

Towards inclusive research at Maastricht University: survey results

Gera Nagelhout, Latifa Abidi, Julia van Koeveringe, Hans Bosma, Nikita Poole,
Jessica Alleva, Mareike Smolka, Brigitte van Lierop, September 2021

Background

Scientific research is used to find answers to important questions. But as long as we exclude certain groups in our research, we cannot guarantee that our answers are applicable to all groups in society. Therefore, inclusive research is important **to enhance the quality and the societal relevance** of our research.

Researchers from Maastricht University, Maastricht for Everybody, and IVO Research Institute formed a **project team** and received funding from the UM Diversity & Inclusivity office to examine inclusive research practices, barriers, and needs among Maastricht University research staff.

We started our project with qualitative interviews and asked experts **what inclusive research is** according to them. We learned that inclusive research can be thought of as research with, by and for your target group and can include people with different demographic characteristics and social identities. Inclusive research cannot be translated into one particular way of doing things. Nonetheless, it is possible to pinpoint some of the **characteristics and principles**:

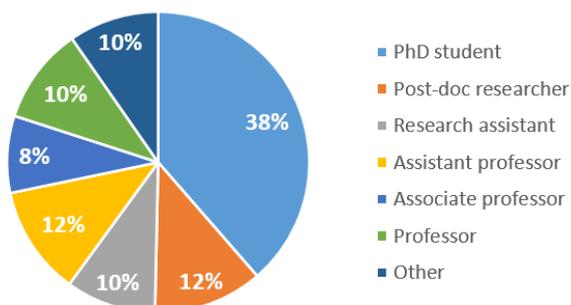
- It is often collaborative; your target group is actively involved.
- Study materials are accessible to your entire target group.
- Your target group is able to exert some control over the research process.
- It furthers the interests of people, for example your research results can be beneficial to the lives of your target group.
- Researchers are aware of their own role in the research process and critically reflect on exclusion mechanisms within their own research.

Methods

We distributed an online survey among Maastricht University research staff through newsletters, e-mails, and social media. The survey was open between April and June 2021 and 149 employees filled it in. These employees were not representative of all Maastricht University research staff, as 100 of the 149 (67%) were from only one of the six faculties (the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences). More than one third of the respondents were PhD students (see figure below). The survey consisted of closed and open-ended questions. We tested differences between genders, those who did and did not identify as being part of a 'minority group', and respondents with different academic position. We reported the differences that were statistically significant.



Academic positions of survey respondents



“As a starting researcher, I am not sure how to start, although I find this a really important topic” (PhD student FPN)

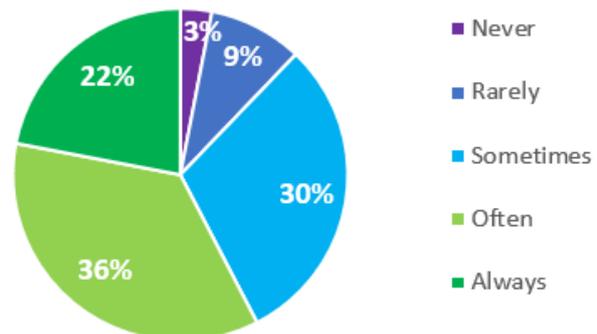
“If you want to say something about the whole population, you need to include participants in your research that represent the whole population” (post-doc researcher FHML)

"I want the outcomes of my research to be valuable for the whole target group, not just those who are higher educated or Dutch" (PhD student FHML)

"Target group participation/involvement is essential to understand a problem and to effectively realize change" (lecturer FHML)

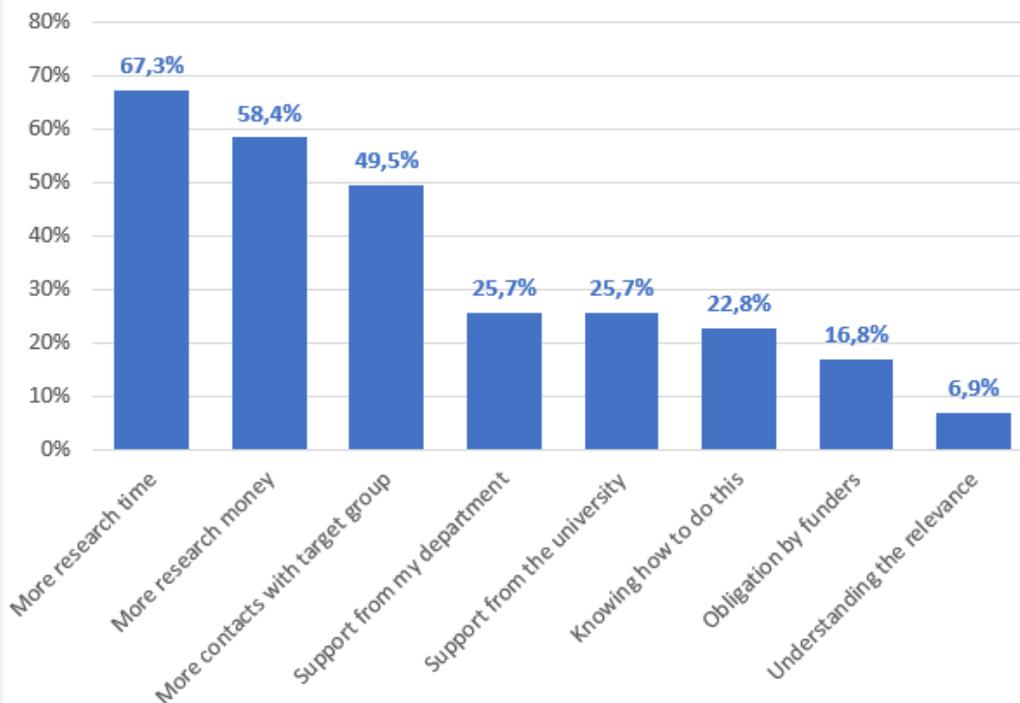
"I find that this topic is still on the luxurious list or the 'maybe someday' list with many researchers. I do not find myself in a powerful position often enough to make the difference" (post-doc FHML)

To what extent do you try to be inclusive in your research?



"Until academic careers are no longer solely based on publishing, inclusivity will not be attractive to young academics with no job security" (post-doc FPN)

What would you need to increase inclusivity in your research?



"Including all voices requires more time and that results in extra money that you don't have" (PhD student SBE)

"We tried to get minority groups, but this was hard to do" (research assistant, FHML)

Respondents who identified as women reported more often that they need more support from their department to increase inclusivity in their research than respondents who identified as men.



“We try to formulate all materials in simple language and have it checked for comprehensibility by patient representatives. However, these are usually (at least somewhat) higher educated” (professor FPN)

How frequently do you use the following strategies in your research to increase inclusivity?

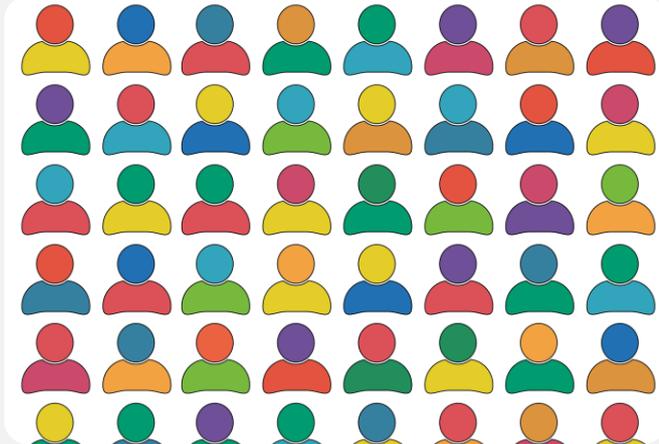


Respondents who identified as part of a 'minority group' ($n=33$) more often used two of the strategies in the figure above. They more often offered study materials in several languages and more often reported to be aware of their own role and biases and giving room to participants for sharing their ideas and experiences.

“Validating an adapted method requires extra time and money, which researchers already don't have much of. So, sacrifices have to be made in terms of inclusivity...” (PhD student FPN)

“I try to be inclusive because I think this is important. However, I think I could maybe do more, but I am not exactly sure how” (PhD student FHML)

“Sometimes you have to exclude groups because of methodological reasons. This increases the internal validity and decreases by definition the external validity. I have come to accept to a certain extent that the non-response is selective. I am trying to not accept it so easily anymore and find ways to better include ‘hard to reach’ or ‘vulnerable’ groups”
(professor FHML)



“We don’t tend to be participatory or to feedback the research findings to the research participants themselves. I would like to be able to do more of that”
(PhD student SBE)

“I try to be inclusive in my research as I think that it is important to include all people that are part of our society. This for reasons related to inclusivity, but also for scientific reasons. We cannot expect our findings to be valid if certain groups are always excluded”
(PhD student FHML)

“It requires a high level of reflexivity, openness and flexibility, which is sometimes hard due to time pressure but also due to ethics protocols”
(assistant professor FHML)

“In times of increasing (health) inequalities, it is important to pay more attention to inclusivity in research” (professor FHML)

“We do not always have the resources to make science as inclusive as possible and sometimes also simply lack the knowledge, at least, I do”
(PhD student FHML)

Conclusions and recommendations

- Most Maastricht University research staff who filled in our survey **tried to be inclusive** in their research. The answers on the open-ended questions at the same time revealed an unsureness of respondents about how to be more inclusive in research.
- Most staff who filled in our survey understood the relevance of inclusive research, but reported that they **needed more support** (e.g. time, money, network) to do so.
- Most often used strategies to increase inclusivity were: ensuring that study materials are understandable for everyone and thinking critically about which exclusion criteria are needed. Least often used strategies to increase inclusivity were **participatory strategies**: involving participants and increasing participants' control over the research process. This may be explained by the fact that most respondents were from the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences, where participatory research may be less common than in other faculties.
- We recommend **training** in how to design more inclusive research for Maastricht University students and research staff. Additionally, research leaders and decision makers at the university should provide support and design policy to **stimulate inclusive research**.



Questions about this study can be directed to Latifa Abidi:
latifa.abidi@maastrichtuniversity.nl