DANCING *with*

PRACTICING DIVERSITY
IN DANCE

A Report on Three
European Dance Higher
Education Institutions

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PRACTICING DIVERSITY IN DANCE

A Report on Three European Dance Higher Education Institutions

Foreword

This project is primarily funded by the European Commission in the frame an ERASMUS+ Cooperation Partnership with additional funding from IRMAS/HES-SO. For the EU, the project is named “Diversity in European Dance Higher Education” but its length and institution-heavy language pulled us to refer to it by its acronym “DDE”. For the present report, the original proposed name for the project’s final report is now a subtitle: “Practicing Diversity in Dance - A Report on Three European Dance Higher Education Institutions.” We felt the need for a name more in line with the knowledges and lenses we were engaged with during the process: the name “dancing with” appeared in one of our discussions within the DDE team, when Moya Michael told a story from when she was working in Namibia. She was observing !Amace, a local healer, dancing with other men for hours on end during a healing ceremony. Encouraged to join in, Moya was feeling reluctant because she felt that she would not be able to do what they were doing, how they were doing it, to which !Amace said, “you cannot dance like me, but you can dance with me”. dancing with is therefore an invitation to dance with each other across differences, from each one’s place in the world, recognising the violence we may witness, and seeking to find alliances, learning, and joy.

We would like to thank ERASMUS+ for the support which made the present work possible. We would like to thank the BA programmes of Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.), Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH), and the Manufacture - Haute école des arts de la scène for the trust, participation, and support of DDE. We would like to thank all students, alumni, teachers and staff for welcoming and generously participating in this research. We would like to thank Utrecht University and the University of Amsterdam for their trust and collaboration. Moreover, we would like to thank dance historian Staf Vos who, in reading an earlier article describing the project (Schenker 2025), highlighted the absence of attention given to disability in the project. We would also like to thank Annelies Van Assche and Kopano Maroga for their challenging questions and valuable suggestions, which have helped us improve this report. We have done our best to honour their remarks, and any shortcoming is our sole responsibility. Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to former DDE members Catol Teixeira, Renan Martins, and Bast Hippocrate, who participated only partially in this project, but whose contribution made a lasting impact on the project's findings and its organisation.

It is our hope that this report may help further work on diversity and social justice in dance higher education and beyond.

Summary

In a two-year project developed between 2023 and 2025, the Diversity in European Dance Higher Education (DDE) team studied diversity practices in the dance Bachelor of Arts (BA) programmes of three different European institutions: the Manufacture in Lausanne, Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) in Stockholm, and Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.) in Brussels. Recognising that enhancing social justice in European dance higher education means meeting the plurality of the European societies of today and requires active engagement with the diversity of both the professional field and the academic context, DDE has organised comparative research around three main areas: access, hosting, and contribution to the field.

Accessing dance higher education refers to the conditions that enable or limit the reception of diversity to these institutions: what are the material costs and legal barriers that potential students and staff encounter when trying to access these institutions? Do audition formats and hiring practices enrich or impoverish diversity? Who makes the decisions regarding access, and how?

Hosting diversity points to the fact that an institution can recruit diversity and therefore have a student community or staff that represents diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds, but that does not necessarily mean that such diversity will be included in institutional practices. Do institutions enable intercultural processes of exchange and learning across differences? What are the spaces, people, and pedagogies that make students and teachers feel at ease, understood or supported in/by these institutions?

Contribution to the dance field and society encompasses the ways these dance degree programmes contribute to the field of dance and society as a whole. We analyse how diversity issues are incorporated into the curricula of these educational programmes, how these institutions attempt to connect with the cities where they are located, and how they prepare their students as members of the professional dance field and of society.

DDE has produced three project results: the present report, a course for dance students entitled 'Dancing Across Difference', and a training for teachers and staff of dance programmes and institutions entitled 'Towards a Pluriversal Dance Education'. For this work, we learned from similar research conducted at the University of Amsterdam by the Diversity Commission Research called 'Let's Do Diversity' (Wekker et. al 2016), while adapting it to the field of BA level dance education. We have used the lenses of ***decoloniality*** and ***intersectionality*** to question the state of diversity and social justice in European dance higher education and used a variety of methods to study it including interviews, focus groups, study of secondary sources such as mission statements, policy documents, and texts by student-led initiatives, as well as available data on the student and teaching community and the curriculum of the past five years.

We highlight the need to question the relation between Contemporary Dance, as practiced and taught in Western and Northern Europe, and other regional manifestations of Contemporary Dance, as well as of other practices of dance. The relations between these different dance traditions are multiple and complex, and recognising their different histories and positions, leading to an investigation of the power relations between them, appears as a pre-condition for engaging in intercultural dialogue. We have asked ourselves what would need to be done to embrace the diversity of peoples and dance cultures, avoiding logics of erasure, appropriation or fetishisation, and how this embracing would entail transforming these programmes. The experience of these dance programmes can vastly differ, and it is often harder for people whose positionalities are more distant from the dominant ones. Given that the dominant dance form being taught is often presented without context, appearing as universally valid, the first step is to locate its history and position. Approaching non-Western and non-dominant practices and knowledges should be done with care and humility: it is not a matter of enlarging the Western repertoire, but of getting to know its limits, making an effort to vividly understand that there are other valid ways of being, thinking, and dancing.

Below, we present a summary of our main findings regarding access, hosting and contribution, and the recommendations aimed at enhancing social justice and diversity in European dance higher education.

Accessing dance higher education

This section is divided into three subsections. The first deals with the ***material costs and legal barriers*** students encounter when coming to study in one of those three programmes, showing that students have a differentiated access to the institution in function of their nationality and socioeconomic condition. Each programme deals with different institutional limitations —such as the costs of the education— and develops more or less effective practices to circumvent these limitations. The second subsection questions how the ***audition formats*** proposed help enrich or impoverish diversity, and we argue that juries could be better prepared, have more clear directives concerning diversity, and that more effort could be directed towards reaching out to the diversity of the cities in which the programmes are located. The third and final subsection addresses ***hiring practices*** and shows a gap between the hired staff on the one side, and the guest teacher on the other: guest teachers are a more diverse population that works in more precarious conditions.

→ Recommendations concerning the access to dance higher education:

- → **Open auditions to the plurality of society** by paying particular attention to how the audition format, content, location, and duration, may help or hinder diversity.
- → **Be transparent about diversity strengths and limitations** in the programmes and institutions by critically revising the information candidates receive concerning the programmes.
- → **Seek diversity at home and abroad** through formats and initiatives that reach out to a diversity of communities on local, national, and international levels.
- → **Include student representation in access**, as current students and recent alumni have a lived and in-depth knowledge of the dance BA programmes.

Hosting diversity

This section is divided into three subsections. The first deals with the institutions' ***buildings and spaces***, showing that separations between the different populations can be heightened by how the spaces are physically divided, and that attention exists to gender questions but is lacking regarding access for

people with disabilities. The second subsection details the ***support*** structures in place to host the diversity present in the programmes, pointing out different challenges and good practices. The lack of diversity in staff is felt by students and guest teachers, and the protocols for dealing with abusive behaviour need ongoing development. The third subsection addresses the ***pedagogies and curriculum***, showing programmes that are densely scheduled, with quick changes, little time for autonomy, and restrictive attendance policies. This leads to exhaustion and a push for flexibility in line with market-oriented models. Students coming from different dance traditions that manage to enter the programmes often feel that they must leave their identities and cultural archives behind to engage with the programmes. Furthermore, students feel isolated from the rest of the field and the city, studying in a bubble.

→ Recommendations concerning the hosting of diversity:

- → **Position and humble the programmes** in relation to their respective contexts and histories. Discuss the colonial histories of the countries in which the programmes are located and explore the history and positionality of the dance practices taught.

- → **Move towards equity and plurality** by recognising that we start the work of diversity and social justice from unequal grounds, as each person comes from a different place, and has a different cultural archive and positionality.

- → To **host interculturality**, focus on pedagogical practices that acknowledge pre-existing power relations between peoples and cultures. Process and acknowledge tensions and ruptures in the work towards diversity.

- → Develop different forms of **support for guest teachers**, paying special attention to the onboarding and offboarding procedures and seeking longer-term stability. Make sure they have thorough knowledge of the programme, the student groups, the codes of conduct and the expectations towards their teaching. Include transparent systems for evaluation and feedback, with formats adapted to dance education.

- → **Strengthen key hosting positions** by giving them access to stability and clarity in their roles. Enable peer-to-peer exchange, the development of intercultural skills, and adequate training and support for dealing with diversity and social justice.

→ **Enact codes of conduct** regarding abusive behaviour. Create clearer, open and safer spaces for addressing abuse related topics, and employ external confidants with intercultural skills.

→ Seek formats that allow for the **co-curation of the curriculum**, including the voice of the students, decentralising the responsibility for curriculum design.

→ To allow for the embodied cultural archives of the students to be an integral part of the programmes, **organise regular moments for lateral learning** where students are given time and space to share their dance with their peers and teachers.

Contribution to the dance field and society

This section is divided into four subsections. In the first subsection, named ***curriculum beyond the bubble***, we note that the programmes have been including more diversity and social justice related content, but that this tends to remain irregular and fragmented. Furthermore, the students' engagement with social issues is not given space and validation, showing the different entanglements —often opaque— between institutions and states. The second subsection, ***autonomy and individuality***, focuses on how these programmes push students towards an ideal of autonomy linked to individuality, in line with market-oriented discourses, and disconnected from relationality, history, and positionality. The third subsection questions how the programmes are ***reaching out to the city*** where they are located, and we observe that the programmes function largely disconnected from the cities and reproduce the image of dance as an elitist field. The fourth subsection addresses the period immediately ***after studies***, and we observe that different forms of support exist, but that students are primarily geared to a small dance scene and when they are not Europeans, state restrictions can make it impossible to stay.

→ Recommendations concerning the contribution to the dance field and society:

→ Actively work towards opening to other potential artistic trajectories, expanding the potential work field of graduates with a **focus on social outreach**, while paying attention to structural inequalities that ground different social realities.

→ **Move towards a relational definition** of autonomy and artistic practice, rooted in positionality, awareness of the history of the

dance forms taught, and the broader sociopolitical context in which they are inscribed. The proposed course 'Dancing Across Difference', one of the project outputs of DDE, could be a concrete starting point.

→ **Position the institutional history and local context** regarding the dance fields they are related to, the history of higher education and the local dance history.

→ Broaden the meaning of what a 'successful' dance-artist may be by **valorising alumni trajectories** other than the predetermined ones. Publicly acknowledge alternative pathways and find space for them within the curriculum.

→ Create collective formats for **studying horizontally** across student and staff communities, to bridge the perceived gaps between these groups and develop common languages and spaces for co-reflection. The proposed teacher/staff training 'Towards a Pluriversal Dance Education', one of the project outputs of DDE, could be a concrete starting point.

→ Create an inter-institutional **Diversity Unit** staffed by representatives from each institution to promote exchange and support in implementing diversity-related policy for each institution.

Introduction

The central question of this research has been how institutional practices function to enrich or impoverish diversity in the dance Bachelor of Arts (BA) programmes of three different European institutions: the Manufacture in Lausanne, Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) in Stockholm, and Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S.) in Brussels. The main goals of the present report are to recognise the challenges of welcoming and hosting difference within institutions, to make visible the plurality of good practices already in place, and to provide recommendations. In this research we have approached the questions of ***diversity*** and ***social justice*** from a particular perspective. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed has shown how the institutional-friendly term 'diversity' has arrived at the cost of neglecting "other (perhaps more critical) terms, including 'equality,' 'equal opportunities,' and 'social justice'" (2012, p. 1). In DDE, we include these often-neglected terms into our understanding of diversity. In European higher education institutions, diversity is often reduced to gender representation and internationalisation. In our framework, diversity is not only about including more students, staff, and teachers coming from international and/or marginalised groups into the existing institutions. It is also about allowing their experiences, knowledge, and worldviews to be properly welcomed and engaged with, transforming these institutions beyond Eurocentrism.[1]

1 We understand 'Eurocentrism' as a worldview that assumes Europe, and more generally the West, as the centre of knowledge and the primary architect of world history: the bearer of universal values and reason, the pinnacle, and therefore model, of progress and development.

DDE is not a project mandated by a ministry or government but rather grew out of our own lives and professional practice. We are people who have studied, work, and/or worked in the three researched institutions, or who have arrived at questions regarding diversity in art and education through different life paths. The DDE research team is composed of individuals that are already working within the field of dance practice and education, such as: Fabi Barba, a P.A.R.T.S. graduate and guest teacher at the Manufacture who is now focused on understanding Contemporary Dance in relation to a long and ongoing colonial history; Gabriel Schenker, a P.A.R.T.S. graduate and academic head of the Contemporary Dance BA at the Manufacture; Meggie Blankschyn, an alumna from the Manufacture and artist; Marit Shirin Carolasdotter, an alumna from SKH working as a choreographer and dancer; Selby Jenkins, an alumna from P.A.R.T.S. and freelance artist; Michael Pomero, a teacher and programme committee member at P.A.R.T.S. and professional dancer; Moya Michael, a P.A.R.T.S. graduate and choreographer and dancer; Chrysa Parkinson, head of the subject area of dance at SKH and a dancer; Zoë Poluch, head of the BA in dance performance at SKH and a dance artist; and Paulina Rosa, an emerging decolonial scholar focused on Contemporary Dance. We have prioritised working with dance practitioners because we believe that the embodied experience of dancing and teaching/learning dance is crucial when it comes to identifying and understanding the specific ways in which diversity is practiced and lived within the field of dance practice and education.

Working with people with institutional positions in the researched programmes and through an EU grant had its pros and cons. On the one hand, it gave us valuable insight into the working of these institutions and helped us ground the report in their realities, better understanding what is already possible and what requires a transformational process that is vast and linked to a broader societal transformation. On the other hand, the proximity with the institutions and people working within them also created friction, where the research team noted limitations to its autonomy, as it had to navigate personal and professional relations, and the self-image of the institutions has partially shaped the observations of the report. It is clear to us that research conducted by an external group would have developed a different analysis and arrived at other observations and recommendations. Beyond its proposed outputs, DDE has been a transformative experience for its researchers, and the fact that some of us have institutional positions has helped bring the questions DDE raises continuously into the institutions.

The partnerships with Utrecht University and later the University of Amsterdam (UvA) stemmed from a desire to collaborate with Rolando Vázquez and Rosalba Icaza, two scholars engaged with decolonial and intersectional thought, who participated in similar research at UvA called ‘Let’s Do Diversity’ (Wekker et al. 2016). The UvA Diversity Commission Research, guided by the Surinamese-Dutch

anthropologist Gloria Wekker in 2016, has functioned as a guide for our own research, although it included a much larger student community, and was a response to student mobilisation for the democratisation and decolonisation of the UvA (Anderson 2015). DDE addresses a smaller, more intimately connected group of students, teachers and practitioners, and adds a dimension not explored by the UvA Diversity Committee Report: the question of embodiment in dance practices. Dancer, anthropologist and storyteller Aminata Cairo has also joined the team, as the project aligns with her long-standing commitment to use her artistic and academic skills to positively impact (dance) communities and promote inclusive education.

The dance higher education institutions of DDE

The group of institutions involved in this research developed gradually and organically. The collaboration originated in discussions internal to the Manufacture, expanding into a dialogue with SKH, and finally into an invitation for P.A.R.T.S to join. The three dance BA programmes researched have been grappling with the question of diversity and social justice over the years, especially following different student-led initiatives concerned with such questions and have been a driving force within their larger institutional umbrellas. Below, we provide more context about each institution.

The Manufacture opened its doors in Lausanne in September 2003 and became part of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland (HES-SO) in 2006. In 2014, it launched Switzerland's first BA in Contemporary Dance, the programme we examine in this research. The Contemporary Dance BA is currently headed by Thomas Hauert in the role of artistic head, and Gabriel Schenker (DDE member) as academic head. The programme, taught primarily in English but in an otherwise French-speaking institution, focuses strongly on an improvisational line of European and North American dance, while introducing many other dance traditions. The alumni of the Manufacture dance BA make up an important part of the current dance scene of Switzerland, particularly in its French-speaking part.

SKH came into being in 2014, when three arts colleges merged into a single university. The basic structure for the BA programme in dance performance currently running at SKH pre-existed the merge by almost a decade. Since its establishment, the dance performance BA education has adjusted to meet the demands of the field and of the university, including switching the main language of study to English and integrating research practices into the curriculum. Now headed by Zoë Poluch (DDE member) the dance BA posits its programme as a context to experiment through various styles and aesthetics of dance, and to undertake a critical reflection on what Contemporary Dance

could be today. Though they stay connected to the city and its dance communities after graduation, few of the alumni stay to live and work permanently in Stockholm.

P.A.R.T.S. is the oldest of the three institutions. It was founded in 1995 with the intention to provide a pedagogical anchoring for Contemporary Dance in Belgium. It was one of the few institutions in Europe at that time that resolutely focused on new artistic developments in dance. P.A.R.T.S. stands out because of its clear mission to recruit internationally. The programme is taught in English, and the curriculum is based on Flemish choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and other choreographers' extensive artistic practice. P.A.R.T.S. operates in close proximity to Rosas, a dance company also directed by De Keersmaeker. As a private initiative that receives public funding, the institution started to deliver legally recognised BA diplomas in 2019. P.A.R.T.S. exerts considerable influence in the dance scenes of Flanders and Brussels.

Perspectives and principles

The objective of DDE is to research, map, compare, and learn from how different dance higher education programmes, institutions and student communities perceive and act upon diversity-related questions. We have proposed three concrete objectives for this project:

- → To map and analyse the present diversity practices and dynamics in each of the dance BA programmes, leading to the current report.
- → To create a course for students on diversity in dance education, entitled 'Dancing Across Difference'.
- → To create a training for teachers and staff, entitled 'Towards a Pluriversal Dance Education'.

We would like to stress that the course for students and the training for teachers and staff, though necessary, would by themselves be insufficient in addressing the welcoming and hosting of diversity. Structural transformation is needed to engage with diversity and social justice as regular practices, and we have developed recommendations that point in this direction. To pursue these objectives, the DDE research principles and methodologies have been indebted to the ones developed and employed by Professor Gloria Wekker and her team on the research "Let's Do Diversity" (Wekker et al. 2016), conducted at the University of Amsterdam. The two research projects share the two main underlying frameworks of intersectionality and decoloniality. In this research project, these frameworks are adapted to consider the specific manifestations of

diversity in the field of dance, paying special attention to that which the body knows and experiences.

The term ***intersectionality***, first developed by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, points to the inseparability of categories such as race, gender, bodily ability, or class, and acknowledges the blind spots created when treating such categories independently: "Intersectionality is a perspective that allows us to see how various forms of discrimination cannot be seen as separate, but need to be understood in relation to each other" (Wekker et al. 2016, 10). An intersectional understanding of diversity is necessary to achieve structural transformation in an institution. When we think of diversity in relation to social justice, within the context of European institutions, we think of ***decoloniality***:

> Decoloniality is a perspective that allows us to see how the dynamics of power differences, social exclusion and discrimination (along the axes of race, gender and geographical and economic inequality) are connected to the ongoing legacy of our colonial history. Decoloniality also helps us understand the role of the University as a modern/colonial institution in the reinforcement of Western perspectives at the expense of the plurality of knowledges of the world. A decolonized university has open forms of expertise, and is open to intercultural and plural approaches to knowledge (Wekker et al. 2016, 10).

We are trying to imagine how thoroughly engaging with decoloniality could transform dance programmes. Decolonial thinking recognises that such transformation cannot be achieved only through changing the content of courses, training, and hiring practices, as those are already framed by structural imperatives, which operate independently of the intention and awareness of individuals. Such transformation requires institutions to be open to engage in a long and sustained process, as much needs to happen before a European dance higher education can be considered decolonial.

DDE departs from the observation that each dance higher education institution develops blind spots that are context-based, creating specific challenges to the access and hosting of diversity. This is apparent from what we, as alumni, teachers, staff, and directors of such institutions, see and hear from students, staff, and guest teachers. There are many variables that influence the creation of institutionally specific forms of constraint for diversity practice: the geopolitical location of each institution, the prevailing dance culture, the working language, the economic possibilities, the teaching community, and the curricular choices. These variables create the conditions in which different forms of oppression might be reproduced; oppressions that affect our everyday lives in complex ways, depending on our positionality and our history. This report is concerned with understanding precisely how different variables combine to

produce intersectional discriminations in each institution. The course for students and the training for teachers and staff respond to the mapped experiences of intersectional oppression that we analyse here. In this sense, the three outcomes of this project inform each other.

As it was the case with the University of Amsterdam, when looking at dance programmes from a decolonial and intersectional perspective and posing the question of its hosting of diversity, many different layers come together. Some of these are linked to specific individuals, some to the institution, and some are related to state regulations and societal issues. We need to bring awareness towards the cultural landscape in which these programmes exist and to the history that has produced it. When considering the broader cultural landscape and history, we are indebted to Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2007), who first established the concept of ***modernity/coloniality*** as two inseparable sides of the same coin. The ideas first explored by Quijano were further developed by decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, and María Lugones. They were also applied to the field of dance by DDE member Fabi Barba. Quijano referred to the relationship between the European/Western modern culture and other cultures as twofold: on the one hand, modernity presents itself through the narratives of salvation, development, progress, democracy and universality. On the other hand, coloniality is enacted through different forms of exploitation and erasure of the peoples and cultures that exist outside the realm of modernity. While sustaining modernity, the colonial order is made invisible by presenting modernity as the totality of what is real.

Modernity/coloniality creates a ***colonial difference*** between a dominant European/Western culture, and all the cultures that become othered[2] under the colonial order. The colonial difference points to the fact that the operations of modernity/coloniality produce very different realities, perceptions and experiences of the world, depending on which side of it we are located: in the West or outside of it. In the context of this research, the relevance of this concept lies in asking: what forms of colonial negation, exclusion, concealment, or erasure are taking place in dance higher education institutions? Which ways of being, thinking, and dancing are allowed in these spaces, and which are not?

One of the pillars of the colonial order, as Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta (2013) has shown, is the global extractivist economic model, established on a massive scale five centuries ago, with the colonisation of the Americas, Africa, and Asia by European powers. Since then, formerly colonised regions in the Global South specialised in the extraction of raw materials, while former

2 One of the byproducts of the colonial difference is the hierarchical distinction between the Western Self and the non-Western Other. We use the term 'othered' to point toward this operation.

colonisers in the Global North focused on producing manufactured goods. This has led to the "paradox of plenty" (2013, p. 61), whereby the natural resources of the Global South fuel industrial development and prosperity in the Global North, while their exploitation keeps the Global South impoverished. The extractivist economic model is mirrored in other aspects of modern life through ***cultural extractivism***, as different authors have shown.[3] Argentinian arts scholar and DDE researcher Paulina Rosa (2024) understands cultural extractivism in dance as the extraction and commodification of human, aesthetic, and intellectual resources from the Global South for the advantage of the Global North. Drawing on a variety of dance scholarly critiques (Barba 2017, Van Assche 2022, Poveda Yánez et al. 2022, among others), Rosa argues that under a cultural extractivist logic in Contemporary Dance, difference is welcomed on European stages "insofar it can be perceived as exotic and/or fetishized as desirable. Otherwise, difference is perceived with annoyance, dismissed as unimportant, or forgotten" (Rosa 2024, 50). Furthermore, cultural extractivism also helps explain the displacement of people from the Global South to the Global North, as their regions of origin are negatively affected by extractivism, and in consequence, they seek job opportunities in the art world of the Global North. Because of these possible manifestations of cultural extractivist logics in the dance world, when we look at European educational institutions that recruit internationally, we remain alert to the possibility that an extractivist logic may (inadvertently) be at work, while recognising that, in recent years, resistant logics and practices of intercultural dialogue are continually being attempted.

Positionality has been another central concept in this research, as it is central to intersectional and decolonial thought. Positionality points to the place each person occupies in relation to different axes of difference in society (nationality, race, gender, class, age, bodily ability, …). It highlights the location that people and institutions have in relation to the colonial difference. In this report, we consider the positionality that the researched dance programmes and their dance cultures occupy in the modern/colonial order. Positionality has been a central element in our work trying to understand the multiple and complex (historical, socioeconomic, geopolitical and cultural) relations that are being knit in each one of the institutions. This, in turn, is instrumental to understanding the different power dynamics at play in each one of the three institutions.

As we set out to write this report, we worry about whether and how dance higher education institutions contribute to a more diverse and just world. DDE is made of people with different backgrounds, areas of expertise and ideas, all painfully aware of the relevance of diversity work in our current context. The political climate in Europe is developing dangerously authoritarian traits and

3 See Cusicanqui (2010), Vasquez and Cojtí (2013), Vázquez (2020), Serafini (2021) and Eliceche (2023).

generating political power through fear and exclusion. The climate crisis, stemming from the global extractivist economic model, slowly but surely destroys the Earth. Economic and geopolitical crises arise, and social rights come under attack all over the globe. The current censorship against diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the United States of America is a warning for the work we do in Europe and for the possibility of safeguarding and moving towards plural, democratic and open societies. These issues touch us to different degrees, as we are an international and diverse group of researchers. Displacement, migration, and border-crossing are part of all of our stories, and many of us have lived in Europe for a long time.

Some members of DDE are knowledgeable in matters of gender, race, migration, class, and/or queerness, which helped many students who participated in this research to trust that we could understand and honour their stories. There are, however, no members of our group who are particularly knowledgeable in respect to ableism, ageism, or religious practices, which has led to blind spots throughout the course of this research. Conscious of the fact that our specific positionalities bring with them certain limitations, we have maintained an attitude of critical self-reflection and engaged peer reviewers with different positionalities, who have kindly pointed out our blind spots.

In sum, DDE has engaged with questions of diversity and social justice through a decolonial and intersectional lens, rooted in the positionality and interculturality of its members. We have observed how relations between the Global South and the Global North (such as modernity/coloniality and cultural extractivism), and between dominant and marginalised cultures, are central to analysing the questions of diversity and social justice in European dance higher education programmes. Moreover, we have tried to address specific cases and realities, listening to the stories of partial erasure that people within these institutions tell. Concerned by the devaluation or erasure of difference, by extractivist logics, and aiming towards social justice, we came ready to be transformed by this work, and we have been. We are still deeply moved by the stories that were shared with us. We hope to do them justice in this report, and in the ongoing work of implementing the research's recommendations.

Methodology

DDE aimed at analysing the state of diversity in dance higher education through mapping and comparing good practices and challenges to provide recommendations. The DDE team used several methods to study diversity, including semi-structured interviews with directors, decision-makers and regular teachers, open interviews with staff and teachers who hold key positions regarding diversity in the programmes, and focus groups with students and

alumni. The project, running between the summers 2023 and 2025, started with a meeting in Utrecht and was followed by a one-week fieldwork in each of the institutions where we introduced the project, organised daily lectures and bodily practices, focus groups with students and alumni, and interviews with staff and guest teachers. The lectures —adapted to each context— revolved around issues of decoloniality and intersectionality, and how they relate to dance practice and education. These fieldwork weeks took place at P.A.R.T.S. in November 2023, SKH in April-May 2024, and the Manufacture in October-November 2024. The final DDE meeting took place at the University of Amsterdam in March 2025, where we also facilitated a two-day inter-institutional gathering of teachers to kickstart a pilot project around the teacher and staff training, one of the proposed outputs of the project.

We structured DDE around three guiding questions relating to access, hosting and contribution:

- → To what extent do the conditions of **access** to these dance BA programmes enrich or impoverish diversity?
- → To what extent do the conditions of **hosting** enrich or impoverish diversity?
- → To what extent do these dance BA programmes **contribute** to enriching or impoverishing diversity in the dance scene and society?

These questions have guided both the interviews and the focus group discussions. We have also been open to discuss unexpected topics when they emerged and seemed relevant to our research, such as the ways in which global movements for social justice were affecting the institutions at the time of our visit. Considering these slight variations and the improvements we incorporated along the way, we tried to work similarly in all programmes to compare their practices. After each fieldwork week was over, the recorded conversations we had during that period were transcribed, and we systematically organised and coded extracts from interviews, focus groups, and other texts, collecting relevant excerpts that relate to each of the guiding questions into our research matrix. That matrix was later summarised and synthesised in the preliminary reports that were prepared for each of the three institutions. From the visit to each institution to the preparation of the preliminary report, the research process was carried forward by members of DDE who were not directly associated with the institution being researched at that moment. We have tried, whenever possible, to complement the study of the fieldwork sources with the analysis of secondary sources such as mission statements, policy documents, and texts by student-led initiatives, as well as available data on the student and teaching community and the curriculum of the past five years. The empirical research and the elaboration of the three institutional preliminary reports constitute the

groundwork leading to this report in which we include a comparative analysis of the three dance BA programmes.

Throughout this project, we practiced participatory and engaged research, functioning both as researchers and informants, recognising that we do not speak from a universal, disconnected, birds-eye perspective, but rather from a located, embodied one. Given that our positionalities shape our understandings, views, and sensing of the world, as well as how we speak about it, we believe that the combination of multiple perspectives helped us offer an informed analysis and constructive recommendations.

In the remainder of this report, we first introduce our general observations on Contemporary Dance education as exemplified by the three observed dance programmes. Then, we develop a comparative analysis around the guiding categories of access, hosting, and contribution. Within each section, we identify challenges and good practices in all three BA dance programmes and end each section with a series of recommendations. With these recommendations, we aim towards a more diverse understanding of dance higher education: one open to being transformed by a plurality of cultures and dance worlds.

Dance and the encounter of cultures in an unequal world

Contemporary Dance education

As dance practitioners in Northern Europe, the researchers of DDE understand Contemporary Dance, as taught in these programmes, as a genre primarily made for the stage, performed by some and watched by others, that values criticality, experimentation, and authorship; it defines itself in opposition to norms and dogmas of previous dance forms, and it sees itself as infinitely open to include dance cultures and peoples (i.e., as culturally unmarked). Furthermore, it is primarily practiced in the 'neutral' spaces of the theatre and the studio; spaces disconnected from their immediate surroundings —erasing positionality and history— and similar across the globe. European Contemporary Dance, as well as its predecessors Modern Dance and Postmodern Dance, are genres of Western dance with a very particular and well documented history, theoretical basis and grammar, all rooted in the history of the West. A first step to bring Contemporary Dance in dialogue with other dance forms is therefore to acknowledge that it is not a more relevant dance-art form than others, nor a more neutral one.

Contemporary Dance as it is currently practiced in Western and Northern Europe is a collective, bodily, experimental domain where the personal and the professional cross in a myriad of ways. This allows for positive forms of transgression as well as the questioning of hierarchies, social categories and norms.

The complexity of traversing these norms also creates a field where at times, experiences of discrimination, erasure, and abuse can be negated through silencing or justified "in the name of art" (Marinus and Van Assche 2025, 7). Bachelor dance education programmes tend to confront young adults with extremely charged content and dense schedules, creating intense experiences. Dance artists who work with their bodies in artistic creations are often concerned with challenging their own aesthetic and physical limits. This creates the possibility of volatile and profound experiences of change in individual artists, states of vulnerability, both physical and psychosocial, as well as potentially intensified group dynamics. Dancers frequently work across cultures and in a second language, increasing the stress of communication and experience of difference. The accumulation of these aspects creates specific challenges to diversity in the field of dance practice and education.

Contemporary Dance effectively has a quasi-monopoly on dance higher education in Europe and its resources, making Contemporary Dance programmes the only viable option leading to a higher education diploma in dance. The absence of a more diverse dance higher education panorama puts an extra pressure on these programmes to host dancers from different backgrounds, and, as choreographer and researcher Ingri Midgard Fiksdal has argued: "Those of us who currently do have access to education, funding, and dissemination need to take responsibility for challenging and expanding these systems to create a diverse, cultural sustainability within dance-as-art" (Fiksdal 2022)*.* European dance BA programmes, as exemplified by the three dance BA programmes studied, are often composed of highly internationalised and often quite diverse student groups, with a less diverse teaching staff, and a predominantly White, cis, mainly heterosexual and middle-class European direction and administrative staff. People in different roles and positions wonder how inclusive these institutions can be when they are led by cis, White people:

> **Trying to have intercultural students and then trying to have intercultural teachers, but then like, also, who is taking this decision? Still three cis males, White** (Student 6, Manufacture).

> **I think race is a really sensitive issue, I think so. I think it's also the fact that it's a very White led White school, all White** (Teacher 6, Manufacture).

> **You can't not have a White lady vibe, when all the people who are in charge of your programme are White ladies** (Teacher 4, SKH).

> **I have given ideas and solutions, pointed things out —as the one of like, five at the most Black people at this institution— and those things**

are then looked at as solutions that the system comes up with. And then it reaffirms what's already in place (Teacher 6, SKH).

I think there's a big contrast in PARTS between the diversity of the student body, and to a certain extent the teachers, and the staff. […] There's very little diversity in this staff (Director, P.A.R.T.S.).

There's something about this institution that's really White and Flemish (Staff 1, P.A.R.T.S.).

This very common pyramid creates a gap between students, teachers and staff when it comes to experiences of diversity —experiences of migration, cultural difference, racialisation, gender identification, or class— within the institutions and beyond. Regardless of the good intentions of the individuals involved, these differences in experience and understanding are a source of tension the programmes and institutions are grappling with. At the centre of our research is the idea that these differences should not be veiled under an idea of sameness, as recognising different positionalities is a precondition for engaging with intercultural dialogue.

We inhabit a very plural European society. At DDE we believe that dance should relate to that plurality, and we are not alone in that belief. The last two decades have seen the rise of social justice initiatives such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and the struggle for Palestinian liberation in an increasingly globalised world. The questions of sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination have come to the fore in Western societies at large, also reaching the field of dance. These questions have touched not only the professional world but also dance education, prompting a variety of student-led initiatives, including in the researched dance BA programmes: at the Manufacture, the student-led Gender Manuf movement helped push certain questions related to gender forward into the institutional life, and more recently, a group of students has created a Decolonial Association primarily aimed at challenging institutional Whiteness[4]; at SKH, students organised a movement now called 'Action for Palestine SKH', and a University-wide series of lectures on diversity was initiated as a response to questions brought up by students of the pedagogy department in 2020; at P.A.R.T.S. students from generation XIII wrote a Manifesto in the wake of Black Lives Matter calling the institution to investigate its Whiteness and Eurocentrism. The current generation of students has

4 As discussed by authors such as Sara Ahmed, Tema Okun or Robin DiAngelo, the term "institutional Whiteness" refers to the reproduction of racial and ethnic biases and prejudices within institutions that are dominated by White(-passing) people.

also engaged in writing and making public a statement in support of Palestine, asking the school and the staff to position themselves publicly.

While the three BA programmes researched are generally led by people open to dialogue and progressive ideals —which generated a constructive climate for conducting this research— not actively engaging with the history and present dynamics of power leads to the reproduction of the status quo. As we will see, programmes aligned with the Western canon, however progressive, carry their own blind spots. Complicating the situation, these programmes exist under larger organisational umbrellas tied, in a variety of forms and degrees, to nation states. European states frequently act in direct contradiction to ideals and practices of inclusivity and social justice, with restrictive migration policies, and Eurocentric values. This discrepancy is a source of enormous pressure for those representing nation states and institutions on the one side, and students and teachers on the other. As a result, time, openness, and discussions across roles, positions, and generations, are necessary to avoid alienating the different communities within each institution.

Several authors critiquing the Western canon have signalled that Contemporary Dance in Europe tends to present itself as internationally valid, positioned as the norm (Chatterjea 2013; Barba 2016; Kwan 2017). Logically, the same happens in European educational programmes that reproduce knowledge around Contemporary Dance, such as the ones we researched. This tendency puts these programmes in tension with non-dominant forms of dance and body movement traditions. Inspired by global movements for social justice, by courses proposed by these dance programmes, and by their own experiences and sources, many students question why certain dance forms are not included in the curriculum, or what it means for White European teachers to be in charge of teaching non-Western practices. Student communities also question where the institutional responsibility lies regarding local and global politics and the space they afford to social justice movements.

A central question of DDE has been what it means to recruit students with a diversity of backgrounds and what kinds of practices need to be present for the diversity of cultural and bodily archives they bring to contribute to the learning environment and influence the institutional practices. Our aim is to think about dance higher education from the perspective of an encounter of different cultures in an unequal world. In that respect, it seems necessary to tackle the central term, Contemporary Dance, and its relations to the history of Western stage dance, to the temporal politics of modernity, and to colonial logics of extraction and erasure.

The drive of this project is not to undo or destroy Contemporary Dance in dance education, nor to further open Contemporary Dance to make it a larger

and more inclusive field and genre towards other dance traditions. Otherwise, 'diversity' in dance education can easily become a diversity of bodies dancing to the dominant logic. The drive is rather to humble this dance tradition from its global desires and image, and to link it to its local histories. It is an invitation to address those relations of power that have become so normal as to become invisible. Addressing these relations of power might be a way of engaging in a movement of collective transformation towards plurality and the hosting of diversity.

The temporal politics of Contemporary Dance

We perceive Contemporary Dance as a field in dispute. Within Europe, we have observed different dance scenes: different in the audience they reach, their budgets, working conditions, networks, aesthetics and genealogies. All these dance scenes understand and name themselves as contemporary, even though they might not be fully recognised as such by other dance scenes. This plurality of Contemporary Dance scenes is not imaginable within the temporal framework of modernity. If we understand diversity in terms of social justice, and we want to be able to host diversity and be transformed by its hosting, we should address the politics and the dynamics enacted by the claim of the contemporary. Understanding Contemporary Dance as a field in dispute directs our attention to the complex relations of power that govern it. These relations of power can be perceived in the dynamics between different European Contemporary Dance scenes, but they become much more apparent when we consider those dance scenes that do not have the same claim over the contemporary because they are grounded in different genealogies or geopolitical locations (thus becoming marginalised dance scenes). Addressing these historically constructed relations of power that invisibly operate in the daily dynamics of the field is indispensable to transform the field into one that can acknowledge and value non-dominant differences. This perspective points to the need of explicitly and continuously positioning the kind of Contemporary Dance (education) we are engaging with and our participation in those dynamics.

Indeed, while the term 'contemporary' in Contemporary Dance seems to point to the dances of today, dance scholar SanSan Kwan shows that the claim of contemporaneity is not equally available to all current dance practices: "In non-Western dance, 'contemporary' is a necessary qualifier when we do not mean to refer to traditional forms. Without it 'Asian dance,' 'African dance,' or 'Native American dance' is immediately assumed to be traditional" (2017, 45). In practice, the term is used to describe a "specific set of formalized dance techniques and choreographic formats which primarily derive from Western-European and North American dance-as-art of the twentieth century" (Fiksdal 2022, 7). Indian dancer and scholar Ananya Chatterjea (2013) argues that while

Contemporary Dance presents itself as pluralistic and multicultural, what often happens is that non-Western dance makers adapt to the codes of Western dance to have a place in the so-called 'global stage'. In this erasure of difference, Chatterjea sees the risk of repeating the racial, gendered and colonial violence of the projects of modernity. We believe that the same can happen with dancers who come from forms of dance that are located in the West but have a non-Western genealogy (and therefore find themselves on the othered side of the colonial difference). This has happened at the Manufacture's dance BA in relation to Afrodiasporic dance traditions such as Hip Hop, or Krumping:

> **I had a hard time coming into the school; coming from a very different background as to how to approach the body. I noticed notions of classism in terms of dance training, culture, finance… It was, subtly, a little bit everywhere. […] I had a problem with teachers appropriating, renaming and theorising Hip Hop culture as if they had invented it. This was a recurring issue with White men teaching with a huge ego. So I can say that I am grateful for the experience in the school, but not in terms of dance** (Student 9, Manufacture).

Different dance forms enjoy different cultural status; Contemporary Dance has a privileged access and claim over the global stage (insofar as 'contemporaneity' has become a much-appreciated asset within modernity) and is highly valued in the labour market in comparison to most dance forms (Chatterjea 2013; Barba 2016; Kwan 2017). When this hierarchy between Contemporary Dance and other dance forms is ignored, new forms of erasure manifest. In this regard, dance scholar Annelies Van Assche and choreographer Karen Schaffer (2023) warn that people who find themselves in positions of privilege in the West risk reproducing a colonial extractivist logic in Contemporary Dance when using materials from other dance cultures without referencing the context from which they came. To avoid an extractivist logic, a coherent practice of acknowledgement, reciprocity, restitution and reparation is needed.

Erasing what came before

While the exact boundaries of what is considered Contemporary Dance may vary in different contexts, in the kind of Contemporary Dance practiced in these three programmes the link to the history of European and North American modern and Postmodern Dance is fundamental. A common trait is the partial rejection of pre-existing dance traditions, most notably Ballet and Modern Dance. This partial rejection has an emancipatory intentionality: breaking free from norms, dogmas, dance traditions and disciplines. The idea of achieving emancipation by unlearning and deconstructing previously learned traditions, moving towards an ideal of neutrality, comes from different practices and

discourses: it comes from improvisational practices that aim at deconstructing and undoing a normalised dance body (such as that required by Ballet, for example), in order to open the body to a different palette of possibilities; and it comes from practices of bodily care that aim at undoing patterns of tension and allowing for a more available, anatomically informed, and healthier body. The unlearning demanded by Contemporary Dance is also linked to the emphasis on the choreographic, and the demand to make authorial signatures inscribed and visible in the dancers' bodies. Unlearning within Contemporary Dance is therefore multiple and complex, with an extremely valuable history of resistance to normative representations of the body and of health within the West. This is indeed experienced as liberating by some students in the researched programmes, especially those trained in the forms and techniques of the West that Contemporary Dance aims at questioning and deconstructing:

> **Because coming from like a very authoritarian dance training, it was a big shock that the dance training here was so different. And that also you are so free** (Student 11, SKH).

> **This school is super chill, because I come from an education that was really straight and did not offer that much freedom in everything. So for me, I mean, in the class, I feel like the teachers don't have much expectation on you. Because it also depends on how you want to learn** (Student 5, P.A.R.T.S.).

> **I find it interesting that I heard a lot [in this focus group] that people found contemporary dance because they wanted something more free. Or they didn't fit into a particular form or way of dancing, and how contemporary dance was somehow a space where you could express yourselves more freely** (Student 26, Manufacture).

When we look at European Contemporary Dance within the framework of modernity, we can therefore see it as a liberatory practice of resistance. However, looking at it while considering the colonial difference complicates this narrative of liberation and resistance. The partial rejection of other dance traditions aims to look for new aesthetic possibilities, while inadvertently reproducing modernity's continuous race towards the future and its devaluation of the past (Barba 2016). Current dances that are produced outside the West tend to be identified as backwards, equated to earlier stages of Western dance development. DDE member Fabi Barba, for example, experienced this during their journey through P.A.R.T.S.: "I had the impression that Ausdruckstanz and Modern Dance in Quito did not have a place within the 'contemporary' dance world into which we were being educated" (Barba 2017, 55). As Barba puts it, "Contemporary Dance, at least nominally, claims the present for itself and excludes other kinds of dances from it" (2016, 52). In doing so, the term Contemporary Dance helps to maintain

a historicist and Eurocentric approach to dance and dance history: historicist, because valuing dance according to a progress-based understanding of history usually leads to posit Modern Dance as previous to Contemporary Dance, and to assume that Contemporary Dance is the latest stage of progress in dance traditions; Eurocentric, because the West is considered as the proper place of the contemporary, the main architect of dance history and the measure and model for all other forms of dance.

Furthermore, the emancipatory practices developed by Contemporary Dance were created in a specific place and time, addressing a particular history. The same unlearning of prior dance knowledge that can be experienced as emancipating by some, can be perceived as oppressive by others: it can reinforce the colonial difference by uprooting bodies and peoples from their traditions, memory, history, and relation to the Earth. The idea of emancipation as practiced in Contemporary Dance requires the practice of becoming neutral, flexible, versatile and open to everything at the same level. Without properly positioning, contextualising, and critically approaching these practices, they tend to presuppose letting go of one's position in the world and suspending one's roots and cultural archive. Especially for students that come from the othered side of the colonial difference, an education rooted in the ideals of Contemporary Dance is often lived as a demand to leave their histories and cultural archives at the door in order to become clean slates, ready to be inscribed with the norms of Contemporary Dance. This was regularly brought up by students from the three programmes:

> **When I arrived in PARTS I felt like a kind of, what we were talking about earlier, erase everything I learned before. And I kept some stuff, but it was kind of like, everything that I was given here was "the truth"** (Student 3, PARTS).

> **So I applied and [during the audition] I shared some salsa, I shared some dancing, not in a studio. I shared what kind of matters to me and I felt good doing that. [...] Coming into education was for me a disappointment. And I think that's where the audition still plays a part, or like the audition process of being accepted. Because I felt that the interest was not there any more in the knowledge that we already have and already bring: everything was scheduled and structured. It would not ask if we had something to teach and to share already** (Student 3, SKH).

> **I think for me, the area that feels mostly uncomfortable in the school is, let's say, the main direction or concept of dance; or idea of what dance is. Because I've experienced that it's a type of contemporary that I didn't do before, and it's very Brussels, it's very White, and it's very, in a way, strict, while trying to be very open, or claiming to be very**

open. And so instead of that, I have had a lot of pressure to conform to do this, and that was quite uncomfortable. Because I felt like there wasn't really an actual space for what I did before, what my dance is, or what I like in dance. I think this is quite… Yeah, like a constant wave in my experience here. And it is sometimes heavy to live (Student 17, Manufacture).

Leaving their difference at the door to engage in experimentation from a place of neutrality and infinite openness, may well be unwanted or impossible for those who come from the othered side of the colonial difference. Firstly, the idea of neutrality presupposes a White, cis, able body. Black bodies, gender non-conforming bodies, or bodies with disabilities are seldom considered neutral in Western spaces. Secondly, auditions for these programmes can be misleading, suggesting that a wider variety of body practices and dance styles will be embraced in Contemporary Dance experimentation than is the case; once they access the institutions, students are expected to establish a certain hierarchy between prior dance knowledge and the one that comes from Contemporary Dance education. These programmes were designed and are run by a mostly cis, able-bodied, White(-passing) and European staff, and the difficulties they present are mostly felt by students that occupy particularly vulnerable positionalities in society. Even if it tends to define itself as infinitely free and open, Contemporary Dance, much like any other dance genre, inscribes bodies in its own specific ways. Trained into bodies informed by dominant positionalities, students develop the skills to move within those bodies as well as lenses to observe those bodies critically.

Next to that, when a student comes from a background related to ancestral or subaltern knowledge —where dance traditions were developed in resistance to enslavement, oppression, and colonialism— assuming a position of neutrality means erasing a political identity. Dance traditions with a genealogy of subaltern resistance are often linked to a dance scene that allows specific people (who are marginalised by normative Western societies) to feel seen. This means that some students experience these movement traditions as more than mere dance genres, and as part of who they are:

The school expects me to be open and to be curious and to commit to the propositions that I'm given. But I find that what is implied is that you should commit to those things as a blank canvas. And I find that for me, it has created a lot of tension and a lot of frustration, because I can't come into anything as a blank canvas, and especially when it comes to dancing, because my dance is so informed by who I am and by the people that dance before me, and the bodies that dance in my body. […] And the thing is, where I come from is not an artistic decision. It's not an artistic choice. It came because I'm who I am, and

> **I move in this world as the person that I am. And there are a lot of spaces in which I cannot interact, and I cannot be seen. And I found those spaces, I found those communities where I could be seen. So it's not just what I like, it's me** (Student 14, Manufacture).

As we have seen, the emancipatory movement of Contemporary Dance is complex and can be simultaneously lived as liberatory for some and oppressive for others. As the resistant qualities of Contemporary Dance tend to remain within the confines of modernity, a decolonial perspective helps bring to the table an understanding of resistance from the othered side of the modern/colonial logic, where there is no freedom without positionality and awareness of our relation to others.

Moving towards a pluriversal dance education

While experimentation is extremely valuable, for a plural understanding and practice of dance to take place, experimentation must be positioned: we experiment from somewhere, in relation to others and to history. Experimentation that departs from ancestrality (i.e., the recognition that we are here because of the Earth and others before us) is fundamentally different from experimentation in the paradigm of Western contemporaneity, which departs from the present, and reaches towards the future isolated in its 'neutral' spaces. Ignoring positionality erases history and creates a fiction where experimentation is supposedly free of all constraints but filled with unspoken hierarchies and limitations in practice. By invisibilising its own framework, Contemporary Dance aspires to occupy a space of universality. By positioning and making visible its framework, experimentation can become instead a space for the re-emergence of that which was erased, suppressed, left at the door.

People, practices and theories coming from the Global South or from historically marginalised communities in the West should be included in dance education but always approached with careful attention to the dynamics of intercultural exchange. Considering the long and ongoing colonial history that has shaped and constrained the relation between Western and non-Western cultures, and between dominant and subaltern cultures, dance education should carefully assess the risks of exoticisation, tokenism and cultural appropriation (see Poveda Yánez et al. 2022; Rosa 2024). Approaching non-Western and non-dominant practices and knowledges should be done with care and humility: it is not a matter of enlarging the Western repertoire, but of getting to know its limits, trying to vividly understand that there are other valid ways of being, thinking, and dancing. The emphasis should be put on restoring balance in these intercultural relations and exchanges through reciprocity and restitution, focusing on honouring instead of extracting knowledge. Intercultural

exchange cannot happen on a theoretical, abstract level; it requires building relations of mutual respect between cultures and peoples, relations that are concrete and historically situated.

Departing from these questions regarding Contemporary Dance education, it seems crucial to open a few fundamental questions:

- → Why are we dancing?
- → With whose body are we dancing?
- → How do we dance?
- → For whom do we dance?
- → With whom do we dance?
- → Is our dancing creating spaces for resistance, joy, healing?
- → How to think of dance education as dancing with rather than dancing like?

We are seeking an understanding of dance practice and education that is rooted in and open to authentic encounters across cultures, differences, positionalities. We are seeking dance education practices that are relational, resistant, and pluriversal, avoiding logics of appropriation, erasure, exoticism or extraction. Pluriversality presupposes the coexistence of many worlds, each with its own grounding (Escobar 2020). One important practice would be a critical engagement with the Eurocentric canon (see Mantoan et al. 2022), simultaneously acknowledging the histories that precede these institutions, and the colonial erasures these histories have promoted. This would also allow students who have been trained in Western ideals of Contemporary Dance to relate to the programme without having to erase that background but acknowledging the challenges it brings with it.

Acknowledging a pluriversal world and respectfully engaging with difference in dance education could help foster more understanding and compassion across cultures, celebrating and learning from, rather than tolerating, erasing or fetishising difference. We recognise that diversity has not been a trademark of modernity over the last 500 years: modern institutions developed to reproduce the dominant culture rather than host a plurality of cultures (Wekker et al. 2016). The task of addressing this feature of modernity is enormous and crucial for developing open, inclusive and plural societies. Yet, the opening towards the relational, the pluriversal, is already there, bubbling in the field, present in dance education, especially in dancing as a practice, rather than in dance as choreography. What we call for is for dance higher education to make it central to their curriculums. When engaging with relational and pluriversal approaches, dance higher education institutions need to be open to be transformed by them, honouring the traditions that have been excluded from dance education, as opposed to capturing and exploiting them for their own gain.

We are exploring how decolonial thinking and practice can help us create a pluriversal dance education that challenges assumptions about Contemporary Dance. Yet, we are aware of the risk of gesturing towards solutions that better integrate diversity into a structure already shaped by modernity/coloniality. While remaining aware of the limitations and contradictions of the monumental task we propose, we still wish to offer recommendations to steer these programmes towards a more relational and pluriversal approach to dance education. In the next section, we develop our comparative analysis of good practices and challenges in diversity-related questions in the three researched dance programmes, and we provide recommendations.

Comparative analysis - good practices, challenges, and recommendations

We developed DDE around the general question of how the dance BA programmes of SKH, the Manufacture, and P.A.R.T.S., and the institutions under which they function, help enrich or impoverish diversity. We then separated this general question into the questions of access, hosting, and contribution to create an understanding of how diversity enters the institutions, how it is hosted, and how the institutions contribute to a diverse dance field and society. We aimed at identifying good practices that could be useful to other institutions as well as challenges to diversity, leading to a series of recommendations. We believe that most recommendations proposed can be implemented without extra funding, while some may require extra financial support.

This research has concentrated on the students and staff that have already managed to enter these institutions and were on site between 2023 and 2024, as well as guest alumni from recent student groups. What is obviously missing in DDE is a study which includes those who attempt to enter and do not make it, as well as those who do not attempt entering, thinking that these institutions are not made for them, or decidedly out of reach. We think particularly of dancers with disabilities[5] who, as we shall see, may have partial access to these institutions through joint workshops and other initiatives, but who have no access to the whole programme and therefore to a dance higher education diploma.

5 We have opted for the form 'person with disability', aware that terminology around disability varies greatly across groups and states where other terms such as 'functional variety', or 'different abilities' may be favoured.

The three dance BA programmes researched have been engaging with the question of diversity and social justice and may be already developing practices around the limitations identified in this research. Through the analysis and the recommendations that follow we aim at emphasising the need for long-term engagement with diversity for institutional transformation. We hope that these recommendations can be useful for dance higher education programmes, as well as other educational programmes.

Accessing dance higher education

This section explores the practices and procedures in place for recruiting students and hiring staff and guest teachers. The question of who enters the institution, and who does not, is a crucial starting question for considering diversity. Recruitment juries and hiring committees function as gatekeepers with enormous power and influence on the diversity of these dance BA programmes.

We departed from the question: to what extent do the conditions of access to these institutions enrich or impoverish diversity?

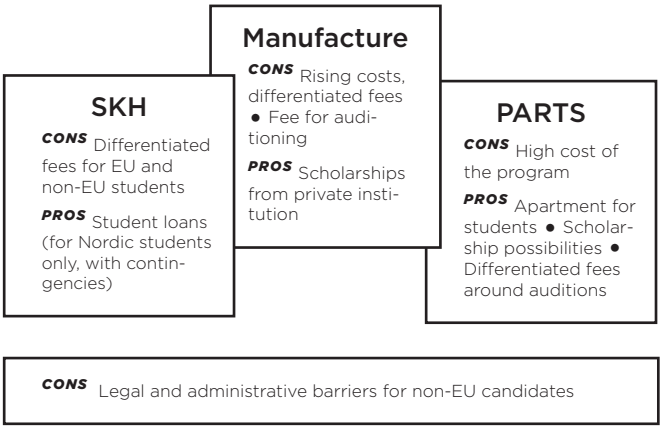
We have separated the question of access into three sub-categories:

- → **Material costs / Legal barriers**
  how do the cost of education, administrative procedures, and scholarship systems help or hinder the constitution of diverse student groups?

- → **Audition formats**
  where are auditions held, what are the formats proposed, how clear and transparent are they, and how does this influence the constitution of diverse student groups?

- → **Hiring practices**
  how are committees organised, who participates in them, what are the standards sought in applicants, and how does this influence the constitution of diverse staff?

Material costs / legal barriers



Studying in one of these institutions may come with different costs depending on the students' nationality and place of residence, thus creating different conditions of access. The listed amounts below refer to the cost of the whole programme, as of 2025, comprising three full years of education. We also consider the costs of auditioning and the access to scholarships and loans.

At SKH, it is virtually impossible to study without a European passport, as the education is free for European citizens, but it costs around €100.000 for non-European citizens. For the European candidates, the cost-free education can be a strong incentive to choose SKH: "this education is for free when you're already an EU citizen. […] I made the choice to not apply for schools that are several thousand euros per year" (Student 11, SKH). SKH's online audition procedures release the candidates from extra costs related to travelling and lodging. At SKH, European students have access to a loan system which unfortunately ends up being used only by the Scandinavian students due to limitations related to work obligations, language and currency rates, creating an imbalance in the student groups:

> **In the CSN[6] financial support, there's a discrimination between Nordic and non-Nordic students. If you are not from a Nordic country you must work at least 10 hours per week, when the Nordic students have this financial support without having to work aside their studies. […] It creates a clear unbalanced situation between the Nordic and**

6 CSN is the authority in Sweden that handles student aid and the surrounding statistics.

non-Nordic students towards the programme. We are clearly not equal (Student 20, SKH).

At the Manufacture, the fees were previously equal for all students, but since 2025 a differentiation was introduced by the umbrella organisation HES-SO, between Swiss students that pay around €4.500, and non-Swiss students that pay around €6.600 for their studies (with Swiss students being defined by tax domicile, and/or by nationality). Auditions fees, travelling and lodging to follow on-site auditions add another financial burden. At the Manufacture, governmental grants for non-Swiss nationals are non-existent, and international students are encouraged to look for scholarships elsewhere (either in their countries of origin, or through private funding). Often, students coming from the Global South, or from Eastern and Southern Europe, are those with the least access to state-funded scholarships. Even for Swiss students, access to scholarships is limited, and the option of taking loans means starting professional life in debt. The only scholarships available, beyond those offered by the different cantons for its residents, are from a private foundation that awards up to two scholarships per year that quite often —but not always— go to students from the Manufacture's dance BA. The competitiveness of acquiring the scholarship therefore comes on top of the one that comes with getting into the programme, but a beautiful example of solidarity was brought to our attention in this regard, in which a student cohort distributed the scholarship from the foundation among those in the group that needed it. Every student we encountered that had been granted a scholarship, be it a public or private one, acknowledged its importance in their ability to continue their studies. In some cases, they also reported a noticeable improvement in their mental and physical health, which positively impacted their academic performance.

At P.A.R.T.S., a private institution**,** the fees are equally high for all students at €16.000. The high cost of education at P.A.R.T.S. is countered by a robust scholarship system, which can be decisive: "I went to Brussels, and I decided to not go to SEAD [Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance, in Austria] because in P.A.R.T.S. I could get a scholarship" (Student 29, P.A.R.T.S.). However, audition fees, travelling and lodging to follow on-site auditions add another financial burden. P.A.R.T.S. has been countering this extra cost through a differentiated audition fee in countries with generally lower income.

For non-Europeans, studying in Europe comes with additional challenges: students must go through heavy administrative procedures and prove sufficient financial means that may be high depending on where a student comes from and their socioeconomic situation. Visa procedures can be long, burdensome, expensive and uncertain: "the visa is quite expensive and took so long to process" (Student 32, P.A.R.T.S.). At the Manufacture, there have been cases of candidates accepted to join the programme who were not allowed to get a visa due

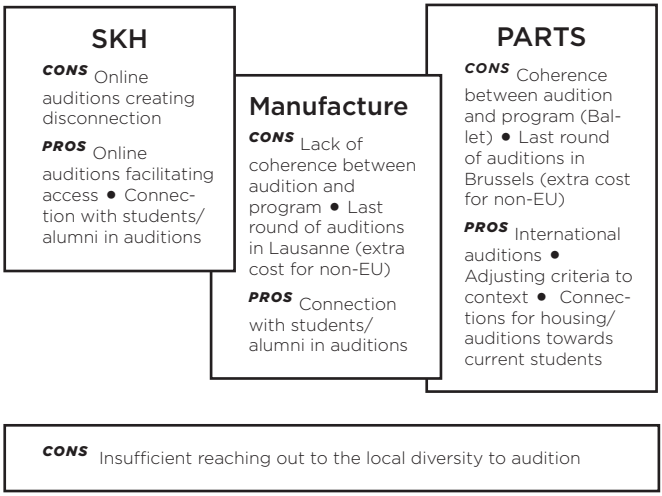
to their countries of origin. In all three countries, and especially in Switzerland and Sweden, living costs are extremely high, putting pressure on students to work on the side while following an intense full-time programme. This creates an imbalance between those who need to work on the side —often those who come from the southern and eastern parts of Europe, the working class, rural areas, and the Global South— and those who do not need to work on the side.

Additionally, in Switzerland, non-European students must sign a statement promising to leave the country at the end of their studies (see Canton of Vaud 2025, p. 3, point 7), which creates further imbalance and anxiety: "We are the same, but then I needed to sign this paper to come here. It was a ghost haunting me sometimes. I need to promise to this place that I'm leaving after" (Student 37, Manufacture). There are currently no concrete measures in place to support non-European graduates who wish to stay in Switzerland and little to prepare candidates for the near impossibility of achieving this, which can create tension between the staff and non-European students and graduates.

These challenges often create uncertain and stressful situations. The institutions help international students navigate the administrative and visa difficulties, usually having one staff member responsible for helping incoming students with information, translations, helping set up appointments, and explaining timelines and documentation needs: "I feel like, before we started the school, we got a lot of information. […] Like, a list of different scholarships that we can apply to. And also, we can go and ask if we have questions" (Student 3, Manufacture).

The auditioning processes are long, often lasting from January to May-June, and the final answer comes late, adding stress to those who need to start visa procedures, move countries, set up bank accounts, arrange rental contracts — all in administrative contexts that are not particularly welcoming to non-native speakers. Preparing students for the legal-administrative processes, as well as personal-cultural difficulties related to being temporary migrants seems necessary, especially for those who come from outside Europe and encounter heavier obstacles from the very start.

Audition formats



The audition formats for these three dance BA programmes are different. P.A.R.T.S. makes a deliberate effort —and has the resources— to recruit international students by organising pre-selections in around 20 different locations in Europe as well as in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, helping to reach out to diversity that comes through internationalisation. Next to that, a pre-selection is organised in Brussels immediately before the final round of auditions, which is particularly accommodating to overseas candidates. Around 150 pre-selected candidates are invited to a final round of auditions in Brussels, which lasts 4 to 5 days. As a result, a group of some 40 students is formed. P.A.R.T.S. finds it important that there is a substantial presence of local students in each cohort, but this is not translated into a fixed number. As a result, the P.A.R.T.S. student groups are very international.

The Manufacture dance BA holds pre-selections in Lausanne and Brussels and a final round of auditions in Lausanne, which lasts 4 to 5 days. The Manufacture dance BA is constrained to recruit at least 50% Swiss candidates (with Swiss students being defined by tax domicile, and/or by nationality). As a result of limited outreach and the Swiss quota, the groups do include students from different parts of Europe and with migratory backgrounds, but usually a maximum of one non-European in groups of 12 to 14 students.

At SKH, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the auditions have been held in online formats. After the first round of pre-selection, 48 candidates are invited to attend two online workshops. 28 of those candidates attend a third round,

which consists of an online workshop and a 10-minute interview with the selection committee, leading to a group of about 18 students. While organising auditions exclusively online facilitates access internationally and helps to recruit candidates that cannot cover the costs of travelling for auditions, the high cost of studies for non-EU students reduces the possibility of internationalisation beyond Europe. Typically, about half the students come from Nordic countries with the other half holding other EU citizenships.

Regarding the final rounds of auditions, students appreciate formats where they can get in touch and exchange with current students and alumni. This is done in a variety of ways in the three institutions: by putting them in touch for housing during auditions, by giving them space to dialogue as part of the audition process, or by including them as jury members, teachers, and/or observers of the audition process.

As for the content of auditions, P.A.R.T.S. mentioned the adaptation of its pre-selection for different contexts by removing Ballet in places where it may function as a barrier. While this shows an effort to connect to a diversity of practices and backgrounds, it also raises the question of the institution's capacity to host students with such backgrounds, as Ballet remains an important part of the curriculum. Adapting audition formats to different contexts could be further developed by questioning the use of dance studios, adapting to different employments of time and dance cultures, creating different communication strategies, and co-designing the auditions with local dancers. In the case of the Manufacture, questions have been raised regarding the presence of hip-hop in the auditions, creating the expectation that street and club styles would have a more prominent role in the curriculum than they do. The auditions function as an introduction to the programme, and finding the right format and transparency seems crucial.

While we did not observe auditioning processes during the research period, many DDE members have participated in audition processes in the three programmes in a variety of roles. It is clear to the DDE team that the composition of juries —and whether they have had diversity training— has a direct influence on the diversity of the student groups, since juries with different backgrounds might rely on different sensibilities when assessing the work of audition candidates. At the same time, clear and transparent directives regarding diversity in the selection procedures should be developed and communicated with the juries. Articulating these directives might imply reviewing the current standards of evaluation and confronting them with the kind of dance and dancer the programmes want to foster. What do we understand as talent, or as excellence, for example? Notions such as artistic or pedagogical excellence are usually defined in terms coming from the canon of modernity. Institutions engaged

with diversity and social justice should challenge and re-define what excellence means in their own terms.

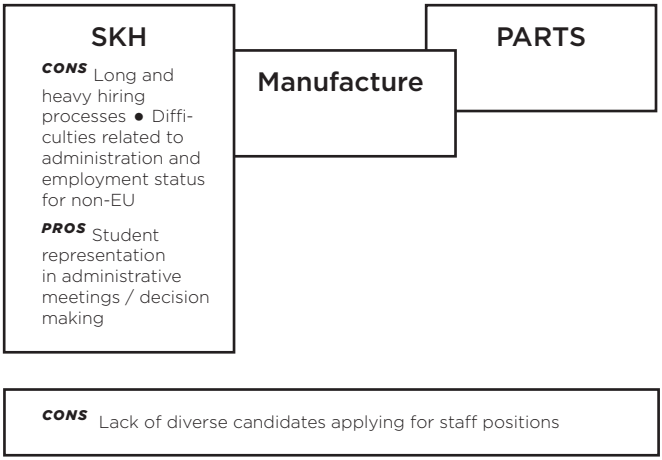
Beyond internationalisation, reaching towards the local diversity of the cities and countries where these dance BA programmes are based remains a work in progress: P.A.R.T.S. has started organising auditions in different neighbourhoods, and SKH and the Manufacture have reached out to schools and organisations to present the programme and invite candidates. These initiatives have occasionally led to more diverse candidatures, but more time and resources would need to be invested to give dancers from migratory or diasporic backgrounds and impoverished neighbourhoods access to these programmes. Next to that, revising programmes to be better able to host diversity would be necessary; otherwise, these programmes risk importing students with non-Western or non-dominant cultural archives to educate them in the dominant European culture, reproducing colonial and classist patterns.

Next to questions regarding internationality and socioeconomic and cultural diversity, we have noted that the auditions' design, workshop choices, and infrastructure create a strong bias for able bodies:

> **Last year, for the first time, for the auditions we had many people with disabilities asking us if we have a system to welcome them. And we are so willing to be able to at least see them, meet them for the auditions… But then we thought: "It's going to be super bad for them." I mean, here it's absolutely not conceived for people with disabilities. Nothing. You know, even the access to the studios, nothing is done for that. And we don't have the space, nor the money, nothing to have them** (Staff 3, Manufacture).

As a result, none of the three programmes have students with visible disabilities, calling for a more thorough engagement with disability at the level of dance higher education. This would require attention to physical access, specialised staff and curricular changes, as well as engaging in a conversation with the whole dance education ecosystem. Thoroughly engaging with dancers with disability has the potential to reimagine ways of being and living together (Goodley et al. 2019) and could help re-defining the goals of dance education. Furthermore, in the case of P.A.R.T.S., only candidates aged between 18 and 25 years old can apply, creating an ageist bias and reinforcing an ideal of dance as directed to young, athletic bodies, which is also present at the other two programmes.

Hiring Practices



In these programmes only a few teachers are hired staff; most teachers are guests, working under temporary contracts. The teaching and administrative staff are predominantly White and Western in all three institutions. At the Manufacture dance BA, they are also predominantly male. The three dance BA programmes note that they receive few candidates with other backgrounds and positionalities when staff positions open. The lack of candidatures probably points toward two issues: on the one hand, the images these programmes project to the outside, as spaces that are predominantly White, European, able-bodied, and promoting European dance content, may make people with other positionalities feel that these institutions are not possible or desirable workplaces for them; on the other hand, structural inequalities in society may mean that people with marginalised positionalities do not have the necessary accreditations or connections to access these vacancies. Legal frames and public discourse around marginalised categories in each country influence the perception of diversity in these institutions: one clear example is how much attention is given to gender balance (within a cis-normative framework) and how little attention and discourse exists around race.[7] Furthermore, employing

7 In Sweden, for example, the Discrimination Act prohibits organisations from discriminating based on seven categories: Gender, Gender identity, Ethnicity, Religion or other belief system, Functional impairment, Sexual orientation, and Age. When the difficulties encountered concern racial issues, there is little backing in the law and public discourse. In Switzerland, a palpable, though often denied racist discourse in contemporary public debates has been documented by Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné (2015).

non-European staff often comes with extra administrative and legal burdens for the institutions, and for the incoming non-EU staff.

In contrast, the guest teachers are more easily employed for short term contracts, and we observed a much higher diversity in this group, if compared to the staff. This creates a split between, on the one side, the student community and the guest teachers —who are internationalised and work primarily in English— and the administrative staff who tends to be local and speak the local language, with less experience and knowledge on migration issues. Such a split and language barrier further hinders employing more international profiles in the administrative staff. For those internationals that are employed as administrative and teaching staff, time devoted to learning the language of the local community is not prioritised by the institutions when onboarding.

Furthermore, the different institutions have different standards regarding work percentages, with some employing heads of programmes at 100% and others as low as 40%. We observed that low work percentages create fragmentation: when the programme heads do not have the time to address the needs of the student and teaching communities themselves, they tend to address them by hiring or consulting others. This practice generally leads to partial solutions rather than structural transformation.

We observed that the three dance BA programmes make efforts to hire guest teachers from a variety of backgrounds and at different intersections of nationality, race, gender, and class (there are collaborations with groups that include artists with disability, but few direct invitations to artists with disabilities). While this movement helps create more diverse spaces, it also means that diversity in the teaching communities tends to enter the institutions in temporary and precarious positions. There would need to be more investment in reconsidering the image of the institutions, the hiring practices, and the compositions of hiring juries to make sure that more diversity can enter the staff of these programmes. A good practice observed comes from SKH, where a student representative participates in the hiring committee and is paid for it. This participation opens the door for intergenerational exchange and for hearing from students; the ones for whom these programmes are designed and who know it from the inside.

→ Recommendations concerning accessing dance higher education

- → **Open auditions to the plurality of society**
  Pay particular attention to how the audition format, content, location, and duration, may help or hinder diversity. Seek transparent ways of composing diverse juries for auditions, and make sure that jury members go through diversity training and

have clear and transparent diversity-related directives. Investigate how to change or mitigate the difficulties in access that candidates encounter when they are non-European, come from a working-class background, or have disabilities.

→ **Transparency about diversity strengths and limitations**
Critically revise the information candidates receive concerning the programmes. The programmes' strengths as well as their limitations in hosting diversity should be clear from the start. Strengths and limitations may refer to state regulations, curriculum choices, workload, support services both during and after studies, scholarship and loan systems, among other things.

→ **Seek diversity at home and abroad**
Seek auditioning formats that reach out to a diversity of communities on local, national, and international levels. By working with groups and institutions engaged with the local social context —with diversity in terms of socioeconomic realities, migration, disability, and others— dance higher education could adapt recruitment methods to better invite dancers from other backgrounds and positionalities. Seek diversity when employing staff and regular teachers, and revisit, address and amend the language policy when needed. Make sure that members of hiring committees go through diversity training and have clear and transparent diversity-related directives. It is crucial to diversify these populations and bring diversity into the core of the institutions.

→ **Student representation in access**
Current students and recent alumni have a lived and in-depth knowledge of the dance BA programmes. Following the example of SKH, include properly remunerated student representatives both in recruitment of new students and hiring of staff.

Hosting diversity

This section looks into the practices, pedagogies, support systems and structures in place for hosting the diversity of student groups, guest teachers, and staff. Institutions that recruit and hire diversity need to establish structures to host it. Engaging with diversity requires acknowledging and giving space to different cultural archives, giving them sustained influence on institutional processes and on the learning experiences of the student groups.

We departed from the question: to what extent do the conditions of hosting enrich or impoverish diversity?

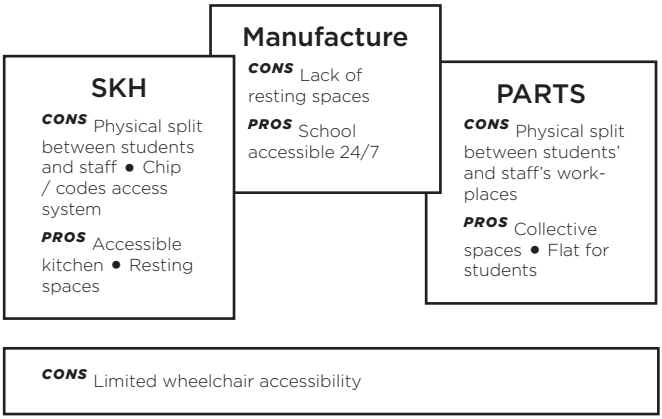
We have separated the question of hosting into three sub-categories:

→ **Buildings and spaces**
how do the institution's architecture, the ways the buildings are inhabited, their location and aesthetics help create an environment hospitable for diversity?

→ **Support**
who does the work of supporting diversity? what frames are given, and what form does the support take?

→ **Pedagogies and curriculum**
how do the workload, teaching styles, and practices of working with cultural difference help create an environment suitable for hosting diversity and the cultural archives of students and teachers?

Buildings and Spaces



The three institutions are in different neighbourhoods of each host city and while their buildings have different histories —mostly invisibilised— they share modern, industrial characteristics. In P.A.R.T.S. and SKH, students and guest teachers feel split from administrative and teaching staff, either because they work in a different building, or because they are mostly in their offices and do not cross students unless needed:

> **"Sometimes there's a bit of a separation between the administration and us tutors, [...] the buildings are separate. So sometimes it feels we're not always included in certain events, it's not clear whether we are staff or not"** (Teacher 2, P.A.R.T.S.).

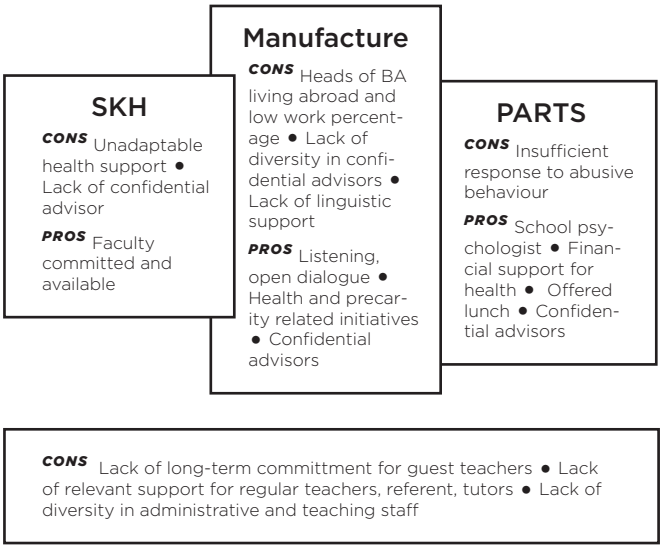
> **"For some students there's a big, big gap to just come up here through the Rosas building to talk to the staff about a simple, simple thing"** (Staff 2, P.A.R.T.S.).

At SKH, this feeling of separation and fragmentation is heightened by a system where chips and codes are needed to unlock doors. As one student describes: "this kind of like, doors policy it's quite restricting for example [...] There is something about these cold empty spaces with a lot of doors that even though you have access, it's not easy to access" (Student 27, SKH). In at least one case, a racialised staff member has encountered a situation where they had to prove their credentials when a chip did not work. This illustrates the stress that racialised staff and students experience in the institution when security policies creates conditions for the reproduction of discriminatory practices. The SKH building also has its strengths: it is surrounded by nature, it has an accessible kitchen, and quiet rooms for resting during the day.

The physical separation of the buildings at P.A.R.T.S. is countered by a shared canteen where students and staff meet, even if they tend to sit separately within it. P.A.R.T.S. is also in the process of converting one of its buildings into student dorms, offering a cheaper solution for those who need it, and supporting students who suffer racial prejudice when trying to rent in the city. At the Manufacture, students tend to inhabit the building as their second home, as one student described: "The richness of la Manuf also comes from the fact that the school is open 24/7. To share such a big communal space, including the kitchen, allows you to meet people. It is the heart of the student body in a large sense" (Student 30, Manufacture).

The three institutions have non-gendered toilets and showers, as well as options for those who would like more privacy. Wheelchair accessibility is not guaranteed as of now, but all three institutions, in negotiation with respective landlords, are engaged in construction works that are expanding wheelchair access. Accessibility practice is underdeveloped, and the burden of advocacy falls to those who need it.

Support



Students of all three programmes name their peers as their primary source of support. Several gender non-conforming students and alumni recognise the Manufacture as the one place that allowed them to explore their own identities with freedom and support. Students from all three programmes also find support from friends and families when they are close by, from building networks outside the institution, and/or from peers with similar backgrounds. As a result, those who have no family and friends around, do not understand the local language and customs, and/or have no peers with a similar background are most likely to suffer from alienation and loneliness.

When questions and problems arise in the student community, students generally find teachers and staff available to listen and dialogue, even if the gap in age and experience can lead to a feeling that the dialogue is insufficient: "just the fact to have a space that is open for talking is a huge thing because in so many schools they don't even listen to the students. I remember my time here, I was like, 'Okay, they don't get it, but I can still see that they are trying to'" (Student 9, Manufacture). Time for exchange is nevertheless small, and insufficient dialogue often means that diversity issues are left unresolved. Next to that, a tension appears between the students' simultaneous need for guidance and for spaces to exercise autonomy. When does institutional guidance appear as the response to a need expressed by the students? And when does it appear as a desire for

control? We observed a difference between guidance that arises from listening and dialogue, and guidance that aims at preserving the status quo.

All three institutions have regular teachers and staff that have a more or less recognised role of supporting the students through their years of study. The names of the roles vary — 'tutors' at P.A.R.T.S. and 'referent teacher' at the Manufacture, for instance— but their roles are similar: regular teaching, observing the students at work in different classes, and supporting them through their trajectory with different dialogue formats. At P.A.R.T.S., two tutors employed at 50% each take up this role, and the students are overall very appreciative of their work. The challenges stem from them having a double role of support and evaluation, which sometimes leads students to feel policed by them:

> **Even if I know that she means the best, I felt that [the tutor] would not notice when I was there, but she would notice when I was not there. […] When I would be missing one [lesson], she would be there to police. I don't want to call her out or anything, but I felt something like, "why would you only notice the negative things when I feel like I'm pushing myself in dance classes and everything?"** (Student 2, P.A.R.T.S.).

Next to that, both tutors share a similar positionality: they have similar dance backgrounds, come from Northern Europe and North America, are cis-gendered and White, which potentially shields them from experiences of minority-related stress. Their connection with some students can be therefore compromised, as one student described:

> **There could be cases where you cannot feel comfortable with either of the two tutors. Then what do you, who do you talk to? I think maybe there should be more possibilities for the tutors and also different points of view, because what we have now is quite Western based and their backgrounds are also somehow Western based** (Student 22, P.A.R.T.S.).

Next to representation of minoritised groups in such positions, intercultural skills help to make bridges. At the Manufacture, like the tutors of P.A.R.T.S., the informal role of a referent teacher exists. Next to teaching regularly, the referent teacher has a package of hours available to see the students at work and dialogue with them. This role is particularly important given that both current co-heads of the BA programme live abroad. While the referent teacher is highly appreciated, the insecurity of her job position and relatively low work percentage are seen as obstacles to her work. A further challenge is the low work percentage of the heads of department, leading to increased fragmentation.

At SKH, this accompanying work is mainly assumed by the head of the programme - employed at 100% - and one staff teacher, both very appreciated by the students. Tutors, referent teachers, heads of programme and staff teachers that take up this work of following and supporting the students must deal daily with the complexities linked to the work of diversity and all report a desire for more tools, training, and guidance. As the current head of the SKH dance BA notes, there is a feeling of over-complexity and lack of support echoed by other heads of department:

> **I'm not really educated to do this. […] I am like a psychologist, a counsellor, a mentor, an authority, a dance teacher sometimes. And I'm not educated in any of those things. So, there's the feeling that I'm doing the best I can, but I'm pretty sure that it could be a lot better** (Head of dance BA, SKH).

Furthermore, in all three institutions, the lack of diversity in teaching and administrative staff is strongly felt by the student community. In the case of the tutors and referent teachers, we note that this work of care is almost always assigned to women, reproducing traditional gender roles.

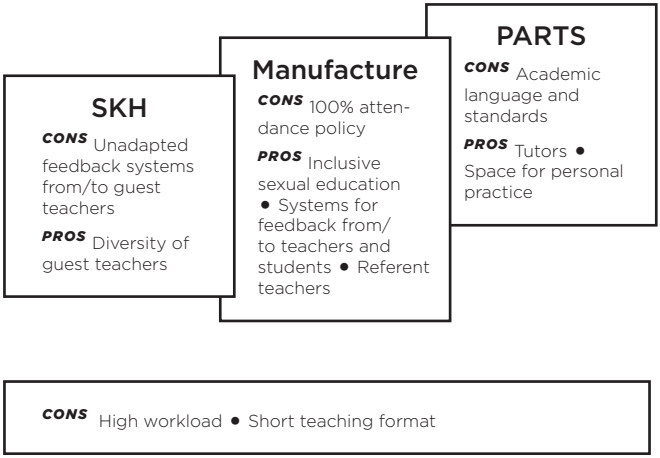
Next to this regular support, students also receive different types of support from the institutions. P.A.R.T.S. has hired a psychologist, provides financial support for health needs, and a macrobiotic daily lunch - which some students do not adapt to, while others greatly appreciate. At the Manufacture, the students have access to a nurse, nutrition classes, and sexual education that embraces diversity in gender expression and sexual orientation. These and other types of support recognise and soften the precarity of student life that is unevenly distributed in the student communities.

The emphasis on embodied experience in dance training uniquely heightens students' vulnerability to situations of physical and sexual abuse compared to other (arts) educational settings, making it even more critical to address such situations with rigour and care. As reported in a 2019 study about misconduct in the cultural sector of Flanders and Brussels in which P.A.R.T.S. is embedded: "Transgressive behaviour is most common in the dance sector, with half of the men and women working in this sector reporting having experienced transgressive behaviour in the past year" (Willekens et. al 2019, 25, our translation). While abuse can take many forms, artistic settings can create insidious situations where abuse is masked by a discourse of artistic transgression, "condoned as artistic freedom and justified in the name of art" (Marinus and Van Assche 2025, 7). This creates confusion between artistic transgression and abusive behaviour, hindering the possibilities to properly address instances of abuse when they arise. However, Marinus and Van Assche highlight that "testing

boundaries on an aesthetical level does not automatically go hand in hand with crossing boundaries on an ethical level" (2025, 7).

The creation of protocols and the addition of confidential advisors have overall helped institutions to better deal with questions of abuse. At both P.A.R.T.S. and the Manufacture, confidential advisors are available to hear the students and are trained to deal with issues of harassment and discrimination. The lack of under-represented groups in the position of external advisor was noted by students and staff as a challenge for hosting diversity at the Manufacture. As one of the confidential advisors mentions: "Since I am a guy in his forties and was the only person in this function, questions of gender were raised. Two other confidants [cis women] have joined us. This leads into a larger call to open up the diversity of trusted persons" (Interview external advisor, Manufacture). However, even with such systems in place, abuse is not always properly dealt with, calling for continuous dialogue and transparency. During our empirical research, we observed at P.A.R.T.S that although certain mechanisms are in place, the institution's awareness and know-how in response to sexual harassment are still lacking. This has led to situations where these measures are not being properly put into practice.

Pedagogies and Curriculum



The design of the programmes mirror market-based values, training students to develop efficiency, speed, and adaptability. For example, the Statement of Intent for the Manufacture's dance BA declares the will to foster a "movement technique which gives access to the body's full potential and enables the dancer to adapt to all sorts of environments by showing and developing responsibility and creativity" (Hauert and Laurent 2014, 5). This body, trained for being hyper adaptable and well versed in different styles is in line with what Susan Leigh Foster has named 'hired bodies', where dancers are encouraged to "train in several existing techniques without adopting the aesthetic vision of any" (Foster 1992). Highly adaptable bodies neutralise previously inscribed knowledges and patterns to become available for choreographic inscription. This leads to programmes with relatively quick changes in teachers, and workshops increasing the speed and intensity at which students are expected to process their education.

Students and teachers of the three dance BA programmes note that the curriculum, based primarily on face-to-face collective teaching, is densely scheduled. These charged and ever-changing programmes leave students in a state of constant exhaustion, as different students describe:

> **"We spend so much time here, it's crazy"** (Student 30, Manufacture).

> **"Just having an almost constant sense of exhaustion, actually. And not knowing how to address it"** (Student 4, SKH).

> **"After a full day of school, I never actually have the energy to practice the things I enjoy. So then sometimes I don't feel a lot of joy about the act of dancing, because a lot of the dancing I do is not the type of dancing I fully enjoy"** (Student 28, P.A.R.T.S.).

P.A.R.T.S. and SKH have established an 80% attendance policy, while the Manufacture has a 100% attendance policy. Although there is some flexibility within each system concerning how it is applied, the policies themselves —especially at the Manufacture— create a very high pressure in such charged and relentless programmes. There is considerable precarity in the student community, exacerbated by the high cost of housing and food. This is particularly true for students in Lausanne and Stockholm. The cost of living also tends to be higher for immigrant students, as they often must pay extra taxes and administrative procedures. Therefore, these intense programmes are lived differently by individuals: those without financial means who have to work on the side to make ends meet, those for whom the curriculum is distant from their own dance and general culture, and/or those who do not speak the local languages (and the working languages of each institution), find it most challenging. "It is hard to be here 40h a week, plus the reading, plus a side job… When do you sleep? When do you do anything else with your life?" (Student 17, SKH). Moreover, these extra difficulties can go unrecognised by fellow students or by teachers and staff, creating tensions within the community.

Furthermore, recruiting students internationally brings with it a set of questions, central to DDE, regarding the relations between the dominant European culture of dance and the dance cultures of the students that come from outside of it: are international students and those from marginalised dance traditions being invited to develop from their own dance cultures, or to be educated and integrated into the dominant culture? Will they be supported after graduation to remain in the dance scene for which they are being prepared? If not, is this made sufficiently clear to them from the outset? If they return home, will they import a Eurocentric understanding of dance to their home countries? Our findings show that these programmes need to do more to avoid (inadvertently) reproducing logics of cultural extractivism and colonisation when they choose to recruit internationally.

Students who come from different dance traditions often feel that their different background was an important factor in being accepted during the audition process, but which finds little space to flourish within the curriculum. Especially at P.A.R.T.S. and Manufacture, students often feel that the programme expects them to erase what they knew before to learn dance principles presented, often implicitly, as 'the truth'. This unspoken implication is perceived as even more violent precisely because it is not said aloud but expressed in other ways that dismiss the principles of other dance backgrounds as unimportant, praising

the principles of Contemporary Dance instead. This is clearly described by a student:

> **I find what is insidious about Contemporary Dance scores is that they claim to be open and to have no shape and to have no form, when in actual practicality, they very much do. […] which is very hard, because there is something also that the school expects me to do, which is to bring my background into the work, as if it's easy to do, it's not easy at all when you can sense that the implication is that 'you do it like us, but with your flavour, but not too much' […] I can look around, and I can be open, and I can encounter different things. It doesn't mean that, in order to do that, I have to let go of everything I have** (Student 14, Manufacture).

This creates a dynamic which reproduces the logic of cultural extractivism, where backgrounds other than the one aligned with the Euro-US experimental stage dance tradition of Contemporary Dance must be left aside or transformed to comply with the dominant logic during the studies. Paraphrasing Rosa (2024, 63), the eye-catching particularity that gets students selected at the audition functions as an unrefined resource to extract, while the training received in Western traditions of movement functions as the production process of a manufactured cultural good. As a teacher puts it:

> **I'm just looking at the system of bringing people from outside. It's the same colonial process. You go to another country, you extract minerals, you extract things. Art, you extract things and bring them to the museums in Europe. […] I think the institutional system is acting exactly in the same colonial manner, bringing the knowledge and individuals from somewhere else. […] Bring things to other countries, so people in other countries don't have to go from their countries to get education in Europe. So it's happening somewhere else. But if you do that, then you have to do it also with exchange of knowledge between the knowledge that is there and the knowledge that is brought here. Not just bringing this knowledge over there, because that would be what the missionary with Cristobal Colon did in South America** (Teacher 8, SKH).

The same risk of reproducing a colonial logic of expansion of the European model exists when students with non-Western cultural archives are brought into these programmes to educate them in the dominant culture of dance, knowing that they will go back to their countries of origin after graduation. The risks of cultural extractivism and cultural colonisation can be mitigated by actively including the students' cultural archives into the pedagogical practices. Students highly appreciate the rare moments of autonomy and lateral learning in the dance BA programmes, where they can take charge of their own

learning processes, share their knowledge and explore with each other horizontally. These moments are often short, irregular, and not given priority.

All three dance BA programmes work primarily with guest teachers, invited for workshops lasting usually from one to five weeks. This short format with teachers that students often encounter only once throughout their studies creates extra pressure for teachers and students; the work of getting to know each other and establishing common ground is often rushed. As one student noted, when teachers come "for one week or less, the time feels really precious to them. Sometimes they would say 'I only have you for so short, is it okay, if we don't have a break? Is it okay if we go over time?' This builds up" (Student 11, SKH). The lack of time for establishing common ground is particularly felt by students with cultural archives that go unaddressed by the dance BA programmes, and whose positionality are more distant from the dominant ones. This can lead to absenteeism, which creates further tensions with the programme heads and staff.

Next to that, these ever-changing programmes hinder the possibility of creating a teaching community, where values and pedagogical approaches could be shared. A teaching community could help create coherence and consistency in the programmes, undoing a sense of fragmentation present in all three institutions. This community could be created without it being reduced to a small staff of hired teachers. It could be instead about securing more continuity and community for the teachers that teach regularly. While all three dance BA programmes have a feedback system in place from teachers to students and vice versa, these are not always well implemented. In the case of SKH, they are formalised in ways that lack dialogue and quality time. An example of good practice comes from the Manufacture, where the last day of a teaching block is dedicated for the feedback from teachers to students, individually and as a group. At the end of the semester, students also provide feedback about each teacher and about the course to the programme heads.

For the students of all three programmes, there is a feeling that they are isolated from the world, studying in a bubble. All three institutions lack connection to other student groups, alumni, departments, and the city at large. For international students, the world of the institution becomes the only world they are being shown, heightening the feeling that there is only one single path after graduation. Having more than one dance BA group running at the same time enhances the sense of being part of a larger community with different possible futures. All efforts to move beyond the institutional bubble —such as collaborating with other institutions, student groups, alumni, or having professionals join the classes, among others— are highly appreciated by students and help them connect to other experiences and realities.

→ Recommendations concerning hosting

→ **Position and humble the programmes**
Explore the history and positionality of the dance practices taught. Locate the programmes in their respective contexts and discuss the colonial histories of the countries in which the programmes are located. While Belgium's colonial regime in the Congo is understood as the most violent and genocidal example in the history of European expansionism (Prashad 2022), colonialism can take many forms: Switzerland is recognised as a paradigmatic example of "colonialism without colonies" (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015); and in Sweden "colonialism also encompasses a range of more ambiguous if undeniably asymmetrical power relations between the Swedish and the Saami, or the Swedish and the forest Finns" (Horning, 2013). These colonial histories have shaped the economic and cultural context in which P.A.R.T.S., the Manufacture and SKH currently develop their dance BA programmes.

→ **Move towards equity and plurality**
Recognise that we start the work of diversity and social justice from unequal grounds, as each person comes from a different place and has a different cultural archive and positionality. The starting point is not equality, but plurality in an unequal world. Acknowledge and honour the different cultural archives that students bring into these shared spaces, avoiding logics of fetishisation, exoticisation, or erasure. Pay attention simultaneously to the oppressive logics that separate us into categories and hierarchies, as well as the resistant logics that open space for self and community-based understandings and experiences: what Maria Lugones named 'double vision' (Lugones 2003).

→ **Host interculturality**
When hosting diverse student and teaching communities, focus the pedagogical practices on interculturality, noting pre-existing power relations between peoples and cultures. When hosting peoples and knowledges that have been traditionally excluded from or fetishised by Western curricula, approach these knowledges with care and in dialogue, practicing interculturality instead of cultural appropriation. Include classes that thematise and give space to different conceptions of art, dance, the body, and culture in general. Process and acknowledge tensions and ruptures in the work towards diversity.

→ **Support guest teachers**
Pay special attention to the onboarding and offboarding procedures for guest teachers. Make sure they have thorough knowledge of the programme, the student group, the codes of conduct, and the expectations towards their teaching. Concerning harassment and power abuse, communicate clear guidelines and organise discussions. Teachers must take responsibility and have support for creating a healthy teaching environment, while students must learn to identify their limits when engaging with transgressive practices. Include in the curriculum sturdy, regular, and transparent systems for evaluations and feedback with formats adapted to dance education. Create space for community building among teachers, including guest teachers. Seek formats that give longer-term stability for guest teachers, for example, by having them follow the process of one student group throughout the three-year programme.

→ **Strengthen key hosting positions**
We have identified people in these institutions that hold key positions regarding the hosting of diversity: they are at times tutors, referent teachers, regular teachers, or heads of programmes. It is crucial that these people have clarity in their roles and access to stable positions, develop peer-to-peer exchange and intercultural skills, and receive adequate training and support for dealing with diversity and social justice. Recognise that most people in these roles are cis women, and how that relates to patriarchy; seek strategies to create more gender balance in this regard. Setting up a context for support and discussion of diversity practices across institutions —a Diversity Unit— with people in key hosting positions as well as external supervisors could help move in this direction and could also mitigate the risk of institutional fragmentation.

→ **Enact codes of conduct regarding abusive behaviour**
Institutional mechanisms to deal with situations of sexual harassment are necessary and helpful, but they are insufficient. Create clear, open and safer spaces for addressing abuse-related topics, and employ external confidants with intercultural skills. Harassment and discrimination are related to broader societal issues and thus require engaging with how higher education interacts with the dance ecosystems they contribute to and learn from in order to enact the cultural transformation needed to be able to properly address them.

→ **Co-curate the curriculum**
Seek formats that allow for the participation of plural voices in the design of the curriculum, including those of the students. Concentrating the curriculum design in the hands of a few is an impoverishing format for the promotion of diversity. When students and staff bring up important topics, acknowledge and cite their contributions.

→ **Organise regular lateral learning**
To allow for the embodied cultural archives of the students to be an integral part of the programmes, organise regular moments for lateral learning where students are given time and space to share their dance with their peers and teachers. Invite alumni to help create and facilitate such spaces. An example of a good practice comes from the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in Amsterdam, where every Friday afternoon is dedicated to student-led initiatives, organised by a rotating curatorial team.

Contributing to the dance field and society

In this final section of our comparative analysis, we look at how these programmes and institutions are helping enrich or impoverish diversity in the dance scenes and society they help shape.

We departed from the question: to what extent do dance BA programmes contribute to enriching or impoverishing diversity in the dance scene and society?

We have separated the question of contribution into four sub-categories:

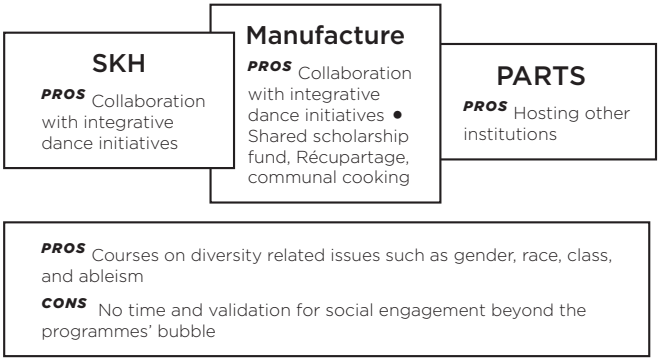
- → **Curriculum beyond-the-bubble**
  how do the programmes' curricula include questions of diversity and connect to broad societal questions?

- → **Autonomy and individuality**
  how is autonomy defined and practiced in these programmes?

- → **Reaching out to the city**
  what kinds of links and outreach initiatives are in place, and how are they helping or hindering diversity?

- → **After studies**
  what kind of professional scene are the students steered towards, and what kind of support do they receive after finishing their studies?

Curriculum beyond-the-bubble



We noted that the three dance BA programmes have been, in different ways, adapting the curriculum to include diversity-related courses and conferences. We could cite as examples: the university-wide series of lectures called 'Lectures and Conversations about Racism and Resistance' at SKH; different classes on issues of diversity and decoloniality organised by P.A.R.T.S.; and the course on Race, Gender, and Class by Fabi Barba, initiated at the Manufacture and occasionally present in the other institutions. All programmes engage dance artists and practitioners from other fields to animate workshops and hold conferences on issues of gender, race, class, decolonial practice, intersectionality, and, less regularly, ableism. Many dance artists and thinkers from the Global South come into the programmes as guest teachers.

In the three institutions there are collaborations with integrative dance companies and projects from the freelance dance scene. For example, SKH hosts a freestyle and street dance organisation, P.A.R.T.S. hosts Platform K, an inclusive dance company for dancers with disabilities, and the Manufacture organises joint workshops with organisations working with dancers with disabilities. While these are undoubtedly good practices that bring diversity into the institutions, they are only the beginning of a process that should lead to the more consistent engagement with students and dance artists with disabilities. Special and continuous attention should be present to avoid reproducing a charity model of disability in which people with disabilities are seen as victims that need assistance from able-bodied people, rather than seeing disability as a socially constructed phenomenon that requires advocacy for societal change (Retief and Letšosa, 2018).

Despite these numerous and varied initiatives, there is a sense of irregularity and fragmentation that hinders the continuity that diversity practice needs. The

coordinator of P.A.R.T.S. reflects on how the simple fact of bringing a diverse group of students together calls for a practice of listening, discussing, and learning together:

> **I remember that we had a generation of students where there were really high tensions within the group. And at some point when we were trying to talk with them and solve them, a remark that came from some of the students was 'you just put us together, and we just have to deal with it, and you have not taught us or given us any tools how to do that'. [...] And I must say that also, we don't always know how to deal with it. And that's a learning process** (Interview coordinator, P.A.R.T.S.).

A similar call for continuity of diversity practices to better host the diversity of the student community can also be heard at the Manufacture:

> **The thing about race and racial issues [...] after Fabi [Barba] comes to give the workshop [on gender, race, and class] it moves everything around. [...] It's great that we talk about this kind of stuff, but somehow it's a bit short. It shakes everything. [...] The two or three weeks after Fabi leaves, the school is different, especially in the dance department. Some people are really dark, suddenly they are willing, you know, to build a revolution** (Staff 3, Manufacture).

When diversity practices are not given a place in the institutional structure, the labour of caring for diverse students falls on those who are perceived as being able to help, and is often unrecognised and unpaid, as the testimony of a teacher from SKH exemplifies:

> **I think that it's really complicated to be a student of colour in SKH, to be a non-White student here. I would say that my students who have chronic illness who have been here, my students who have health issues, and then the students who are Black and Brown, almost all of them have come and spoke to me privately, after knowing what I'm working on, and asked me to help them troubleshoot some basic stuff around racism, stuff around ableism that they're encountering** (Teacher 4, SKH).

Without continuous guided practice, students can be left on their own to deal with important and complex questions that diversity and social justice raise. Different from a humanities or science setting, where students spend most of their time studying and preparing for classes at their own pace, these dance BA programmes are primarily based on full-time face-to-face learning, leaving the students no time and energy to engage with extracurricular questions that are

dear to them. The engagement of young people with societal questions should be given space, be cherished, supported and stimulated.

A paradox is noted whereby questions of diversity and social justice are given some —albeit little— space in the curriculum, but the programmes are not prepared to cope with the demands for institutional change that inevitably follow. To different degrees, all three programmes present a lack of connection between theoretical courses that promote critical thinking and dance practices that put the body in the foreground, which often leaves students feeling frustrated and confused. During our fieldwork weeks in these institutions, they were still dealing with the aftermath of global initiatives such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, and they were still involved with discussions about the ongoing genocide "perpetrated by the State of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, specifically in the Gaza Strip, since 7 October 2023" (Albanese 2024, p. 2). Despite the generalised idea of the arts as autonomous spaces to imagine and create a different world, when global politics are acknowledged within these institutions, it becomes clear that they are far from being politically independent of the state, even in programmes centred on artistic practices:

> **After the 7th of October, a lot of students were very engaged in manifestations and of course, the students wanted the school to put a flag —and I think they did put a flag— or to position themselves. But because of Switzerland and because of the politics and because of how Manufacture is able to survive, to be —I don't know where the money comes from but— the school could not. So on one side, you are doing a programme where you are engaged and pushing people to say what they want, and to take responsibility. But then, in certain cases, when they do, like in politics, they realise that there are contexts that limit how outspoken you can be** (Teacher 2, Manufacture).

> **I think it's important also to look at the position of SKH politically, because now there has been this conflict with Palestine, and SKH has not been able to pronounce anything, anything. Why? How come that there can be this silence? And when they said something on their home page, they said that they cannot take a different stand than the one the government is taking, and for an art institution like a space of art I feel this is super problematic. […] I just think it's super needed to question that** (Student 3, SKH).

> **After the whole Palestine situation, it's very good because they wanted to have a meeting to also let us know. Because maybe some people really don't know about the situation, don't know about this history, but they saw it in everyone's social media. But still we don't put words on it, it's like "Do you want to know about the Middle East situation?"**

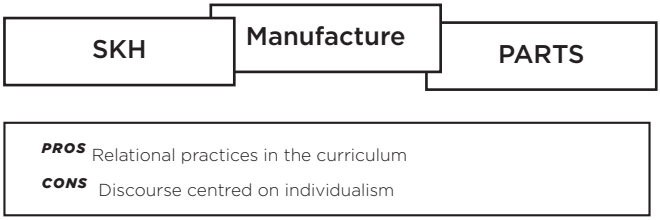
> **and I'm feeling a bit… I don't know, I feel like we are citizens, and we have phones, and we have so much knowledge about what is happening, so we are allowed to say words. We are allowed to use the term "shooting," to use the term "Israel," "Palestine"** (Student 19, P.A.R.T.S.).

At the Manufacture, pro-Palestine student-led political activism was met with much resistance. A teacher recalls that, after October 7th happened, many students "felt the need to be vocal, to participate, to strike, and that was quite repressed, all that. It was quite painful. I was there, and it was quite painful to see that the students were not supported" (Teacher 6, Manufacture). As this teacher remembers it, when students tried to hang signs and banners on the walls, they were asked to remove them. When they tried to bake cakes to sell them and send the money to pro-Palestinian organisations, the direction responded with a general attitude of 'Okay, now go back to school', dismissing the time and energy that students were putting into these small gestures of solidarity: "I think for them, it was quite traumatic" (Teacher 6, Manufacture). At SKH, something similar happened following a joint student-staff initiative:

> **The first response to our open letter from the SKH board or the institution was that we cannot claim SKH in our open letter. They basically said "You are not SKH". And I instantly exploded like, "I am. Truly, I am. Like, I'm one part, but I definitely am that one part of SKH". And then not being able to say that, it's… that's why we had to change our group's name from "SKH for Palestine", to "Action for Palestine SKH". That we had to kind of manoeuvre around the policies that the institution was implementing** (Student 28, SKH).

This raises the question of whether the current frameworks proposed by these institutions consider structural inequalities and relations of power and are open to the critical thinking they promote in their programmes. Presently, the institutions mostly function as barriers to social engagement through an overloaded programme, no space for autonomy, and, in some cases, dismissal of questions and demands from the student community.

Autonomy and individuality



A central characteristic observed in the dance BA programmes researched is a demand for students to become autonomous and to develop an individual artistic identity:

> **Here at Manuf, there's a big pull towards autonomy and autonomous work. And even before entering, there was a big accent on this. They were kind of stressing this point also. And I know for myself I tended to feel quite alone at some points last year** (Student 30, Manufacture).

> **I feel a lot the expectation of having to build an individual practice or individual pathway through this whole time here. An individual way of thinking as well, individual points of interest, that somehow relate to what we do here. [...] But I feel like it's very individualistic, and somehow through all these different things that we do here, we still need to... there is this implicit expectation of us extracting some kind of individual meaning for it, that we then enhance** (Student 2, P.A.R.T.S.).

> **I feel we are expected to engage in the work we're doing... but to find our individual ways within it too. [...] For example, with this course we're doing now with the subject 'Specialisation', we're all expected to engage in it, but we're also very encouraged to do very different things** (Student 29, SKH).

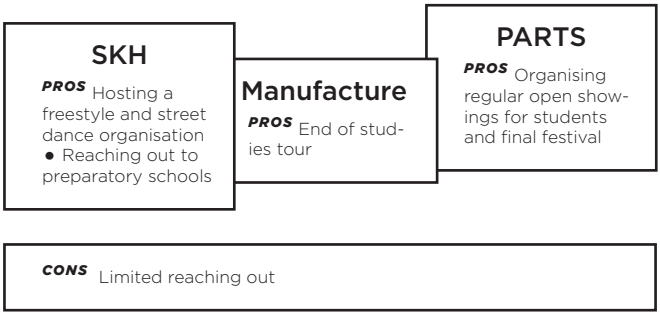
Choreographer Karen Schaffer coined the term 'flexible performativity' to refer to what is consistently asked of her as a professional performer of Contemporary Dance. The notion of flexible performativity encompasses several characteristics that have become requisite for those appearing in Contemporary Dance and performance work, such as 'hyperindividualism', the presentation of deeply personal, unique and highly charismatic personalities on stage, and 'autodramaturgy', the ability to adapt to different performative situations and audiences (Van Assche and Schaffer 2023, 204). The movement towards autonomy and individuality observed at these three institutions, combined with the wide variety of bodily practices in their academic offer, resonates with these

characteristics. The model of professional dancer formed at these dance programmes is therefore that of a critical, empowered artist, but it is also fully in line with market trends in the Contemporary Dance field, as flexible performativity is both a trait of a Contemporary Dance culture and a set of skills required by an artistic labour market.

The problem with this model of professional dancer is that each student is expected to affirm itself as unique, self-made, disconnected from others, from history and positionality. This expectation might not necessarily come from the way institutional authorities communicate their understanding of autonomy, but from Western society, where autonomy is often understood as an individual effort. There might be assumptions working in the world that permeate these institutions; not being able to fully confront those assumptions could lead the dance programmes, unwillingly and unknowingly, to reproduce those assumptions. When autonomy is understood as an individual effort, students can feel isolated and lonely. Yet, dance education is a good place to confront the perceived dichotomy between the individual and the collective: at these dance BA programmes, almost all workshops are collective exercises, and even when students are asked to work towards a solo, they actively participate in each other's processes, sharing studios, observing, and giving feedback. While there is an apparent contradiction between the valuing of the individual and the high demand of collective work in these programmes, the personal and the communal are not separable. This point of tension in these institutions could be generative, and it could be a way of questioning and challenging societal assumptions of individuality.

From a decolonial perspective, self-sufficient individuality is a fiction: we are always already in relation to Earth, to those what precede us and those around us. We are always dancing with others, even when we dance alone. Within the dance BA programmes, we observed a wavering between different understandings and practices: a modern, market-oriented discourse of individuality that pushes students towards uniqueness and authorship; and relational dance practices that enable the awareness that we are relational beings, always already in relation to others. While dance-as-practice tends to be rooted in interpersonal relations, embodied knowledge and oral histories, the field of Contemporary Dance seems to be primarily organised around dance-as-choreography, with a focus on the author, the textual/conceptual, the abstracted and represented, and the market-oriented. Within the programmes we studied, dance is explored and valued for itself, but it also operates under the weight of choreographic forms and their (Western) history. Nonetheless, dance involves much more than just choreography. Building from practices of relationality, sharing and honouring dance knowledge, and undoing the dominant discourse on individuality, could help these institutions to create more hospitable spaces, where plurality is rooted in the relation with others.

Reaching out to the city



The three dance BA programmes researched are in three different cities: Stockholm, Lausanne, and Brussels. Brussels is the capital of Belgium and of the European Union, is a bilingual city, and has a very high percentage of migrants. It is also one of the European centres for Contemporary Dance (Vanhaesebrouck and Vanhoutte 2024). Stockholm is an equally populated city, but its location in the far north of Europe, high prices, and a toughened immigration policy in the last decade makes it a less diverse city. DDE members involved with SKH observe that there are many artists, presenters and producers in the Stockholm area that would like the city to be recognised as a hub of Contemporary Dance. Lausanne is much smaller than the other two, and it is the third most expensive European city (Expatistan 2025). In terms of migration, it is the least diverse of the three, with most immigrants coming from other European countries. Together, Lausanne and Geneva form the centre for the independent scene of Contemporary Dance production in Switzerland.

All three dance BA programmes function largely with a sense of disconnection from the cities in which they are located. Most students know relatively little about the cities they are studying in, and their connection to the city through the curriculum is limited: "For example people are always asking me 'How is Brussels, what did you do there?' I'm like, 'I don't know, I live in P.A.R.T.S., I don't do anything'" (Student 14, P.A.R.T.S.). At P.A.R.T.S., the three-year BA programme currently culminates with a festival that students curate and organise, with the support from the staff. While the students are given autonomy to create this festival, if the programme is not connected to diversity-related initiatives in the city, it is difficult to envisage that they will manage to reach a more diverse audience.

Some initiatives have been put in place in the last years to improve the links between the programmes and their host cities, such as reaching out to preparatory schools and hosting other groups and initiatives with a social concern in the institutional buildings. SKH, for instance, works with local Contemporary Dance

stages, festivals, and galleries. At the Manufacture, students tour at the end of their studies establishing links with presentation spaces beyond Lausanne. P.A.R.T.S. and SKH also organise regular open showings, giving space for students to share with an audience what they have been working on beyond the official presentations that are part of the curriculum. These initiatives can help the programmes connect to a larger variety of potential students and to what is going on in the field and beyond it.

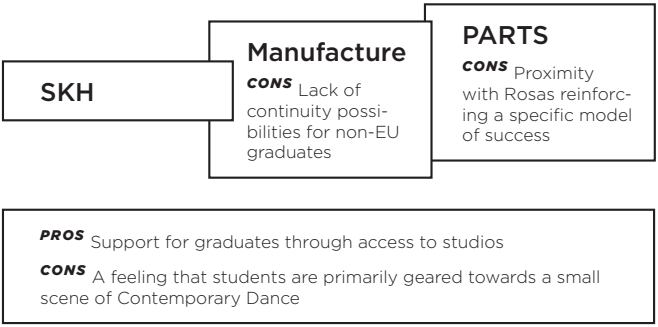
Despite the efforts to reach out, there is a lack of consistent presence in marginalised and highly diverse neighbourhoods which, combined with an image of an art field only accessible and turned towards the upper classes, results in a lack of local socioeconomic diversity, as students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds typically end up auditioning:

> **Until now, students from Belgium that we recruited were all white middle class. Yes. Whereas if you look around you in Brussels, to young people who are dancing, that's not the case. So we're clearly not reaching a more diverse Belgian community, on the level of the city or of Belgium in general** (Coordinator, P.A.R.T.S.).

> **Even though it was an international group, it was not a diverse group, you know, like in relation to class, for example. I felt like, class wise, they were kind of the same because everyone could afford to do this education and actually choose to do an art education, because that's not a given. It's not a secure future** (Former dance BA head, SKH).

> **The diversity that I think we overlook, but that students overlook too, is class diversity. I think we reproduce people who come from the same background, generally from the same socioeconomic background, and that, for me, is a major problem** (Director, Manufacture).

After studies



After graduation, all three dance BA programmes offer support in the form of free access to studios when available, and the staff remains available to talk, inform, and guide.

When it comes to the contribution of these programmes to the dance field and society, several questions are important: are students being geared towards the existing dance scene and the reproduction of existing models? Or are they geared towards questioning these models? Is the education directed to a larger field where what is learned in dance education can be later transposed to other fields of society? What is considered a successful trajectory after studies? Is it possible for graduates to pursue a career that offers some degree of sustainability? These programmes facilitate access to the field of Contemporary Dance through the introduction to an existing (albeit limited) network throughout the studies, as most teachers are active in the field and are potential future employers or colleagues. The downside of this model is that students experience a certain pressure to network during their studies. Next to that, these programmes work with such specific portals to the professional scene that accessing the dance world they link to without passing through a higher education in dance can be difficult.

In the case of P.A.R.T.S., the institution has a history of pushing students into predetermined career paths reinforcing a specific perspective on what professional success is in the dance field. That is apparent in a book celebrating 20 years of the institution (Van Rompay 2016), centred on graduates exclusively through the lens of the European Contemporary Dance scene. Next to that, the school shares the compound and artistic director with the internationally renowned dance company Rosas. In the past, students have been picked up from school to join the company, or auditions disguised as workshops were included in the curriculum. As Rosas has been recently referred to as a toxic

work environment by some of its dancers (De Somviele 2024), this heightens the need to the question this specific professional trajectory for P.A.R.T.S. graduates. This questioning has been initiated in the past years, seeking more independence from Rosas, and opening to other artistic trajectories - even if the pull of Rosas notoriety and market-based trajectories and discourses remain strong. At SKH, the current dance BA is faced with a shrinking freelance art scene following drastic cuts to the arts in Sweden, which puts into question for which field the students are being prepared. At the dance BA of the Manufacture, a discourse of openness towards different post-studies trajectories permeates the programme but is countered by a programme turned to the freelance dance scene and the valorisation, in the institution's newsletters, only of alumni that are successful in that scene. Next to that, alumni from outside the EU struggle to develop their careers in Europe after studies, especially at the Manufacture, as state restrictions are even higher in Switzerland. Such situations call for extra transparency concerning visa related difficulties after studies from the very start, and support from the institutions to facilitate access to the local scene.

→ Recommendations for Contribution

→ **Focus on social outreach**
As it stands, the three dance BA programmes researched gear students —through how they present themselves, the curriculum, and which professional trajectories they valorise— to the freelance European Contemporary Dance scene. We recommend revisiting this predetermined path and actively working towards opening to other trajectories, expanding the potential work field of the graduates and focusing on their capacity to bring about social and artistic change. When reaching out to people with disabilities, organisations engaged with disability, and to the diversity of the city in general, pay attention to structural inequalities that ground the different social realities, to avoid charitable models of exchange.

→ **Move towards relational autonomy**
The ideal model of professional dancer tends to be defined within these dance BA programmes in individualistic terms, within the paradigm of unique, self-made artists, disconnected from others, history, and positionality. We recommend recognising the current practices of relationality that already exist in these institutions and moving towards a relational definition of autonomy and artistic practice (rooted in positionality, awareness of the history of the dance forms they engage with and the broader sociopolitical context in which they are inscribed). Give enough space and support to the societal questions that students engage with. The

proposed course 'Dancing Across Difference', one of the project outputs of DDE, could be a concrete starting point.

Position institutional history and local context

Dance BA programmes tend to have a lot of power in shaping the local dance scenes. Next to positioning the dance cultures being taught, it is important to position the institutions in relation to the dance fields they are related to, and to the history of higher education. Acknowledge and position the institution regarding the local dance history.

→ **Valorise alumni trajectories**
Next to giving space within the curriculum for the development of skills and interests that broaden the meaning of what a 'successful' dance-artist may be, valorise trajectories other than the predetermined ones by publicly acknowledging alternative pathways and finding space for them within the curriculum.

→ **Studying horizontally, studying with**
Create collective study formats across student and staff communities, to bridge the perceived gaps between these groups and develop common languages and spaces for co-reflection. The proposed teacher/staff training 'Towards a Pluriversal Dance Education', one of the project outputs of DDE, could be a concrete starting point.

→ **Develop a Diversity Unit**
Aware that much can be learned across institutions, we advise creating an inter-institutional Diversity Unit staffed by representatives from each institution. In regularly timed meetings, the Diversity Unit members could exchange perspectives and support each other in implementing diversity-related policy for each institution.

Conclusion

We have analysed how the conditions of access, the hosting practices, and the contributions to the dance field and society of three European dance BA programmes, asking how they help to enrich or impoverish diversity and social justice. Regarding accessing dance higher education, we investigated the material costs and legal barriers, the audition formats, and the hiring practices. We have recommended opening auditions to the plurality of society, being transparent about diversity strengths and limitations of the programmes, seeking diversity at home and abroad, and including student representatives in recruitment and hiring processes.

Concerning the hosting of diversity, we observed the institutions' buildings and spaces, the support structures in place to host diversity, and the pedagogies and curriculum. We have recommended positioning and humbling the programmes, moving towards equity and plurality, focusing on hosting interculturality, supporting guest teachers, strengthening key hosting positions, enacting codes of conduct regarding abusive behaviour, co-curating the curriculum, and organising regular moments for lateral learning.

As for contributing to the dance field and society, we asked how the curriculum can reach beyond the programmes bubble, the relation between autonomy and individuality, how the programmes reach out to the city where they are located, and how these institutions relate to graduates after studies. We have recommended focusing on social outreach, moving towards a relational definition of autonomy and artistic practice, positioning the institutional history and local context, valorising diverse alumni trajectories, creating collective formats

for studying horizontally across student and staff communities, and creating an inter-institutional Diversity Unit to promote exchange and support in implementing diversity-related policy for each institution.

Contemporary Dance education

Overall, we highlight the need to question the relation between Contemporary Dance, as practiced and taught in Western and Northern Europe, and other regional manifestations of Contemporary Dance, as well as of other practices of dance. The relations between these different dance traditions are multiple and complex, and recognising their different histories and positions, leading to an investigation of the power relations between them, appears as a pre-condition for engaging in intercultural dialogue. We have asked ourselves what would need to be done to engage in a pluriversal practice of dance education —embracing the diversity of peoples and dance cultures while avoiding logics of erasure, appropriation or fetishisation— and how this would transform these programmes. Our findings show that the experience of students in these dance programmes can vastly differ, and it is often harder for those whose positionalities are more distant from the dominant ones. Given that the dominant dance form being taught is presented with little context, appearing as universally valid, the first step is to locate its history and position. Next to that, approaching non-Western and non-dominant practices and knowledges should be done with care and humility, to vividly understand that there are other valid ways of being, thinking, and dancing.

Our empirical research prompts us to believe that art education and artistic practice have enormous power to affect others and help transform the world. Dance foregrounds embodied practices, and practices of togetherness, and it has a lot to teach to other fields of knowledge as well as to diversity practice. Through its improvisational practices, dance opens to the unknown, to the unexpected. Diversity practice should be approached in the same manner, not with a rigid set of formats and structures, but rather departing from principles, and improvising solutions through ongoing dialogue. We think that dance higher education can help foster a more hospitable environment for the encounter of cultures in an unequal world and participate in forming dancing citizens[8] that are aware of both their own positionalities and the positionalities of the artistic practices they engage with. Dancing citizens that can engage

8 We follow Hannah Arendt (1973) and her critical understanding of citizenship, untying the notion of citizenship from belonging to specific nation-states which creates a dichotomy between those that belong and those that do not belong to states and therefore have no rights. Citizenship is understood here as the participation in political life among others beyond and independently of nation-states.

with different traditions of dance and of culture at large with awareness, curiosity, and respect to its different histories, positions, and to the underlying power relations. Dancing citizens that are attuned to relationality, aware that their capacity to be, to think, and to imagine is rooted in socio-historical positionality. Dancing citizens that understand that the contemporary cannot be separated from ancestral temporalities. Dancing citizens that can dance with each other without expecting or imposing, being knowledgeable about the stories that are dominant in their practices as well as the stories that have been silenced and made marginal.

We are painfully aware that activating even a fraction of the proposed recommendations is an enormous task that cannot be done all at once with limited time and resources. Tackling diversity could well put an extra strain on already overworked staff in dance higher education institutions. Yet, it is not necessarily about adding work, but about re-thinking priorities, being open to let go of frameworks and practices that do not actively work towards the hosting of diversity. We hope that this final report of DDE, as well as the course for students and the training for teachers and staff, can help give direction and ideas to institutions that are currently undergoing a process of self-questioning and transformation. The crucial question seems to be: how to transform these recommendations into sustained practices?

We recognise that not everyone has the same sense of urgency when it comes to diversity work. When only some people in the community are desperate for structural change, their behaviour and the language they use can come across as disruptive and violent. This, in turn, can lead others to dismiss the content of the critique because of its form. To prevent this unproductive dynamic from happening, we recommend creating safer spaces to live together and talk together. To become aware of our own blind spots, to question ourselves and our place in the world, and to engage in difficult conversations, we need to establish common ground from which genuine listening, dialogue, and transformation can emerge. Living in this world and moving towards social justice demands diversity to be treated as a practice, and we, dancers, know that a practice requires being consistently nurtured through time.

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