To belong, or not to belong; that is the question

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Growing up in Amsterdam in the 1980's, I went to primary and secondary school with kids who had their origins all over the world. I had friends without a migration background, and I had friends whose parents had come from one of the former Dutch colonies –like mine-, or as so-called "guest workers" from Morocco, Turkey and Spain, or as political refugees from various countries in South-America. This multi-ethnic school environment was mirrored in the ethnic diversity I saw throughout the city, and especially on a daily basis in the suburban neighbourhood in which I lived with my mother. My Surinamese background, my brown skin and the accent with which my mother spoke (and still speaks) Dutch, never seemed out of place. I was one of many kids with a "different" ethnic background, one of many kids with a skin tone other than white, and with a parent who had an accent. Central to my life was a city in which diversity was so common and felt so familiar that I thought it represented the Netherlands as a whole. Little did I know...

After secondary school, I decided to go to university in Leiden, a university city about 50 kilometers from Amsterdam. I wanted to experience a different environment, and I succeeded in doing just that. In that city, and at that university, I learned that Amsterdam didn't represent the Netherlands in terms of ethnic diversity at all. It was during this time at university that I "became" a brown girl in the sense that I became highly-aware of the fact that I was different compared to most of my fellow students. It wasn't that anybody treated me differently, but I felt different, both in terms of skin colour and ethnic background. This feeling of being different didn't negatively affect my performance. I did well academically and I never doubted whether I technically belonged at the university. I did. I had earned my way in. However, the feeling of being different did hamper my *feelings of belonging* at university. To give a couple of examples: I didn't participate in the introductory days at the very beginning of my first year, which is promoted as <u>the</u> way to make new friends and get acquainted. I didn't join a student association, which is considered a big part of student life in Leiden. And I only lived in a student house for two out of the four years I spent studying.

Since finishing my studies and moving back to Amsterdam, I have regularly thought about my time in Leiden and why I felt so much out of place there. Reflecting upon it, I think that, unconsciously, my life in Amsterdam had been centered around the normalcy of my background and appearence as a part of the city's diversity.Whereas the –to my eyes- limited ethnic diversity in the university and

Leiden as a whole forced me to question this normalcy and hence to decentre my position in society. This decentring caused uneasiness as it came with a certain consciousness that what I had considered "normal", no longer represented my new life world.

Yes, we all come of age. My "awakening" in that sense wasn't that special. But what ís special, is that twenty years on, we can start to think of my experiences as a student in reverse. As we live in an age in which diversity has become so intricate that we now speak of cities -such as Amsterdam- and places as 'super-diverse', feelings of belonging among students -or lack thereof- can now also be pondered on account of the presence of diversity instead of its absence.

The presence of diversity is something I encounter on a very regular basis as I work at the VU University Amsterdam. The VU University in Amsterdam is known as one of the most multicultural or multi-ethnic universities in the Netherlands. This reputation of being a university that attracts students with a migration background, many of whom are so-called first-generation students[1], could have easily worked against the VU. Yet, it has been turned into an asset and a unique selling point of VU University. It is used as a way to juxtapose the VU University to Amsterdam's other, larger, and better known, university: the University of Amsterdam (UvA). The UvA is seen as the more classic, "white", middle class, activist university. And UvA has been criticized over the past few years, from within by its own staff and its own students, over its lack of inclusiveness when it comes to students and staff who differ from the "the blueprint of the secular, mostly white, middle class"[2].

Next to using diversity as a juxtaposition, why is diversity as an asset and unique selling point of VU University important, and how does it play out for feelings of belonging of VU students, I wonder? Research[3] done in the workplace on perceptions of similarity or dissimilarity shows that employees who perceive themselves to be dissimilar compared to their co-workers, are more likely to monitor both their own performance and their workplace to look for cues about who belongs and who doesn't. This monitoring can actually impede their performance at work, as looking for these cues takes away time which could have been devoted to work-related tasks. If we are to translate this mechanism to the university setting, it becomes obvious why a highly-diverse university can be beneficial for students with a migration background: it allows them to perceive themselves perhaps

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[1] First generation student refers to the fact that these students are the first in their families to enter and go through higher eduction.
[2] Diversity Commission, 2016, p. 1
[3] Sahin, O., J. van der Toorn, W. Jansen & N. Ellemers (2019). Looking beyond our similarities: How perceived (in)visible dissimilarity relates to feelings of inclusion at work. *Frontiers in Psychology,* 10:575, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00575

not as similar compared to their diverse set of co-students, but at least also not as the only one who is dissimilar. This mechanism can also work for students without a migration background, as it "affords them the freedom to be different as well and if they wish to deviate from the norm, they would likely still be accepted"[4].

VU University as a highly-diverse setting, offering room for difference, could thus foster feelings of belonging among both students with and without a migration background. Yet does room for difference automatically coincide with the presence of diversity among the student body? Or are matters, as usual, a bit more complicated than this? Well, there is of course the fact that the diverse student body isn't reflected in scientific and teaching staff at VU University. And it is commonly "known" at VU University (simply by looking around at the cafeteria or wherever one sees groups of students informally interacting) that social groups are self-segregated along ethnic and sometimes visibly religious lines. This flocking together in subgroups can be a sign that students actually do feel dissimilar despite, or perhaps because of, the presence of diversity[5]. These feelings of dissimilarity can be enhanced by experiences with forms of racial or religious micro-aggressions in the classroom[6], such as being singled out in class or teachers using stereotypical examples in class, which some VU students with a migration background have encountered. Whereas other VU students without a migration background have expressed their discomfort and unhappiness with certain social challenges that come with diversity and a diverse classroom[7].

Room for difference doesn't seem to automatically coincide with the presence of diversity. What seems to be required is a setting in which diversity isn't simply the reality, but the norm[8]. And in order for diversity to become the norm, there needs to be contact and interaction with diversity; widespread appreciation and valuing of diversity; and policy and practice that accommodate diversity. These three requirements should be integrated at VU University on a general level (top down), in the classroom among teachers and students, and it should engage students. More so, engaging students and understanding diversity as a norm should also be explicitly aimed at students without a migration background, as for them diversity policy and practices can come across as

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[4] Sahin et al., 2019, p. 9
[5] Sahin et al., 2019, p. 2
[6] Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2016
[7] Source: VU student survey Belonging@VU
[8] Bethel, A., A. Szabo & C. Ward (2016). Parallel lives? Predicting and enhancing connectedness between international and domestic students. In: *Multi-dimensional transitions of international students to higher eduction,* D. Jindal-Snape & B. Rienties (eds.)

threatening. Diversity policy and measures should therefore be framed as inclusive, pertaining to everybody, including students without a migration background[9].

The notion of including students with <u>and</u> without a migration background in diversity policy and measures is crucial, as engaging students appears to be the most powerful tool in embedding diversity norms in the classroom[10]. Yet, when considering the three points needed for diversity to become an institutional norm, a couple of important questions have to be addressed. First and foremost, how do we deal with the fact that widespread appreciation and the value of diversity within VU University doesn't happen in a vacuum, and appreciation of diversity in Dutch society in general isn't common nowadays? If VU University introduces diversity norms, this will go against the grain to more general societal views, and will perhaps not easily be met with agreement by all staff and students. Secondly, contact and interaction with diversity among students and among students and staff is a possibility in the diverse context of VU University. But since students do not automatically search out diversity when it comes to working together or hanging out together, do we "force" students in diverse working groups, and based on what diversity, as ethnicity is of course not the only, nor necessarily always the most relevant marker of difference? And lastly, policy and measures that accommodate diversity within VU University receive top-down (fortunately!) time and attention. However, policy and measures aimed at, for instance, a more inclusive curriculum, could be highly contested among staff as it is oftentimes looked upon as being at odds with "good" or "neutral" education.

Thinking about diversity as the norm in the university allows me to reassess my own experiences as a student. Despite the challenges that lie hidden in the open-ended questions posed above, what diversity as the norm offers is a way out of the loneliness that comes with the feeling of being dissimilar. Looking back, it was good for me personally that I was forced to decentre my position. Many people with a migration background can probably relate both to the painfulness of the experience, as to the benefits it can bring in terms of self-knowledge and knowledge about society and one's place and position in it[11]. This makes it all the more relevant in this day and age, in which people without a migration background self-segregate the most and are least likely to maintain

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[9] Jansen, W.S., S. Otten & K. Van der Zee (2015). Being part of diversity: The effects of an all-inclusive multicultural diversityapproach in majority members' perceived inclusion and support for organizational diversity efforts. *Group processes & intergroup relations,* 18(6), 817-832. doi: 10.1177/1368430214566892
[10] Bethel et al., 2016
[11] Waldring, I. (2018). The fine art of boundary sensitivity: second-generation professionals engaging with social boundaries in the workplace. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam: Doctoral Thesis

interethnic contacts and friendships[12], that students without a migration background too become aware of their place and position in the diverse context of the university (and society as a whole). Because yes, we all come of age. Yet I'm pretty sure that although my former fellow students had their own processes to go through, very few of them had to reconsider their life worlds and their own position in it. And this is precisely what diversity as a norm can provide all students: a feeling of belonging through the joint discovery of being similar in dissimilarity, and in the wake of this, a joint reconsideration of what it means to abdicate the comfort of the centre in favour of the experience and the knowledge that decentring has to offer.

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[12] Crul, M. & F. Lelie (2017). De 'integratie' van mensen van Nederlandse afkomst in superdiverse wijken. *Tijdschrift over Cultuur & Criminaliteit (7)* 1, 39-56