

DECOLONIZE UGENT

INTRODUCTION

The decolonization of our education is yet to come. Higher education is trapped within colonial Eurocentric paradigms, which complicate qualitative teaching practices and leave many students unsatisfied. The following letter presents the problems within the policy and education of Ghent University, and how these can be resolved. Through this open letter we reach out to Ghent University, we indicate what changes need to be made concerning policy and we suggest ways of achieving these. Decolonize UGent!

This year in May, a shockwave swept across the United States after the gruesome murder of George Floyd. Outrage was palpable among the whole world, as well as in Belgium and at Ghent University. The murder of Floyd is yet another addition to the long list of people of African descent who are targets of structural racism. Police violence is also a bitter reality in Belgium. Although many cases remain unnoticed, current campaigns, such as #Justice4Mawda and #JusticePourLamine, show the lived reality. Not only major lawsuits, but also discrimination in the form of ethnic profiling are commonplace in our society. Moreover, according to a report by Amnesty International¹, the documentation of ethnic profiling in Belgium is inadequate due to a lack of data collection. The actual figures for police violence against racialized minorities are, in all likelihood, higher.

After more than a decade of fighting against racism with a focus on decolonization, it felt appropriate to talk about the current coloniality of power structures. Some students feel powerless, others feel a pressure to undertake something. For a great many, these events cut deep, for they hit close to home, to their own existential realities and lived experiences. Unia, the Interfederal Equal Opportunities Centre, received 8,478 different reports of complaints of discrimination, hate messages and hate crimes in the year 2019. No less than 13.1% of the files that were opened based on these facts took place within the education sector.² Numerous are affected and demand change. The question arises; what can a university do?

A university is a societal institution. Through its action and statements, it has a definite impact on society and its students. Nonetheless, a great deal of UGent students felt unheard these past months. Due to UGent's unclear and incomplete response, the trauma surrounding the aforementioned events was not recognised.

Students did not remain silent. A first open letter was distributed, addressed to the institutions of higher education in Ghent. On 2 July, the student association Umoja Ghent³ called for a genuine change towards an inclusive higher education. On the one hand, they demanded recognition of racism, on the other, they asked to make inclusivity a priority, through concrete plans of action. This open letter pursues the first, but aims to define the concepts of "recognition of racism" and "inclusivity", to clearly point the way for our university, and to state a clear demand. Because action and recognition are absolutely necessary.

¹ https://www.amnesty-international.be/sites/default/files/bijlagen/amn_rapport_etnisch_profileren_web_ok_1_0.pdf

² <https://www.unia.be/nl/publicaties-statistieken/publicaties/cijfersverslag-2019>

³ Umoja Ghent is an African student association that promotes African diversity in Ghent as well as represents the interests of an underrepresented group of **students**. The association strives to promote intercultural solidarity among all Ghent students.

DECOLONIZATION

Decolonization is the process of undoing the epistemic injustices embedded in colonisation, perpetuated by coloniality, and its influences in all levels of our society, as well as in our minds. In education, this translates to confronting our colonial past, to allow us to better understand its current influences on our educational practices and frameworks. Within education, this means confronting colonialism, including Belgium's colonial past, for a better understanding of the current influences on our educational practices and frameworks.⁴ This means that the term diversity does not sufficiently cover, which imposes the use of the term decolonization. Our higher education all too often starts from a Eurocentric / Western framework, and **themes such as colonization, discrimination and racism do not always receive the necessary attention and context.** There is, for example, still a lack of reflection on the history of the various learning disciplines. Education should aim to deliver critical students who dare to look beyond their own environment and are aware of structural inequalities in society.

Both "Sustainability" and "Diversity" were chosen as so-called university-wide policy choices, challenges to which Ghent University wants to commit itself fully in the coming years. While sustainability is (rightly so) explicitly present in programme evaluations, diversity remains absent. Consequently, we ask Ghent University to put word into action and draw up guidelines to fully achieve her decolonization, at least through the following channels:

- Start up research and coaching within the faculties concerning how study programmes can decolonize their programmes, and provide sufficient support for coaching. Identify current initiatives for decolonisation of training courses and communicate them transparently.
- Evaluate the used frames of reference. Different voices, including non-Western ones, ought to be used within the programme. This is possible by re-evaluating the courses and / or reworking the themes that are discussed within these courses. It is clear that there are biases⁵ within research and education: find out how and where they are expressed in their respective courses and / or disciplines. Name them, too. Two examples are:
 - Facial recognition in computer science. Several studies⁶ have shown that non-white faces are more often given a false positive than others.
 - Diseases with dermatological symptoms are less readily recognized in dark-skinned patients. Medical students do not receive enough information about this and only see white example patients.⁷

⁴ Decolonization is a concept that has no fixed definition and is still developing in the literature. We would like to refer you to the following source for more information

bv. <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/youthsociety/assets/docs/briefs/decolonizing-education-research-brief.pdf>.

A resolution has already been submitted in the Flemish Parliament on the decolonization of education. Although primary and secondary education are the main focus, some suggestions were made for academia here too.

<http://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/pfile?id=1566970>

⁵ Biases are prejudiced perspectives. In this case, prejudices from a eurocentric, colonial framework.

⁶ <https://nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/ir/2019/NIST.IR.8280.pdf>

⁷ [https://www.jaad.org/article/S0190-9622\(05\)04720-1/abstract#back-bib17](https://www.jaad.org/article/S0190-9622(05)04720-1/abstract#back-bib17)

Such biases should be given a place within the course content, so that the student is aware of the problematic biases within their discipline. In addition, the problematic and possibly racist background of a researcher must have a place within the course content, all the more so if it had an influence on his theories and research.

- Introduce societal courses to programmes where something similar is not yet offered. It is important here that the courses are relevant and that they establish a connection with the respective programme. It is also important to include such themes in university-wide elective courses.
- Organize university-wide transfer of knowledge about decolonization and related themes.
- Set up training sessions and workshops for professors and assistants so that they too can come into contact with decolonisation as an analytical framework to address issues such as white privilege, discrimination, and structural racism. Teachers should be encouraged to participate.

REPRESENTATION

Students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent can rarely identify with the mainly white workforce of Ghent University. The importance of representation for the learning performance and mental well-being of the student cannot be underestimated. All students benefit from a university's workforce being a reflection of its students.

Therefore, we propose the following points:

- Be proactive in promoting ethnic diversity among academic staff at all levels, both assistants and professors. This can be done in various ways, including by examining and removing barriers to a PhD as well as for further promotion. These barriers are also related to the limited intake and progression of students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent.
- Be proactive in focussing on diversity among staff such as student psychologists, student doctors, social services, disability services, monitoring services, etc. It is not easy to talk about highly sensitive and personal topics such as discrimination with people who do not have the same experiences, or who have difficulty relating to the experience of students being stigmatized. This contrast creates barriers to the necessary social care among students. It goes without saying that this change cannot just happen overnight as these positions are often already filled. That is why we ask for inclusivity to be given more weight in the appointment procedures for the aforementioned services.

INTAKE AND PROGRESSION

In addition to decolonization of the personnel corps, the auditoriums should also be a reflection of our society. Currently, many students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent are unable to take the leap to higher (university) education. If they do take that step, they are still hampered by many factors that prevent them from reaching the finish line, more so than white students. Structural barriers are still present within higher education and we demand structural solutions.

Ghent University already took initiatives in the past. An example is the role model project in which young people from racialized minorities are encouraged to take the step from secondary education to higher education. Despite these initiatives, the intake and progression of students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent remains problematic. Secondary education is partly responsible for the lower intake of those students in university education. However, this cannot be the reason for a university not to assume its own responsibility and not to take structural measures that improve their progression.

Improving the progression is a layered problem that does not have one solution. Nevertheless, there are a number of initiatives that can be launched already:

- Students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent are less likely to be reached by the offered services and supports. This was also visible in the Mental Well-being survey of the Ghent Student Council, in which the awareness about certain services was asked. It is good that Ghent University offers such services, but the University must focus even more on the visibility and awareness of these initiatives among the groups that truly need this help. Limited access to psychological aid, study aid, financial aid, etc. can form structural barriers in higher education. It is in itself not evident to share a trauma, let alone when the student has to justify themselves for this to staff who have no experience with this issue. Again, the importance of focusing on a representative workforce shows.
- Continue to focus on student counseling. Good examples of this are the study sessions organized on Wednesday by the Policy Unit Gender and Diversity.
- Communicate with secondary education to investigate the barriers to intake and to remove barriers in a targeted manner.

A continuous critical approach to an ever-evolving educational policy and practice must be a structural part of Ghent University. In addition, Ghent University must remain wary of increased barriers for racialized minorities, in order to safeguard the inclusiveness of educational policy at every level. Sufficient research and reflection from different perspectives into how changes in policy can affect various groups must be performed.

RACISM CONTACT POINT

Many students currently do not know where they can go when they experience (structural) racism. Daily racism is also present in the university environment.

- In addition to aggression, bullying and undesirable sexual behaviour, racism must also be explicitly included as a form of transgressive behaviour in the operation of the Trustpunt. Of course, this also means that the necessary expertise is essential to the proper provision of services. As such, the representation within the counsellor corps is a must, so that students can identify themselves with trusted persons.
- Make sure that the Trustpunt is provided with sufficient resources so that it is not hindered in its functioning.
- Provide clear communication about the existence of the Trustpunt and the follow-up procedures used. It is important that students find their way to the Trustpunt easily, even students who are less likely to be reached.

COMMUNICATION

There is a common perception that themes such as Black Lives Matter and the possibility of a headscarf ban in higher education⁸ are not reacted to quickly, nuanced and adequately enough. Therefore the following is suggested:

- Have a response ready when topics about discrimination and inequality are discussed in the media and could relate to UGhent students.
- Involve students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent in communication policy, especially for broad campaigns. By giving students a say, nuances and sensitivities can be better taken into account.
- Students with diverse origins and in particular those of African descent should not be presented in a clichéd manner and should not only be involved in themes of diversity.

LACK OF POLICY CULTURE

Current policy plans and initiatives⁹ are too optional, non-binding and non-committal. Decolonization should be an inherent part of the overall policy culture and policy making, it should not merely be an option. An example of this are University-wide Policy Choices (UPC): faculties had to choose at least three UPCs and Diversity could be chosen as one of the UPCs. Only five faculties chose Diversity as their objective. However, decolonization (not merely diversity) should be an objective for every faculty and in every policy domain.

⁸ Ghent University was one of the last higher educational institutions to respond to the much-discussed ruling of the Constitutional Court, which ruled at the beginning of June that the ban on wearing visible religious badges, such as a headscarf, is not in conflict with freedom of religion or the right to education. In other words, it would be possible for a higher educational institution to ban the wearing of a headscarf from now on. https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20200705_95514732

⁹ https://www.ugent.be/nl/univgent/waarvoor-staat-ugent/diversiteit-en-gender/beleidscel/beleidsplan-diversiteit-2019-2023/at_download/file

CONCLUSION

This letter aims to reach out to the academic community on one hand and to the university administration on the other. Getting rid of structural racism and a decolonization of (higher) education are not evolutions that can happen overnight, but that does not make them any less urgent.

A number of structural reforms are needed to achieve these goals. It is important that Ghent University's workforce is a microcosmic reflection of society, students must be able to identify with their environment. Furthermore, it is necessary to remove the current structural barriers in order to optimize the intake and progression of students, as the auditoriums are often not a microcosmic reflection of society. In addition, students must also be able to consult accessible support that takes their experience with (structural) racism seriously. The instance that currently exists, Trustpunt, must be made more visible, so that students can find their way to the contact point more easily. Clear and nuanced communication about socially relevant themes is also crucial. Finally, current policy culture that considers (what is up until now named as) diversity as "optional" should adapt to a contemporary image of society, where decolonization should be an all-encompassing general objective in every policy domain at every faculty.

These themes are not separate from each other. Decolonization is an intersectional process that manifests itself in different domains of our society, including our education and policy. Cherry picking is not an option: we demand that all cited and future action points are to be carried out equally and fully within a general change of mentality of the University that considers decolonization to be inherently necessary. Our role, as students, within this dialogue has been depleted. While students should undoubtedly be consulted, it is not the responsibility of students to organise the initiative that addresses and upholds this dialogue. Such a working point cannot be limited to solely a student initiative. This is mentally exhausting. We expect Ghent University to actively get to work, that a budget will be made available to implement these policy changes in a qualitative way and that the efforts shown by employees will also be honored. The implementation of action points is the responsibility of Ghent University.

Of course, we recognize the efforts already made by the institution, and we realize that turning inclusivity into actions does not happen automatically. However, that is no reason to stick to the status quo, on the contrary, it must change. Complexity should not be a reason to adopt a bystander attitude. In addition, decolonization is an important instrument with which we have to get to work at this very moment. Nowadays, decolonization seems to be everywhere in our society. We ask Ghent University not to regard decolonization merely as a buzzword, but to actively focus on structural change. The students need an answer, a need for recognition that the status quo is no longer sufficient, **a need for action.**



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Wel jong niet hetero vzw
Platform stop etnisch profileren
BOEH!
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Rainbow House
OverKop
Girls Go Boom
Minderhedenforum
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