not be challenged. This allows perpetrators of exclusion and discrimination to continue unchecked while shielding institutions from pressure to reform. As trust in institutional processes erodes, faculty may become disengaged, cynical, or even leave academia altogether, particularly those from marginalized groups. Over time, this perpetuates a culture of fear, where speaking up is seen as too risky, further entrenching academia as a hostile and exclusionary environment for those who challenge injustice.

Strategies

a. **Whistleblower Recognition Program**: Publicly honour individuals who have contributed to institutional improvement through ethical courage, to begin shifting cultural narratives from "troublemakers" to "changemakers."
b. **Mandatory Bystander Training for Faculty and Leadership:** Equip staff with tools to recognize discrimination and exclusion—and act safely and effectively when they witness harm.
c. **Create "Speaking Up" Protocols:** Develop institution-wide guidelines outlining how faculty can support complainants, raise concerns, or challenge injustice without formal complaint processes.
d. **Solidarity Statements Mechanism:** Allow faculty to issue or sign collective statements of support (with protections) when a colleague comes forward with a complaint.
e. **Peer Ally Programs:** Establish voluntary programs where trained peers accompany and support complainants throughout institutional processes.
f. **Complainant-Centred Networks:** Create spaces—virtual or in person—where those raising complaints can connect confidentially for solidarity, guidance, and mutual aid.
g. **Recognize Supportive Action in Evaluations:** Value mentorship, DEI contributions, and advocacy—including support of complainants—in annual reviews and promotion criteria.
h. **Public Acknowledgment of Harm and Isolation:** Encourage institutions to name the phenomenon of isolation and silence in official policies and DEI statements, affirming that it is unjust and counter to academic values.
i. **Annual Reflections on Academic Culture:** Facilitate department- or faculty-wide discussions on silence, complicity, and courage as part of broader inclusion efforts.
j. **Anti-Retaliation Protections for Allies and Witnesses:** Extend whistleblower protections to individuals who speak up in support of complainants or challenge institutional practices.
k. **Anonymous Reporting of Social Retaliation:** Allow faculty and students to report informal exclusionary behaviours (e.g., being left out of meetings or collaborations) with optional follow-up support.
l. **Normalize Public Support:** Encourage leadership to openly affirm support for ethical courage and acknowledge the institutional value of those who dare to speak up.
m. The silence that surrounds many complainants is not simply a personal failing of colleagues—it is the predictable outcome of institutional cultures built on fear, hierarchy, and conflict avoidance. Breaking this silence is not merely an ethical imperative; it is a necessary act of cultural transformation.

Fear of Contract Termination: In some cases, institutions leverage contractual clauses to terminate employment under the justification of "strained relationships," effectively removing individuals who raise concerns about exclusion or misconduct. This practice creates a culture of fear, where employees—especially those on temporary or precarious contracts—hesitate to file complaints due to the risk of losing their positions.

a. **Prohibit Dismissals Based Solely on "Relational Strain":** Revise employment policies to prevent termination on vague grounds like "irreparable working relationships" without a rigorous, transparent, and independent review process.
b. **Independent Review Panels for Terminations:** Require that any dismissal following a formal complaint must be reviewed by a neutral body unaffiliated with university management.

Lack of Accountability for Senior Leadership: A deep sense of resignation might exist among employees who consider filing complaints, as they recognize that even if their case is granted, disciplinary measures against leadership—particularly full professors—are rare. A common saying reflects this reality: *"This university would fire 20 assistant professors before firing a full professor."* Senior academics, especially those with large grant acquisitions, are often perceived as *too big to fall*, with institutions reluctant to take action against them due to financial dependencies and reputational concerns. Authorities higher up may hesitate to impose disciplinary measures out of fear that departure of "star" faculty could lead to a loss of significant funding, reinforcing a culture of impunity where power and financial leverage outweigh ethical accountability.

Strategies

a. **Enforce Integrity Standards Regardless of Power or Status**: Implement and enforce policies where violations of integrity—including ethical misconduct, discrimination, and abuse of power—lead to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal, regardless of an individual's prestige, grant success, or academic status. Institutional integrity must take precedence over financial gain or reputation, ensuring that all faculty and leadership are held to consistent ethical standards.
b. **Separate Ethical Oversight Board:** Establish an autonomous body empowered to investigate and recommend disciplinary actions for leadership misconduct—functionally independent of university administration and financial interests.
c. **Decouple Ethics from Financial Metrics:** Reframe leadership evaluations to include ethical conduct and community trust, alongside grant income and publications. Institutional success should not justify moral impunity.
d. **Leadership Term Limits and Reviews:** Introduce regular ethics reviews as part of leadership renewal processes, including anonymous feedback from staff and students.

Barriers to Legal Action: Taking a complaint to civil court is a high-risk move that can lead to contract termination, making legal action an unviable option for many employees. Pursuing a case also requires significant financial resources, which many academics may not have, and insider knowledge of how the system functions, further discouraging legal measures. Additionally, even if a complainant wins the case, they may face reputational damage, being labelled as a *troublemaker* or *difficult to work with*, which can severely impact future career prospects. Given that the Dutch academic community is relatively small, a negative reputation can effectively blacklist individuals from being hired at other higher education institutions, reinforcing a system where those who challenge exclusion and misconduct bear the greatest risks.

Strategies

a. **Fund for Legal Aid & Independent Advice:** Create an institutional or inter-university fund that provides legal support and advisory services for employees pursuing justice in discrimination or misconduct cases.
b. **Anonymous Pre-Complaint Consultation Line:** Offer external consultation services where faculty can understand legal implications and risks of pursuing formal action, without triggering any internal procedure.
c. **Post-Complaint Employment Protections:** Offer guarantees that those who win a legal case against an institution will receive support in securing future employment and protection from reputational retaliation.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Challenges

Tokenism in DEI Efforts: Institutions without robust diversity, equity, and inclusion policies may fail to address systemic barriers or create an inclusive environment. Performative rather than substantive efforts—often described as *white noise*—contribute to the reinforcement of exclusion in academia by creating the illusion of progress without meaningful structural change. Institutions may introduce diversity statements, committees, or symbolic initiatives while failing to address the systemic barriers that marginalize certain groups. This superficial commitment allows exclusionary practices to persist under the guise of inclusivity, silencing real concerns and exhausting marginalized faculty with endless dialogues that yield little concrete action. As a result, performative efforts maintain the status quo, discouraging genuine participation and limiting their access to decision-making, funding, and professional advancement. In fact, without addressing systemic biases, inclusivity goals risk becoming symbolic rather than impactful. Performative efforts discourage genuine participation, and may erode trust among marginalized faculty. If faculty perceive DEI initiatives as empty gestures, they may disengage from institutional change efforts, leading to a cycle of exclusion.

Strategies

a. **Move from Statements to Systems:** Develop actionable DEI implementation plans with measurable goals, timelines, and accountability structures—not just vision documents.

b. **Empower DEI Teams with Decision-Making Authority:** Shift the role of DEI teams from advisory to policy-making by granting them a mandate to propose and implement DEI-related changes at the institutional level. This includes the authority to develop actionable policies and oversee their execution, ensuring DEI efforts are not sidelined or diluted by higher management. Empowered DEI teams can drive structural change rather than merely providing advice that may be ignored.

c. **Hold Department Leadership Accountable for DEI Outcomes:** Incorporate DEI responsibilities and behaviours into the progress evaluations of department chairs and other leaders. DEI performance should be a measurable component of leadership assessment, discussed during regular performance reviews and linked to leadership development goals. This ensures that promoting DEI is seen as a core leadership competency.

d. **Shift from Representation to Redistribution:** Prioritize not just who is at the table, but who has power. Involve marginalized faculty in meaningful roles, with decision-making authority and resources.

e. **Collect and Analyse Diversity Data**: Establish a systematic and transparent process for collecting diversity data on the student and staff populations, including academic and support staff. This data should include information on race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and other relevant categories, collected in compliance with privacy and ethical standards. Use this data to identify patterns of underrepresentation, monitor the impact of inclusion initiative.

Institutional Resistance to Systemic Change: Institutions might resist deep structural change in DEI efforts, favouring surface-level initiatives that do not substantially challenge existing power dynamics or the status quo. This resistance might stem from multiple factors, including fear of legal consequences, concerns about alienating dominant groups, or a broader reluctance to confront entrenched power structures. Some institutions might prioritize stability over reform, treating DEI as a risk-management strategy rather than a commitment to equity. Efforts that might disrupt the existing hierarchy—such as reevaluating hiring practices, redistributing resources, or holding leadership accountable—can be watered down or delayed to avoid institutional discomfort. As a result, exclusionary practices may remain intact, perpetuating systemic inequalities under the guise of inclusivity. Without a willingness to address these deeper issues, DEI initiatives might risk reinforcing the very barriers they claim to dismantle.

Strategies

a. **Provide DEI Training for Recruitment Committees:** Require all staff serving on selection committees to undergo mandatory DEI recruitment training, covering topics such as recognizing implicit bias, using inclusive language in vacancy postings, assessing growth potential over rigid criteria-matching, and ensuring diversity in committee composition. Participants should be held accountable for integrating DEI principles into recruitment processes, with monitoring mechanisms in place to evaluate impact and consistency across departments.
b. **Introduce Leadership Accountability Metrics:** Include DEI outcomes in leadership appraisals. Require leaders to report annually: *What institutional practices have you changed this year to address exclusion?*
c. **Integrate DEI Contributions into Evaluation and Promotion:** Formally include DEI contributions in annual reviews and promotion criteria for all staff and faculty in leadership roles.

Avoidance of Discomfort and Superficial Solutions: Institutions might at times prioritize quick resolutions over engaging with the complexities of systemic inequities. A reluctance to confront difficult conversations might contribute to the persistence of exclusionary structures. When efforts focus primarily on risk management rather than long-term reform, trust in DEI initiatives might be undermined.

Strategies

a. **Train for Brave Conversations:** Offer mandatory workshops on having difficult dialogues about race, power, and inequity. Train both leaders and faculty.
b. **Create Courageous Space Forums:** Institutionalize regular spaces for frank, facilitated discussions where marginalized voices are prioritized—not just invited.

Lack of Expertise and Opportunism in DEI Roles: In some cases, diversity and inclusion positions might be filled by individuals without specialized expertise in addressing structural inequities. When this happens, DEI roles might be perceived as enhancing institutional reputation rather than driving substantive change. This could mean that discussions on diversity raise awareness but might not translate into meaningful institutional shifts.

Strategies

a. **Professionalize DEI Roles:** Require DEI officers to have proven expertise in systemic equity, anti-racism, or social justice frameworks—not just interest.

b. **Require DEI and Leadership Training for All Leaders:** Mandate DEI and reflexivity training for all leaders, including department chairs, with a focus on recognizing bias, fostering inclusion, and managing diverse teams. Complement this with formal managerial training (akin to the BKO but focused on leadership and organizational management), equipping leaders with practical tools for effective and equitable governance.

c. **DEI Hiring Standards:** Appoint DEI staff through transparent, merit-based hiring processes with input from faculty communities most affected by exclusion.

d. **Prevent Token Appointments:** Avoid overburdening the same few marginalized faculty with DEI work—distribute responsibility institution-wide with proper compensation and support.

e. **Hire Full-Time DEI Professionals with External Expertise:** Fill internal DEI roles at the university and faculty levels with externally recruited, full-time professionals who have established careers in DEI and extensive, specialized training. These positions should not be held by faculty members as add-ons to existing roles, or for reputational gain, but by dedicated experts whose sole focus is to drive systemic change, develop policy, and ensure institutional commitment to equity and inclusion.

Exclusion of DEI Contributions in Job Evaluations: Contributions to diversity and inclusion, such as fostering inclusive team cultures or mentoring underrepresented colleagues, might not always be explicitly recognized in job evaluations (such as annual performance reviews) or promotion criteria. When such efforts are overlooked, faculty and staff committed to inclusivity might face challenges in gaining institutional acknowledgment for this work, which could potentially discourage engagement with diversity initiatives. A lack of recognition of diversity contributions in job evaluations might also create emotional labor burdens for faculty who take on mentoring and inclusion work without sufficient institutional support.

Strategies

a. **Recognize DEI Labor in Promotion Criteria:** Require departments to include DEI activities in annual reviews, tenure dossiers, and leadership assessments.

b. **Reward, Don't Exploit:** Compensate DEI work with reduced teaching loads, stipends, or promotion points—especially for those mentoring underrepresented colleagues.

c. **Fund DEI Work:** Provide dedicated funding and workload recognition for DEI initiatives, mentorship, and outreach, ensuring this labour is not carried solely by marginalized staff.

Neglect of Difficult Conversations: Some institutions might struggle to engage with critical discussions on systemic inequities, favouring neutral approaches that do not challenge existing structures. If difficult conversations are avoided, underlying issues might remain unresolved, limiting the effectiveness of diversity efforts. By sidestepping discussions on racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other structural barriers, institutions might create an environment where marginalized faculty and staff feel unheard or dismissed.

Strategies

a. **Make Structural Oppression a Required Topic:** Embed critical discussions of racism, sexism, coloniality, ableism, etc., into staff retreats, student orientation, and training programs.

b. **Institutionalize Difficult Conversations on Inequity:** Facilitate structured dialogues on topics such as racism, sexism, and intersectional discrimination at

all levels of the faculty. These conversations should be regular, supported, and embedded into institutional culture, not treated as one-off events. Higher management must actively participate, modelling engagement with discomfort as part of meaningful reform.

 c. **Narrative Justice Projects:** Support initiatives where marginalized faculty and students document and publicly share their experiences—moving beyond silence.

Failure to Address Structural Power Imbalances: Many DEI efforts might focus more on symbolic representation than on redistributing power and resources. Without structural changes in areas such as hiring practices, tenure and promotion processes, and funding allocation, marginalized scholars might continue to face systemic disadvantages, even in the presence of visible diversity initiatives. Genuine inclusion requires not only increasing representation but also ensuring that historically excluded voices have real influence within institutional decision-making.

Strategies

 a. **DEI Integrated into All Governance Levels:** Embed DEI considerations across key decision-making bodies, including hiring committees, tenure and promotion boards, curriculum committees, and leadership selection processes.

 b. **Introduce Participatory Budgeting for Inclusion:** Designate a portion of departmental or faculty budgets for equity-focused initiatives, co-created with underrepresented groups to ensure that resources reflect their needs and priorities.

 c. **Institutionalize Reflective Evaluation Questions:** Incorporate structured, equity-focused reflection into annual evaluations. Prompt staff and leaders to consider: *How have I redistributed opportunities this year? Whose voices have I amplified or included in decision-making? What barriers have I helped identify or dismantle?*

Symbolism without substance is not inclusion—it is erasure. DEI must not be a stage where marginalized voices perform for the comfort of the powerful. It must be a process of institutional transformation rooted in justice, accountability, and a redistribution of power. *Anything less is not equity—it is optics.*

Implications of Systemic Exclusion in Academia

Systemic exclusion within academia has far-reaching consequences, not only for individuals directly affected but also for students, institutions, and society at large. The following sections elaborate on these critical implications:

Pipeline Narrowing: Exclusionary practices and unfair treatment hinder the advancement of marginalized individuals within academic and professional pathways, creating significant barriers to leadership positions. Those who do reach senior management roles often have the power to 'reproduce themselves'—favouring candidates who reflect similar backgrounds, values, and notions of academic excellence. This results in a closed circuit of leadership, where dominant discourses and specific academic profiles are perpetuated, further entrenching systemic inequities and limiting institutional diversity.

Attrition of Talent: Systemic barriers, limited opportunities, and persistent exclusion drive many capable individuals out of academia, representing a significant loss of intellectual capital, diversity, and innovation. This attrition is especially pronounced among women—particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare or eldercare.

Erosion of Motivation and Engagement: Exclusionary dynamics in academia can deeply undermine morale, leaving faculty and staff feeling undervalued, invisible, and unsupported. Over time, this erodes motivation, trust, and institutional commitment. Individuals may feel compelled to constantly prove their worth, facing scrutiny without recognition or goodwill. The emotional toll of marginalization and systemic barriers often leads to disengagement, with faculty withdrawing from collaborative efforts, offering only the minimum needed to remain in their roles. This decline in motivation also impacts mentorship and teaching, as disengaged staff may struggle to provide meaningful guidance or invest in long-term academic and institutional goals.

Increased Workplace Conflicts and Organizational Dysfunction: When exclusion and discrimination go unchecked, tensions between faculty, staff, and students can escalate, resulting in a toxic work environment marked by internal conflicts and diminished cooperation. As trust erodes, it sows division among colleagues, fuelling conflict and further weakening institutional cohesion and long-term progress. The absence of transparent and impartial conflict resolution mechanisms exacerbates disputes, undermining teamwork, mentorship, and a sense of shared purpose. This dysfunction not only hinders interdisciplinary collaboration and weakens the academic ecosystem but also incurs financial costs, such as increased sick leave among faculty and staff. Ultimately, organizational dysfunction rooted in systemic exclusion impairs both individual well-being and institutional resilience.

Health Impacts: A culture of exclusion, coupled with discrimination and lack of institutional support, contributes to mental and physical health challenges such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and chronic stress-related illnesses. These conditions further alienate affected individuals, diminishing their ability to participate meaningfully in academic life.

Impact on Students and Academic Performance: Exclusion among faculty has direct consequences for students, as it leads to unwelcoming classroom environments, bias in grading, and fewer mentors from non-dominant backgrounds. Marginalized students may experience higher dropout rates and lower academic performance due to feelings of alienation or lack of institutional support. Institutions that do not actively promote diversity and inclusion risk losing -much needed- prospective students, especially from underrepresented backgrounds, affecting enrolment rates and campus diversity. Furthermore, when exclusion affects faculty, they are not in a good position to serve the needs of students from diverse backgrounds in the best possible manner. This compromises the overall quality of education and student support, particularly for those who rely on inclusive and empathetic learning environments to thrive.

Lack of Role Models for Students: The underrepresentation of faculty members from non-dominant social groups limits students' access to mentors who reflect their identities, experiences, and aspirations, creating a disconnect between academia and the realities of a diverse society. For students from marginalized backgrounds, the absence of role models can reinforce feelings of exclusion and self-doubt, making it harder to envision themselves succeeding in academic or professional fields. This lack of representation not only affects individual confidence and career aspirations but also perpetuates systemic inequities by maintaining academia as an exclusive space – an ivory tower- where only certain identities are visibly associated with success and authority.

Homogeneity of Perspectives: The exclusion of diverse voices in academia narrows intellectual discourse, reinforcing echo chambers where dominant viewpoints go unchallenged. Without a variety of perspectives, research and curricula lack critical engagement with alternative frameworks, theories, and epistemologies, leading to stagnation in academic thought and innovation. This homogeneity limits interdisciplinary collaboration, constrains problem-solving approaches, and excludes knowledge systems that could enhance scholarly inquiry. Expanding intellectual diversity is essential for fostering critical thinking, innovation, and more holistic understandings of complex global challenges.

Bias in Knowledge Production: When academic spaces are dominated by homogenous groups, research priorities, methodologies, and interpretations reflect the biases of those in power, shaping what is considered legitimate knowledge. This leads to blind spots in scholarly inquiry, where issues affecting marginalized communities are overlooked, misrepresented, or deprioritized. Fields such as medicine, economics, and history illustrate this bias, with research often failing to account for diverse experiences, perspectives, and needs. Additionally, gatekeeping in peer review, funding, and editorial boards reinforces these limitations, perpetuating systemic inequities in knowledge production.

Weakened Innovation: Excluding faculty from non-dominant backgrounds narrows the range of perspectives in academic discourse, stifling the cross-pollination of ideas essential for innovation. Intellectual homogeneity limits the exploration of unconventional questions and alternative methodologies, reducing the scope and relevance of academic inquiry. In exclusionary environments, faculty may self-censor, avoid risk-taking, or refrain from challenging dominant paradigms—further dampening creativity. Over time, this suppression of diverse thought weakens critical thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and academic freedom, ultimately hindering the generation of transformative knowledge.

Reinforcement of Societal Biases: Students who experience a biased academic environment may internalize and perpetuate these biases in their professional and social lives. As graduates enter various sectors, their adherence to exclusionary norms can contribute to the continued reproduction of systemic inequities beyond academia.

Economic Consequences for Institutions: Legal cases, public controversies, and high faculty turnover due to exclusionary practices can impose financial burdens on institutions through lawsuits, settlements, and recruitment costs. The loss of talented faculty also reduces research grant success rates and funding opportunities, as diverse perspectives are linked to stronger research outcomes and innovation. Institutions that fail to address exclusion may struggle to secure philanthropic donations or corporate partnerships, particularly in sectors that prioritize equity and social responsibility. In addition, exclusionary practices might undermine the institution's ability to attract a diverse student population, and student enrolments might drop.

Decline in Institutional Reputation and Global Competitiveness: Exclusionary environments damage the reputation of academic institutions, making them less attractive to diverse talent, including faculty, researchers, and students. Universities that fail to foster inclusivity may struggle in global rankings, funding opportunities, and collaborations, as inclusivity and equity are increasingly recognized as indicators of academic excellence. This also affects international recruitment, as institutions perceived as exclusionary may lose global talent to more inclusive environments.

Groups Most Vulnerable to Exclusion in Academia

While exclusionary dynamics can affect a wide range of individuals, certain groups are *disproportionately impacted* due to intersecting systemic barriers embedded in academic structures, cultures, and norms. The mechanisms and structural dynamics described below exacerbate the exclusion of the following groups:

1. **Women, Particularly Mothers, Caregivers and Single Parents**: Women continue to face systemic disadvantages in academia, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. The culture of overwork, presenteeism, and limited flexible career options penalizes those who take career breaks due to childbirth, eldercare, or illness. Lack of part-time or portfolio-based leadership roles, and the stigmatization of part-time work, often limit women's progression to senior positions. The emotional labour of mentoring and DEI contributions, frequently unrecognized in evaluations, further compounds gendered inequities.

2. **Racialized and Ethnic Minority Scholars:** Faculty from racialized backgrounds—especially those from non-Western or migrant origins—face structural racism, underrepresentation, and the devaluation of research focusing on marginalized communities or emic perspectives. Lack of access to informal networks, affinity bias in hiring, and exclusion from mentorship pathways contribute to career stagnation. Experiences of microaggressions, tokenism in DEI, and invisibility in decision-making erode their trust, morale, and long-term engagement.

3. **International Staff**: International scholars, particularly non-EU staff, might be marginalized by Dutch language requirements that are often applied selectively or used as a justification for exclusion from administrative and management roles—even when not essential. Their lack of local social and cultural capital, and unfamiliarity with unwritten institutional norms might hinder their access to leadership positions, special professorships, and informal networking spaces critical for advancement. An

overemphasis on national visibility over international might impact further disadvantages them.

4. **First-Generation Academics and Those from Lower Socio-Economic Backgrounds**: Academics without access to elite educational networks or insider knowledge of academia often struggle to navigate opaque systems, unwritten rules, and elitist norms. These individuals are more likely to be excluded from informal decision-making spaces, lack access to mentorship, and be seen as "outsiders" to dominant academic cultures. Their contributions may be undervalued or dismissed, particularly if they do not align with conventional notions of academic "excellence."

5. **Religious or Spiritual Individuals, Particularly from Minority Faiths**: Scholars who visibly practice religion, such as Muslims, Orthodox Jews, or Christians in secular contexts, or those who define themselves as *Spiritual but not Religious* often face bias and scepticism regarding their capacity for rational and logical thinking, academic objectivity or competence. Religious attire, holiday observances, and faith-informed research interests may be subtly stigmatized or discouraged. Many feel pressure to downplay or conceal their religious or spiritual identity, contributing to invisibility and alienation in academic life.

6. **LGBTQ+ Individuals:** LGBTQ+ scholars may experience subtle marginalization or token inclusion, especially in environments lacking robust DEI policies. They may be discouraged from pursuing research topics related to sexuality and gender, or feel unsafe sharing aspects of their identity. Lack of mentorship, fear of discrimination, and institutional silence around queer issues contribute to their exclusion.

7. **Scholars with Disabilities:** Faculty with visible or invisible disabilities face barriers to access, inadequate institutional support, and biases questioning their productivity, competence or commitment. The inflexible structures and lack of accommodations can exclude them from leadership opportunities and networking opportunities while overwork culture further marginalizes those unable to sustain long hours.

8. **Early-Career Academics and Non-Tenured Staff:** These individuals are especially vulnerable to power imbalances, nepotism, and retaliation. Fear of contract non-renewal or stalled advancement discourages them from challenging injustice, filing complaints, or engaging in DEI work. Their exclusion from decision-making, coupled with precarity, reinforces a culture of silence and limits their influence in shaping institutional change.

9. **Interdisciplinary Scholars and Critical Thinkers**: Academics who challenge dominant paradigms or work across disciplines are often seen as unfocused or non-conforming. Their work may be undervalued in promotion processes, and they are frequently excluded from leadership roles for not aligning with conventional success metrics. Institutional structures favouring discipline-specific expertise make it harder to secure funding, publications, and tenure. Those who critique institutional policies or leadership may face subtle retaliation, such as reduced resources, heightened scrutiny, or exclusion from key roles.

10. **Introverted, Modest, or Collectivist Individuals**: Academia tends to reward self-promotion, visibility, and individualism, disadvantaging those who, due to personality traits or cultural norms, are less inclined to self-advocate. This includes introverts, individuals from collectivist cultures, and women who may be socialized to prioritize humility. These scholars are often overlooked in grant applications, promotions, and leadership appointments. Moreover, the prevailing notion of what

constitutes a "good leader" is strongly biased toward Western, individualistic ideals, with limited awareness that leadership may look quite different in collectivist contexts. As a result, valuable forms of leadership rooted in collaboration, humility, and collective responsibility might go unrecognized.

11. **Individuals with Refugee Status**: Scholars with refugee backgrounds often face intersecting challenges, including disrupted academic trajectories, lack of recognition for prior qualifications, limited access to networks, and uncertainty around legal status or funding eligibility. Institutional systems may lack the flexibility or support structures needed to accommodate their unique circumstances, leading to barriers in hiring, progression, and inclusion. They may also face stigma or bias, particularly in contexts where their presence is politicized, further contributing to marginalization and limited participation in academic life.

12. **Older Academics**: Older faculty members may encounter age-related biases, with assumptions about their adaptability, productivity, or relevance in fast-evolving academic fields. They may be overlooked for leadership roles, professional development, or funding opportunities. Ageism can lead to marginalization, especially when coupled with changing institutional priorities or technological shifts that lack inclusive support.