Application of the Department of Information and Computing Sciences at Utrecht University for the MINERVA Informatics Equality Award 2023

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Abstract

The department initiated informal lunches for female staff members in 2017, and founded the Women in Information and Computing Sciences (WICS) network in 2018, fostering activities to increase career opportunities for women in informatics. WICS successfully received funding for various activities, such as an outreach program where women are active as role models, and won the university-wide diversity award in 2020. WICS initiated the founding of the departmental diversity committee, which broadens the aspects of diversity, including, e.g. ethnicity, sexuality, gender identities, and neurodiversity. The percentage of women in the department (including staff and PhD students) has increased from 14% in 2017 to 34% in 2023.

1. Description of our initiatives

Founding the WICS network. The Department of Information and Computing Sciences started to organize informal lunches for women staff members on the occasion of the Westerdijk year in the Netherlands in 2017 (celebrating the 100th anniversary of the appointment of the first female professor in the Netherlands, Johanna Westerdijk, at Utrecht University). In early 2018, the women decided to go more formal and founded the Women in Information and Computing Sciences (WICS) network. **This network aims to establish and maintain a network between junior and senior members of the department, to initiate activities to increase career opportunities for women, and to raise awareness on issues faced by women.** Since its founding, WICS has organized many activities beyond the monthly lunches and collaborated with other organizations in the university. This includes collaboration with the women's group of student association Sticky of the department, to provide role models and foster their interest in an academic career, and collaboration with the Young Women of Geoscience (YWoG) at Utrecht University, such as presenting the WICS network at their inaugural symposium, and the collaboration on two Wikipedia Edit-a-thons to work together on editing, or creating, Wikipedia pages for female scientists (January and March 8, 2021).

Moreover, **WICS successfully received funding** from the EDI Committee of the Faculty of Science at Utrecht University in 2018 for three projects. First, a grant to establish an outreach program where women are active as role models and contribute to changing gender-stereotypic attitudes towards technical subjects in society. With the help of a student assistant, WICS created a series of leaflets where ICS women introduce themselves and their work, and presented a small puzzle connected to their work for the reader to solve. Second, a project to retain young female talent in academia, by creating an environment where female scientists feel at home, where they see themselves working in the long term, and where new female talent can meet role models. This included a survey and discussion on what we can/must (not) do to retain female talent in the department. Finally, a project to host small events organized by WICS for academic staff members (all academic levels, from PhD students to full professors) to participate in a critical discussion about diversity-related topics and share their ideas and experiences. This included not only the monthly lunches, but also an only online library with books on diversity-related topics and a staff Teams channel to discuss diversity issues.

In 2018, WICS co-founder Anja Volk won the Westerdijk Award of the Faculty of Science and initiated the "I am a scientist" exhibition to counteract stereotypical expectations about scientists, which was received very positively within the faculty. Furthermore, in 2020, WICS won the university's second Diversity & Inclusion Award (together with YWoG) for the "impressive way in which both networks devote themselves to the promotion of gender balance within their departments, faculties and even beyond".

Founding the ICS diversity committee. WICS initiated the establishment of the ICS Diversity Committee within the department to improve inclusion for all staff members in 2020, since our rapidly growing department needs to consider many different dimensions of diversity, for example, ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender identities, socioeconomic status, and neurodiversity. Moreover, it became clear in the informal lunch discussions of WICS that issues for underrepresented groups cannot be solved by these groups themselves. It requires the shared effort of everybody in the department, and so the founding of the dedicated ICS diversity committee that stimulates and steers these efforts, became the next logical step. The committee started working in September 2020, with 7 scientific members from all divisions of the department, encompassing different academic ranks from PhD students to full professor, as well as one support staff member, forming the steering committee with official managerial time allocation. The steering committee is supported by additional diversity ambassadors (advisors from scientific staff members), and master and bachelor student members.

In following the LERU recommendations, the committee is dedicated to a comprehensive approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, encompassing the following three points:
- to address inclusion and enhanced representation of all under-represented groups,
- to aim at the entire academic community of staff and students together, and
- to make the content of both the research and the research-led curriculum more inclusive.

The committee addresses questions such as "Is our curriculum well-prepared for first-generation students who cannot learn from their parents how academia "is working"? Where do staff members struggle who are not (yet) fluent in Dutch because information is mostly provided in Dutch? How do our promotion criteria accommodate for caring for your children or parents (e.g., number of journal articles per year, number of invited lectures per year you need to travel for)? How do we attract a more diverse population of students?

In the first three years of its existence (2020-2023), the committee has been working on the following main projects:

1) Establishing an assessment plan for measuring equity, diversity, and inclusion at our department, and carrying out a first survey among staff members in 2022/23 on this topic.
2) Establishing informal lunch discussion within the department in collaboration with WICS on different dimensions of diversity (following the WICS example of monthly informal lunches). Topics so far included discussions on how the usage of Dutch and English in daily interactions at the department can contribute to a better intermingling of Dutch and international colleagues, and an exchange on challenges of the LGBTQIA+ community through an invited talk on the research field of queer linguistics.
3) Welcoming newcomers to our department and welcoming the diversity of experiences when entering our department as a new workplace. Coming from a different country to a new workplace is connected to a number of challenges, including language barriers and cultural uncertainties. In our newcomer meetings, new colleagues and students exchange about their experiences with joining the department, and can receive hints and advice from experienced non-Dutch and Dutch colleagues.
4) Collaborating with the Sticky study association on improving the intermingling of bachelor and master students, as well as Dutch and international students, within the study association. Developing a "Diversity dilemma game" for students by adapting an existing game for staff members at Utrecht University to the context of students. A first prototype has been used at master introductory days.
5) Working towards visibility and presence of the EDI topics in departmental staff meetings where everyone is present through talks given by the diversity committee, and by invited experts.

The Diversity committee is active in exchanging experiences with other diversity-related committees in the Netherlands, such as through the EDI working group within IPN, the Diversity and Inclusion committee at LIACS (Leiden University), as well as the Faculty of Science EDI committee and the UU-wide EDI committee.

2. Evidence of impact

Since the founding of the WICS network in 2017/ 2018, the network's activities within and beyond the Department of Information and Computing Sciences have helped to establish the departmental diversity committee, which is the first departmental committee within Utrecht University's Faculty of Science (which hosts a faculty-wise EDI committee). The **Diversity and inclusion award 2020** of Utrecht University for the WICS network, and the **2018 Westerdijk award** for WICS co-founder Anja Volk demonstrate the visibility and impact of these initiatives at the faculty and university level. The interconnection of the departmental activities with other university-wide, national and international activities, has enabled impact on staff and students in the department, but also beyond the department within the Faculty of Science, while at the same time feeding into international activities and learning from them.

Since 2017, the department has grown significantly in staff numbers from ~100 in 2017 to over 200 in 2023, including PhD candidates. Our efforts in hiring more women in the area have resulted **in an increased representation of women for all academic ranks**, most notably an increase in PhD students from 15% in 2017 to 40 % in 2023, demonstrating our commitment towards changing the under-representation of women in computer and information sciences.
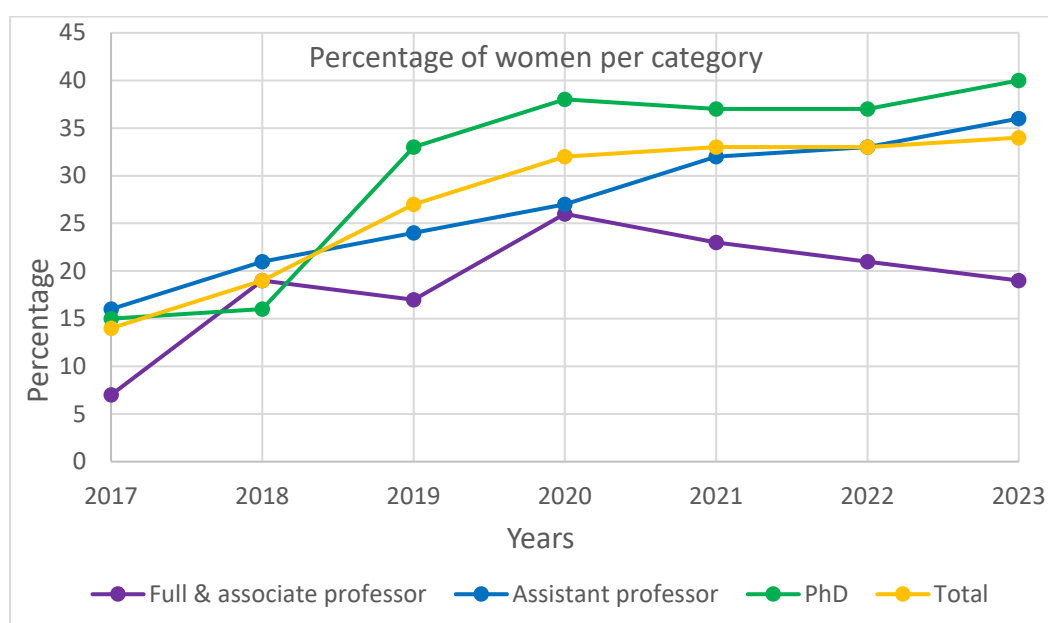
At the same time, the **composition of departmental committees** has changed, since we have now a policy for ensuring diversity in all of our committees. While we used to have an all-male board of the department in 2017, this has changed since then. Currently, our vice head of the department is female and so is one of the division chairs.

Equally important to achieving a greater diversity among staff members is the achievement of greater **inclusion and equity in the workplace**. The sharing of experiences of women in the department through the WICS network lunches has stimulated open discussions at the department of *everyone's* experiences, in order to stimulate a more inclusive workplace.

For instance, the pilot within WICS on adapting the University of Sydney's model of "Ask me anything" sessions towards discussing issues faced by women in a safe space, was extended to a session on the usage of Dutch and English at the department with everyone invited and the chance to exchange different perspectives in an open manner. Together with presentations for all staff members, these events **help raising awareness and starting an open dialogue**.

In the diversity survey carried out in 2022/23 by the ICS diversity committee, the following answers were provided to the question of what potential advantages participants see in relation to EDI activities: "Help people feel more included, and increase diversity", "Happier people, better work", "In general, these indeed increase awareness and help you react responsibly and suitably", "Instruments for avoiding involuntary prejudices and stereotypes

myself, for recognizing situations when this happens, and in general being more aware of potential issues." "It shows that there is attention for these matters. The UU is not ignoring it, or assuming discrimination (or exclusion) does not happen." "Not feeling alone in a situation; strength in representation towards decision makers". "People feel more welcomed and more comfortable and therefore more relaxed. It is known that only in this state people can develop their full creative potential." "Potentially less cases of academics quitting because they feel unwell/mistreated/etc at the workplace." "That everyone feels welcome to be their true self and feels included / part of the group." "To let everyone, independent of their background etc., feel safe and at home here - without having to worry about abuse. Our jobs are hard enough by themselves."

The diversity committee's survey on investigating diversity and inclusion in the department relating to, for instance, gender identities, age, sexual orientations, neurodiversity, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, is the first survey of its kind in a department within Utrecht University (and a computer science department in the Netherlands), bringing systematically difference between groups at the departmental level into the focus, such as different experiences of discrimination and feeling included in the department. While this provides **systematic insights on which we can build follow-up initiatives to improve**, we envision this initiative as a role model for other departments and the faculty and university to gain insights into the experience of employees. On a positive side, the report revealed that there is currently no gender-pay gap in the department, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community do not differ in their sense of belonging to the department from other staff members. The survey prompted the following comments on the work of the diversity committee:

- "Even though I only started working at UU very recently, I already saw a couple of things working on improving everyone's approach, so that is a good thing."
- I think that the diversity committee is doing a great job!
- Keep up the good work!
- Overall, the department provides a nice working environment
- Thank you for your efforts!
- Thank you for your hard work
- Thanks for the initiative!
- This is a great initiative and I am happy that our department supports such assessments.
- You are doing a very important job!

Our collaboration with the **student association** has already led to a more diverse student board (instead of an all-male board), currently the students invest efforts into establishing a diversity committee among students to join forces with us on improving diversity, inclusion and equality among our students.

Faculty and university-wide impact: The Exhibition "I am a scientist", counteracting stereotypical expectations on scientists, was well-received across the faculty and is used for bachelor and master open days to showcase the diversity of scientists to future student generations. Our initiatives helped establishing similar initiatives at other faculties, such as the founding of YWoG at the Faculty of Geosciences. At the same time, the commitment at the faculty level on the topic of diversity through the EDI-wide committee has a positive impact on initiatives in our department. Representation of women has also improved on the Faculty level, for instance both our dean and vice dean of research are currently women.

Nation-wide impact: Our department's efforts on EDI have been recognized as "a model for others to follow" in the recent research review of Computer Science departments in the Netherlands in 2022.

International impact: Utrecht University's mentoring program for women researchers has fed into establishing the very successful international Women in Music Information Retrieval Mentoring Program of the International Society for Music Information Retrieval, which runs on a yearly basis with 160 participants from all continents, and is currently open to all under-represented groups, and has inspired the founding of similar mentoring programs, for instance at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Spain.

The collaboration between the WICS network and the ICS diversity committee enables us to address the situation of women in the department through various activities, while at the same time broadening the perspective to other dimensions of diversity, and we seek to address the intersectionality of these experiences. It is our vision that finding underlying shared experiences across the different dimensions of diversity will help to engage everyone in the department to improve diversity and inclusion among our staff and students.

3. List of references

Women in Information and Computing Sciences Network website: https://wics.sites.uu.nl/

ICS diversity committee website: https://www.uu.nl/ics-diversity-committee

Faculty of Science exhibition "I am a scientist", initiated by WICS co-founder Anja Volk: https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/faculty-of-science/about-us/equality-diversity-inclusion/campaign-i-am-a-scientist

Press release on Utrecht University's Diversity and Inclusion award: https://www.uu.nl/en/news/diversity-inclusion-award-for-young-women-in-geoscience-and-for-women-in-information-and-computing

Press release on Westerdijk award for diversity and inclusion for Anja Volk: https://www.uu.nl/en/news/anja-volk-wins-westerdijk-award

4. Further details

This submission is on behalf of a group. We provide letters of support from Prof. Isabel Arends, the dean of the Faculty of Science and Prof. Lynda Hardman, professor at the Department of Information and Computing Sciences and at CWI, the Research Institute for Mathematics & Computer Science in the Netherlands. The initiative may be considered as a runner up and be included as an exemplar of best practice in future Informatics Europe publications.