



NIAS

Netherlands Institute
for Advanced Study
in the Humanities
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BELONGING TO ACADEMIA

Symposium at NIAS AMSTERDAM

23-24 April 2026

Of late, Academia - understood broadly so as to encompass all institutions for (higher) education – has come to realize that underneath and within its framing as places of universal access, resides a wealth of practices and principles that seem to prioritize the belonging of some kinds of students, and some kinds of knowledge more than others. These prioritizations occur through language, procedures, infrastructures and architectures, curricular content, and no doubt other factors as well. Their normative work has largely favoured those already privileged at the expense of those already marginalized; ‘Western’ facts and methodologies and categorizations over other-than-western knowledges.

And so Academia has begun to look into these largely unwritten normativities. Faculties have installed DEI departments to accommodate the belonging of people from an increasingly wide array of identities and walks of life. And in many ways ‘the curriculum’ has begun to be de-colonized by adding and pointing out that claims to objectivity, neutrality and universality have developed in a context of western epistemic hegemony.

What do these efforts to decenter the privileged look like? What does it mean and imply to reframe curricula, classrooms, selection procedures, and infrastructures in ways corrective to social, epistemic and material injustices and inequalities? How do educational institutes go about facilitating ‘belonging’ for all? How do educational institutes and policies frame and practice diversity, equity, and inclusion, of students but also of knowledges? What values and moralities underly these narratives and practices?

And more fundamentally: what kinds of understanding of ‘belonging’ reside in the efforts and measures to re-center people, things, knowledges? Or vice versa: can these practices help to theorize ‘belonging’ in ways specific and situated, ways that transcend the ‘everyone should be able to belong anywhere, at any time’?

It is in this context that NIAS organizes its third and last gathering in the domain of Studies of Belonging. We wish to unpack belonging, again, by looking at the workings of policies and practices to facilitate equal and equitable belonging to Academia and their effects on one hand, and towards ways to further conceptualize the concept of belonging.

We propose to distinguish between three broad sub-themes within the discourse on Belonging to Academia: *people, knowledges, and things*.



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Under *people* we engage largely with the topic of DEI. Here the problematic is the underrepresentation of certain groups of people – be it (academic) staff and students - and their relative lack of recognition within institutions. We ask: (how) do policies & practices to promote equal and equitable belonging to Academia work? How and where from do they conceptualize belonging?

Under *knowledges* we engage with de-colonial thinking. Here the problematic is epistemic (in)justice. We ask: what kinds of knowledge (production) do belong to educational/academic curricula and studies? How to open up to/engage with other, other-than-western, modes of knowledge making without giving in to complete relativism? Can the academic landscape accommodate a multiplicity of knowledges, and what would that look like?

Under *things* we engage with the material environments that infrastructure (non)belonging: architectures, classrooms, curriculae. Here the problematic is that we often consider belonging to be a feeling, an affect – both in terms of what it is and in terms of what it takes. We conjecture that belonging is to a large extent also mediated by the material environments and orderings of educational situations. We ask: what kinds of ‘belonging’ do buildings, architectures, learning materials facilitate or render problematic? What, for example, do maps show? Can one become ‘at home’ in a field without having a laptop? What world does one come to belong to when attending a particular kind of education? What kind of material obstacles hinder the full participation of underrepresented non-Western scholars (e.g. visa, costs of open access publishing, etc.)?

The symposium thus aspires to better understanding of the various meanings of belonging. That then provides the opportunity to go back to the original question of the three Studies of Belonging conferences: what did we learn about belonging in these various contexts?