

Mission & implementation diversity and inclusion Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp

CONTEXT OF THE NOTE

In early 2021, a temporary working group was installed with the task of preparing a school-wide vision around diversity and inclusion for the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. After seven monthly working sessions under the guidance of Atlas Antwerp, this group of 20 students, teachers and staff from the various programs came to a mission and vision in early 2022. In 2022, these documents were commented on, updated and refined by the conservatoire's Wellbeing Sounding Board Group. The same exercise was then repeated at the staff level. The document below is a statement of intent to create an active policy. It is a living, changing document to generate engagement.

MISSION/VISION DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Mission

The Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp offers music and performing arts education. Through flexible education with attention to the individual, we aim to enable every student and teacher to get the best out of themselves. The Conservatoire therefore aims to be a **'mind-expanding' art school (1)**, where everyone feels **welcome and respected (2)** for who they are.

In a society that still excludes many people based on gender, colour, disability, language, culture, religion, income, sexual orientation... we prefer to see such **differences (3)** as a source of artistic and educational strength. They strengthen us as an art school to challenge the norm and become a "textbook example" for city and society in this. So we do not lock ourselves up between white walls, but broaden our **Western tradition (4)** in critical dialogue and through collaborations outside our comfort zone.

The Conservatoire is committed to arts education that is **multi-voiced and multi-lingual (5)**, both in the curriculum and in the classroom. By **decisively addressing** sexism, racism, ableism and other negative forms of **discrimination (6)**, we create trust and safety as equitable basic conditions for everyone's individual growth. Artistic values that we foster in students and teachers also underpin the school's **diversity policy (7)**: quality through skill, creativity from critical self-reflection, with room for vulnerable experimentation.

Regarding diversity and inclusion, the Conservatoire aims to be a "learning school" with a sense of change and innovation.

Vision in 7 points

1. **Art thrives on diversity.** Innovation in music, performing arts and art education are often driven from the periphery of the existing arts field. Certainly as an art school, greenhouse for the art of tomorrow, we therefore like to keep pushing our boundaries into what is less familiar to us. The extraordinary artists we want to develop are not only technically skilled, but also show social awareness of their position. They possess the necessary tools to make a difference out of their individuality in a field of work and society that are becoming increasingly diverse. It is precisely at that crossroads that today's innovations sprout. Our school not only wants to stay up to date, but also to blaze new trails in the arts field.
2. **Everything starts with an inclusive school culture.** The special strength of our art program is that it is extra flexible in customized education. It helps to make each student's own story and ability special. We strive to create the basic conditions for this: that everyone feels at home at school and is given equitable opportunities, because extra facilities and reasonable adjustments are possible. A school that thus seeks to remove its barriers becomes more pleasant for everyone. Therefore, our school cherishes open dialogue and room for criticism, as well as a transparent hierarchy and safe manners.
3. **All differences deserve attention.** Every identity is plural: for art creation, that unique uniqueness is a crucial resource. Therefore, we consciously do not use one identity norm for students, faculty and staff. We believe that different profiles actually enhance our pedagogical quality. We see the diversity we strive for as a broad palette, broader than just national differences, multilingualism or gender equality. Also regarding colour, class, age, sexuality, religion, ability... we are aware of possible privileges or exclusion mechanisms. We do not believe in pigeonholing, but rather in intersectional thinking.
4. **No Western tradition without critical thinking.** Our curriculum builds on a long and rich Western tradition. Just for that, students from other continents gladly sail into the port of Antwerp. Even for local students, the canon remains inspiring. At the same time, as a school, we are aware of the colonial background of that Western frame of reference and actively search for our blind spots: that is what makes us a truly international school, strongly embedded in a multi-coloured city. We deal consciously and critically with formulations and customs of the past and present. We open our curriculum and our teaching staff to different perspectives and cultural traditions.

5. **Language is crucial, in plural.** Of everyone's plural identity, language is an essential means of expression. Not only because of the international profile of many of our programs, with a total of over 50 nationalities involved, multilingualism is our second nature. Furthermore, we are aware of our context within the super-diverse city of Antwerp and make room for the languages and dialects of our Belgian students. Also artistically, as an art school, we honour all the nuances and creative possibilities of language as a carrier of nuanced thinking: it expresses itself not only verbally, but equally visually, performatively and musically. We want to cherish this polyphony. Therefore, we are committed to a multilingual school culture: we want to provide language support in Dutch and English, we deal with students' language needs as flexibly as possible, and if necessary, we grant individual adaptation with respect to language-related learning problems. We avoid non-inclusive or violent terms in our communication. Language requires caring. No multilingualism without caring multilingualism.

6. **Discrimination should be excluded.** Art schools, with their boundary pushing, physical and personal pedagogy are prone to transgressive behaviour. Wanting to be a welcoming home for all becomes credible only if there are accessible procedures in case of transgressive behaviour: not only a clear reporting procedure and an independent ombudsperson function, but also consistent action after thorough investigation. Discrimination, from micro-aggressions and (un)conscious stereotyping to gross violations, is not swept under the rug. The school also remains extra vigilant for its own institutional racism and ableism. Pushing your boundaries in confidence is only possible if those boundaries are clear.

7. **No polyphony without structural policies.** For us, polyphony is an integral choice and a shared responsibility. We opt for a structural policy at all levels. In order for our polyphonic ambition not to depend on accidental pioneers or loose projects, there are fixed checks and balances, structures and procedures, budgetary priorities. The specific context of artistic entrance exams means that not everyone can start at the Conservatoire. We continue to critically review the entrance exams themselves (how people are selected), the forms of exclusion that manifest themselves there, and the larger societal challenges that prevent certain groups from accessing the necessary preliminary training or participation in the arts. When a student starts at the Conservatoire, we want to ensure that the educational environment for every student in the school is as high quality as possible.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp strives to create an inclusive school environment, where everyone feels welcome and respected for who they are. In this way, everyone's creative ability is given the best opportunities. A shared attention to diversity among students, (guest) teachers and staff requires not only goodwill, but also active commitment.

These actions and goals require different approaches for all parts and programs of the Conservatoire. The programmes, research, production and administrative-technical staff translate the objectives into an appropriate workable framework.

1. Art thrives on diversity

The Conservatoire is structurally committed to a more diverse composition of its pool of both regular teachers, guest teachers and jury's.

This objective is a multi-year process based on a clear human resources policy.

- We will go for open calls where possible for guest lecturers beyond our own network.
- We list the target ratios now used by the various programmes for guest and regular teachers and jury's. We communicate them openly and evaluate them regularly.
- We are looking at options for inclusive recruiting and job postings. We are counting on support from AP University College in this regard.

The Conservatoire is aiming for a more diverse intake of students and strengthens ties with alumni after graduation .

An inclusive art school eliminates barriers to entry and helps bridge the gap to the work field after college.

- The programmes are making efforts to be more accessible to students with different profiles.
- We regularly review and evaluate the programmes and reform when necessary.
- We want to keep the professional field close through our recent alumni and continue to think about general alumni policy.

2. Everything starts with an inclusive school culture

The Conservatoire installs a firmly established culture of conversation in school.

Well-moderated moments of conversation on sensitive topics are valued by students. They help create additional awareness, exchange alternative knowledge and contribute to a shared vocabulary.

- Talks are organized on a regular basis: school-wide and at the programme level if necessary.

- In IBaMaFlex, you have the opportunity as a student to request a preferred name and indicate your pronouns. We respect declared pronouns and provide training and support for faculty, staff and students if necessary.
- We always try to communicate as inclusively as possible while respecting everyone's identity. We bear a collective responsibility for this.
- We are taking a critical look at our organizational and meeting culture. We work to create a constructive working and learning environment and provide collective education around forms of communication.

The Conservatoire aims for a more horizontal relationship between students and faculty where possible.

- Feedback from students and (guest) lecturers is crucial for the functioning of the programmes. Feedback opportunities are structurally embedded through the programme committees, formal evaluation moments after course units and informal feedback and discussion moments organized by the programmes.

The Conservatoire strives for a supported, structural vision around diversity and inclusion .

- The vision around diversity and inclusion and the Code of Conduct are discussed during the recruitment period and endorsed by the recruited staff member. The vision and code of conduct are a part of development and evaluation interviews for staff.
- The vision around diversity and inclusion and the Code of Conduct are discussed and walked through with students each year.
- The school community has a say in policy through the Sounding Board Group, which takes place several times each academic year.
- The evaluation of courses integrates checks around diversity and inclusion.
- With the Patrimonial service (and where possible through the De Singel Management Committee), the accessibility of the building will be looked at and a plan drawn up for improvement.
- We are working to collect tips around accessibility at performances and internships.
- We transparently communicate the personnel policies that the Conservatoire conducts and by extension the personnel policies of AP University College.

3. All differences deserve attention

The Conservatoire avoids using one identity standard for students, faculty, staff and others associated with the school.

We all have multiple identities and take intersectional thinking as a starting point. Diversity is the norm. We remain vigilant of our own blind spots and continue to examine them in order to work with them.

- We give persons with disabilities (invisible or visible) and neurodiverse persons equal opportunities. We make reasonable accommodations whenever possible (such as a modified study program, extra support, etc.).
- We facilitate and support where appropriate (productionally and/or financially) safe(r) spaces or other specific initiatives started by students.
- We continue to be in discussions with AP University College's student facilities service about a broad general offer that further meets the needs of our students.

4. No Western tradition without a critical view

The Conservatoire opens its curriculum to non-canonical perspectives and cultural traditions.

How can our school provide extra space for artistic inspiration from other traditions, without sacrificing the added value of the traditions we already teach? By also giving attention in course materials, reading lists, history subjects, artistic projects... to non-Western traditions, to oeuvres of women artists and/or to non-canonical art forms, we increase critical awareness among students and teachers about the Western tradition.

- This is a challenge of the entire arts field and transcends the Conservatoire level. We are focusing on gathering relevant resources and tools around the topic on Digitap and Teams. There are also quite a few examples in-house already, which can be shared even better with each other.
- We integrate this search into the training components.
- We are exploring further opportunities for collaboration with other courses (inside and outside the Conservatoire).
- Whenever possible, we organize moments for knowledge sharing, exchange, possibly training... for faculty, staff and students of the Conservatoire.

5. Language is crucial, as plural

The Conservatoire chooses a clear language policy because multilingualism is an added value.

- We are working to develop a clear and transparent language policy that encourages students' professional, artistic and personal development in a pedagogical manner.

- The Conservatoire's language policy starts from an awareness of the intersection between language, identity and other learning challenges such as dyslexia or ASD and possible language-related power structures.
- We streamline ways to test the language skills of new students during artistic entrance exams. This allows us to provide students with lower levels of proficiency in the languages of instruction offered with the necessary and appropriate support to complete the programmes.

The Conservatoire offers space for all languages.

- The school's policies and curriculum actively invite students to explore and appreciate their home languages, dialects and cultures, and to engage in dialogue with teaching materials in languages other than Dutch or English.
- The Conservatoire promotes awareness about the added value of the Dutch language for the well-being and professional opportunities of international students.

The Conservatoire provides language support.

- We provide accessible language support for students, such as specific support for academic writing in Dutch and English.
- We support students in developing professional language skills, in addition to academic language skills and subject-specific jargon.
- Teachers are supported in developing their own language skills and further development in multilingual teaching methods, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and language-aware teaching.

The Conservatoire communicates openly about language and language policy.

- The language policy and its expectations are clearly communicated to current and prospective students and staff of the Conservatoire.
- The choices, and rationale for them, around language use in courses and teaching materials is clearly communicated before the start of a course unit.

Check out the [research report on multilingualism at the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp](#) for extensive report and interpretation of these actions. The research was completed in 2022 and Joanna Britton is now permanently attached to the Conservatoire as a language coach.

6. Discrimination should be excluded

The Conservatoire continues to refine its policies and procedures around transgressive behavior.

- The code of conduct is discussed with all students at the beginning of each academic year (at commencement time) and with all staff at their intake.
- Every year the code of conduct is revised and discussed in the sounding board group, this way everyone who wants to have a say in its content.
- Guidelines for handling certain situations are established so that it is clear what is expected and when.
- The reporting procedure is as clear as possible to everyone at the Conservatoire. A step-by-step plan is posted throughout the building and is freely available on the website.
- There is consultation with the people of the Reporting Point Transgressive Behaviour of AP University College (by project officer diversity and inclusion) to see how the Reporting Point can better meet the needs of the Conservatoire and what preventive programme is organized by the Reporting Point.

7. No polyphony without structural policy

The Conservatoire anchors diversity and inclusion as a focal point in its structural operation.

The Conservatoire's vision around diversity and inclusion also translates into policy choices and budgetary priorities.

- Budgetary space is created for initiatives and actions around diversity and inclusion.
- There is participation opportunity around the diversity and inclusion policy for everyone associated with the Conservatoire, through the Sounding Board Group.
- Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp, together with HoGent and KASK, took the initiative for an intervision platform on diversity between Flemish art schools: how are things going in other schools, what are inspiring practices and opportunities for improvement? We are looking at how this network can be given a sustainable form.
- We work from small to large and vice versa: where possible, initiatives are structurally anchored at the (sub)programme level and policy decisions are implemented at each level.
- The Conservatoire hired a part-time diversity and inclusion project officer as of January 2023.
- We are implementing the results of the research project "Resilient Artists" in the school.

The Conservatoire is considering a professionalization policy for staff, faculty and researchers.

There should be room for staff, researchers and faculty to professionalize around education-related topics, where possible within their remit and free of personal financial costs.

- We remain in discussions with AP University College general services about establishing a structural annual training offering accessible to Conservatoire faculty, researchers and staff.
- Within the provided training offer, there is room for training around diversity and inclusion.
- We are moving towards a system where professionalization is effectively part of the job description. Depending on the appointment percentage, we look at what can be included, such as participation in INSPIRE, training from the offer of AP University College, the offer that is organized in the broad art sector, the offer of ARTICULATE, specific training organized at the level of the Conservatoire, ... This can be followed up on the basis of the development interviews.