



Embedding diversity-responsive teaching in first-year higher education: A pilot training approach

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ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates that welcoming higher education institutions (HEIs) that value student differences are crucial for promoting student success, especially for ethnic minoritized, first-generation and/or low socioeconomic status (SES) students. Teachers are not always aware how their teaching practices either hinder or foster inclusion and how this is particularly relevant for students transitioning to higher education. This paper presents the theoretical framework and design principles underlying a staff training programme developed at KU Leuven (Belgium) to support teaching teams of first-year bachelor programmes.

Drawing on social and cultural psychology, sociology of education, and multicultural education research, the programme centers on the concept of cultural (mis)match: the systematic alignment of higher education institutions with white, middle-class, individualist norms that undermines the sense of belonging—and consequently the academic performance—of students socialized in interdependent cultural orientations. In response, the programme equips teaching and educational support staff with the theoretical grounding and practical tools needed to implement teaching practices that actively acknowledge, value, and integrate diverse cultural orientations into classroom practice.

The programme consists of three blended modules combining in-person workshops with an online platform, piloted across five STEM and Humanities programmes. Preliminary lessons from the pilot underscore i) the importance of dedicated, stand-alone content on socio-cultural mechanisms as a foundation for meaningful engagement with inclusive pedagogy; ii) the value of balancing shared theoretical grounding with discipline-specific peer exchange, supported by a co-teaching model that pairs pedagogical facilitation with DEI content expertise; and iii) the importance of differentiated, faculty-level implementation support to bridge individual learning gains and organizational change.

Keywords: initial professional training, pluralist teaching practices, cultural knowledge, psychological processes

Introduction

Despite increasing numbers, students from ethnic minoritized and lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, are still underrepresented in higher education institutions (HEIs) (e.g. Kruithof & Verhaeghe, 2024; Kottmann et al., 2019). Furthermore, those who are enrolled, typically face lower grades and rates of study progress, and more drop out, than their white middle class peers (e.g. Bunce et al., 2021). Student monitoring data at Flemish universities (including KU Leuven) point to the structural rather than individual

nature of these achievement gaps, demanding a systemic approach from HEIs to mitigate inequities (Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad, n.d.).

This contribution discusses the underpinning theoretical framework and design principles of a (piloted) staff training programme aimed at supporting teaching teams of first-year bachelor programmes at KU Leuven in developing diversity-responsive teaching practices. KU Leuven is a highly innovative university serving approximately 65,000 students, and employing more than 22,000 staff members across 15 faculties in 10 cities throughout Flanders, Belgium. The pilot project was driven by the institution's central services—KU Leuven Engage (diversity policy) and Teaching & Learning Service—in collaboration with researchers from KU Leuven's Center for Social and Cultural Psychology. We aim to inspire other HEIs to consider staff professionalization as a strategic pathway to increase knowledge and agency among institutional leaders, teaching staff, and educational developers in designing inclusive learning environments.

Framework

Our training programme integrates key insights from social and cultural psychology, the sociology of education, and multicultural education. At its core, we draw on evidence that i) both the curriculum and didactic principles in higher education tend to align with the frames of reference and socialization practices of white, ethnic majority, middle-class students; ii) this practice (often unconsciously) undermines students from ethnic minoritized or working class backgrounds' sense of belonging, which is a key psychological process for achievement, and iii) that pluralist approaches to education can counteract this.

Psychological processes that shape student experiences

To fully understand why students from marginalized groups in society often underperform in HEI, it is crucial to consider the psychological processes necessary for learning to take place. One of those prerequisites is that students can identify and connect with campus communities: Do they feel at home /that they belong? Empirical evidence robustly demonstrates that higher rates of belonging predict better educational outcomes over time (e.g. Korpershoek et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2023), however, opportunities for, and levels of belonging tend to be lower for students from (historically) marginalized communities (e.g. Gopalan & Brady, 2019), perhaps due to higher prevalence of cultural misunderstandings in education (De Leersnyder et al., 2022) or higher perceived discriminatory climates at school (Baysu et al., 2023). Lecturers of first-year bachelor's programmes are usually the first ones with whom students interact and are, therefore, particularly crucial for establishing belonging. One key lever, which begins before training didactical skills of these key actors, is therefore awareness of how their practices shape belonging, particularly in intercultural contexts.

Diversity at work in the classroom: Cultural (mis)match

One of the main factors jeopardizing belonging is the alignment of HEIs with white, middle class values and frames of reference, resulting in potential student-institution mismatches for ethnic minoritized and/or lower SES students (Bourdieu, 1974; Freire, 1970, 2017; Stephens et al., 2012). Indeed, HEIs' course content is often rooted in W.E.I.R.D (Western Industrialized, Educated, Rich and Democratic) (Henrich et al., 2010) perspectives and the power structures these embody, urging a de-colonization of the curriculum (see Shahjahan et al., 2022 for a review). Less tangible, is that the everyday educational practices of HEIs tend to

align with cultural norms and expectations common in white, majority, middle-class contexts: valuing personal achievement, self-sufficiency, and individual goal-setting (Stephens et al., 2012). Consequently, they promote and reward the particular ways of thinking, feeling, and engaging that are more common among students socialized in these contexts : considering the self as independent from others, reasoning analytically, being intrinsically motivated, and expressing emotions openly (e.g. Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mesquita, 2022; Nisbett et al., 2001). In practice, this means that lecturers may expect students to think aloud in discussion (which suits analytic but disrupts holistic thinking styles) (Kim, 2002), reward students driven by personal passion for the subject over those motivated by wanting to make their family proud (Liem et al., 2012), and misinterpret culturally shaped behaviours (such as avoiding eye contact) as signs of disengagement or disrespect (Grossman, 1990). While HEI norms, expectations and practices thus align with white middle class contexts of independence, they often instigate experiences of cultural mismatch for students socialized in many minoritized and/or working class contexts that emphasise an interdependent self, relatedness, joint decision-making, cooperation, and holistic reasoning. These experiences signal to students that HEI is ‘not a place for students like them’, which may undermine their belonging, increase perceptions of task difficulty and unfamiliarity, and hence, decrease performance (e.g. Goudeau et al., 2025). At the same time, and further undermining achievement, lecturers may develop lower expectations toward students who experience cultural mismatch, which is known to result in lower quality scaffolding of learning opportunities and feedback and/or in biased evaluations (Rubie-Davies, 2007; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Toward a pluralist, diversity-responsive teaching approach

To mitigate cultural mismatches, the focus should be on adapting institutional practices—not changing students—to welcome and reward more diverse ways of being and relating, getting motivated, and seeing the world (e.g. De Leersnyder et al., 2026b). The starting point of this process of change is to make HEIs and their lecturers aware of the cultured nature of their educational practices and the extent to which they embody independent cultural scripts in their classroom.

An extensive body of research in educational sciences and social psychology shows that such efforts to deliver ‘multicultural education’ (e.g. Banks, 1993), ‘culturally relevant pedagogy’ (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or to implement ‘pluralist school diversity models’ (Bardach et al., 2024) all enhance both equity and quality in education. Specific to HEI, and in contrast to colour-evasive approaches that ignore diversity, it has been found that pluralist approaches in which i) the institution acknowledges, values, and affirms cultural diversity in its communication and/or ii) teachers implement a decolonized curriculum and/or iii) teachers integrate practices that reward interdependence next to independence, elevate student belonging and achievement for all students and/or can close achievement gaps (Birnbaum et al., 2020; Stephens et al., 2012; De Leersnyder et al., 2022, 2026a) as these approaches foster belonging, enhance self-efficacy, reduce discrimination, and increase intercultural understanding in class.

Our pilot training was designed to equip teachers with practical tools and pedagogical strategies to implement, such a pluralist approaches. This includes examining whether course materials reflect students' diverse backgrounds and experiences, employing varied methods for engagement and collaboration, and explicitly communicating academic culture and expectations rather than assuming shared understanding. Key herein is a ‘culturally informed, not knowing’ stance (De Leersnyder, 2018; Mesquita, 2022) in which one is aware of one's own cultural assumptions and biases. This means cultivating a curious, inquiring

mindset that seeks to understand students' actual meanings rather than imposing interpretations based on the educator's own cultural frame of reference.

Design

As training has the most impact when it extends beyond a one-off initiative (Devine & Ash, 2022) and working towards inclusive education is a continuous process, this training programme targeted both teaching and educational support staff who shape the learning environment of first-year bachelor students.

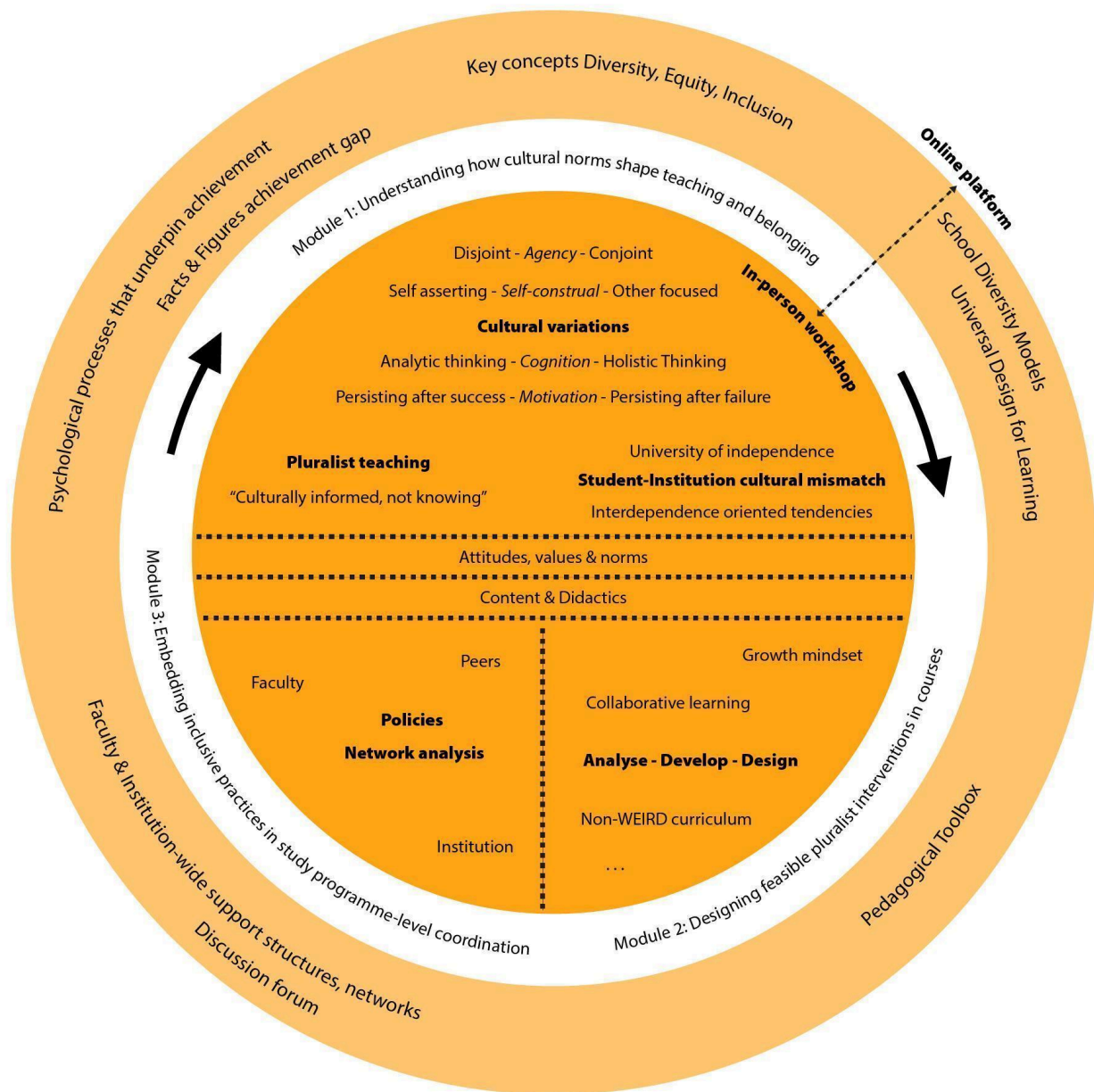
The programme consists of three modules in a blended format, combining in-person workshops with an online platform (i.e. Blackboard) featuring topical pages with video clips, examples, and additional scientific references for deeper exploration. The training was piloted across five study programmes in STEM and Humanities, involving voluntary participation by both teaching and educational support staff.

For each module participants could pick one of two parallel sessions, which resulted in heterogeneous groups of 18-32 teaching staff and 4-7 educational support staff per session across faculties.

Since leadership support is key for the successful implementation of DEI-efforts (LERU, 2019), we delivered a keynote for deans and study programme coordinators of each participating faculty prior to the training programme, addressing empirical evidence for the benefits of a pluralist approach, the underlying psychological mechanisms of educational disparities, and the training programme's general outline.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the three modules, illustrating their structure and the components of the theoretical framework addressed in each module. The next section discusses underlying design principles and first lessons learned.

Figure 1 Framework Diversity-Responsive Teaching staff training programme



Design principles and lessons learned

Explicit engagement with culture and socio-cultural diversity as a conceptual foundation

In line with research emphasising the cultured nature of academic environments (see above), meaningful training in inclusive pedagogy requires an explicit and sustained focus on socio-cultural mechanisms. Generic diversity frameworks or the diffusion of ethnic diversity related content across broader professional development initiatives, risk obscuring the specific ways in which cultural norms shape teaching practices,

student belonging, and academic success. Dedicated, stand-alone content on socio-cultural mechanisms is therefore a necessary precondition.

The programme's first module introduces participants to the theoretical framework. An online platform illustrates how different school diversity approaches either hinder or foster sense of belonging and subsequently widen or narrow achievement gaps. The subsequent in-person workshop guides participants in critically examining their own cultural frameworks, their students' cultures, and the cultural biases embedded in their teaching practices. Participants explore how cultural models inform pedagogical choices, for example by critically examining how a position-papers centre on individual performance rather than collective learning, favour self-assertion over other-focus, and reward analytic over holistic thinking.

Expanding the programme to additional diversity dimensions (e.g. gender, LGBTQIA+-identities, neurodivergence) would require care to preserve the central emphasis on socio-cultural dynamics.

Balancing theoretical grounding with peer exchange across disciplinaries and contexts

An institution-wide staff training programme must be adaptable across diverging pedagogical contexts, requiring shared language and common starting points while allowing for discipline- and programme-specific translation. The challenges experienced by teaching staff in STEM disciplines differ substantially from those in the Humanities, and practice-oriented teaching raises different questions than theoretical, lecture-based formats. To develop feasible classroom interventions during the programme, discipline-specific peer group exchange is favoured over cross-disciplinary groupings. Yet the literature on group learning cautions that small, homogeneous peer groups are susceptible to confirmation bias and group thinking.

An introductory theoretical session preceding peer exchange can challenge participants' existing frameworks and fuel more substantive discussion in subsequent practical sessions. This logic is reflected in the current programme's structure. Module 1 establishes a shared theoretical foundation, while Module 2 guides participants in translating these concepts into concrete, pluralist teaching practices. The online platform highlights specific approaches — such as collaborative learning and growth mindset strategies — that accommodate both independent and interdependent ways of being, thinking and getting motivated. The in-person workshop then supports participants in designing feasible interventions for their own context (Analyse, Develop, Design-cycle).

Moreover, a co-teaching model involving facilitators from complementary backgrounds (e.g. general educational developers, discipline-specific educational support staff, DEI experts) is a promising avenue to ensure that peer exchange is both well-facilitated and expertly guided. Instead of having a single coach managing group dynamics, this model pairs a pedagogical facilitator with a content expert who brings substantive knowledge of inclusive and diversity-responsive pedagogy. This allows facilitators to not only structure and guide the exchange, but to actively reflect on it, challenge assumptions, offer evidence-informed input, and redirect discussion where needed.

Differentiated, faculty-level implementation support

A recurring challenge in professional development is the gap between knowledge acquired in training and competency applied in practice. In addition, staff enter with varying levels of knowledge and preparedness

to invest time and resources. Blended learning offers clear benefits, including flexible learning paths and an online discussion forum that facilitates continued peer exchange.

The modular components serve as accessible reference resources, where participants can return to amid competing professional demands. In order to increase the implementation of classroom-ready strategies and sustained practice, various conditions are at play: extended timelines, managerial support for participation, alignment with faculty-level policy cycles, and performance review systems that signal institutional commitment to inclusive education. These conditions informed the design of the third module in particular.

The third in-person workshop frames inclusive education as a collective goal and shared responsibility across the study programme, faculty, and institution, stipulating actions like harmonising terminology to support knowledge integration and reduce cognitive overload, or communicating behavioural norms to students less familiar with academic culture. To bridge individual learning gains and broader organisational conditions, educational support staff occupy a particularly critical role. Targeted capacity-building in change management and implementation support are considered a meaningful lever to make sure that both HEIs and students can fully reap off the benefits of diversity staff training initiatives.

Biographies

Evelyn Morreel is a doctoral researcher at KU Leuven's Center for Social and Cultural Psychology under the supervision of Prof. De Leersnyder. Her PhD focuses on equitable teaching practices in HE and transforming educational contexts into inclusive learning environments. She conducted the evaluation and monitoring activities of the training.

Joyce Koeman is a Diversity Policy advisor at KU Leuven Engage, responsible for developing staff trainings on equity, diversity and inclusion. With colleagues of KU Leuven Teaching and Learning Services she co-developed and organized this pilot.

Jozefien De Leersnyder is Associate Research Professor at KU Leuven's Center for Social and Cultural Psychology. Her research focuses on understanding the interplay between culture, psyche, and thriving in diverse social environments, with particular emphasis on equitable education. She co-created content, instructed the first in-person workshop and supervised monitoring.

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