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# Diversity as the most valuable tool to make learning potential flourish

The University College Odisee is, with 17,000 students, the third largest university college in Flanders (Belgium). As a member of the 'Association Katholieke Universiteit Leuven' we offer bachelor study programmes on different campuses in Aalst, Brussels, Ghent and Sint-Niklaas. Odisee has a clear vision for the future, which came about after an intensive consultation process involving all staff, at all campuses. Our focus is on 'people', their talents and development. The student is our central focus point. Optimism drives us in everything we do. We trust each other, share experiences, knowledge and skills in open networks. Thinking, daring, doing, persevering and dreaming are our guiding motives. We have a clear strategy to transform that vision into practice. We take pride in our vision and have translated it into five key policy objectives to deliver our strategy in daily education practice. A thorough quality culture is essential to ensure its realisation.

There are five key policy objectives which are inextricably connected.

1. We offer state-of-the-art education. Together with internal and external stakeholders, we continuously evaluate and improve our training and service.
2. We anchor our courses in the field of work (and vice versa).
3. We build an open, innovative and prestigious educational community.
4. We want to develop and implement an integrated talent policy according to international recommendations.
5. We are preparing and shaping our educational community for super diversity.

Due to the major changes in the educational landscape and the expansion of higher education to the idea of education for all, these two last key policy objectives appear to be leverages to one another to grow towards an inclusive education community.

The student population in (Flemish) higher education should be a reflection of the people in the society (Pliner & Johnson, 2004). It is a social necessity to deal constructively with the super diversity of modern society, and with our different campuses in different major cities. In these major cities we speak more and more of 'super diversity'. There are several minority groups (e.g. Romanians, Albanians, North Africans, Spaniards and other populations), which brings together more social, economic, cultural and ethnic differences. We need to address this issue to overcome the challenges and to find connection with each other and the bigger society. Diversity policy then means, for our university college, recognising and accepting the unique qualities, talents of all students (and staff) to enable opportunities for fully developing the potential of students to enter the field of work successfully.

Students entering higher education take on a new role in life next to the different roles they already hold in other contexts, such as brother, son, scout leader, friend and so on. They are not just students on our courses, they are much more. In Odisee we started looking more holistically at the student, and we saw that a much wider learning environment unfolds, characterised by the student's unique learning needs, talents and personal qualities.

This unique composition of learning needs, talents and personal qualities for each student is translated educationally as their individual learning style and learning potential but often shows in student differences.

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Differences between students often cause difficulties in class management, group composition and sometimes create unwanted cultural barriers. Barriers such as having a negative image of students with a migration background, as well as lower estimates of academic performance for some students and doubting the study ethics of students with a diverse background.

Lack of understanding can sometimes make teaching more difficult or challenging.

Every day, we allow opportunities to perish due to differences between students and forget how to deploy diversity as the most valuable tool to make learning potential flourish. To grow towards inclusion, we need to align our educational environment and education practice to the learning needs and talents of each student in the diverse student population.

## Creating a strong learning environment

We are now creating a powerful learning environment for each student, where a broad basic understanding is the basis for an inclusive education community in which the learning environment is stimulated to make use of student differences.

To create this powerful learning environment we needed to install **three important pillars** (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2002).

**First of all, we are creating an inclusive culture** with inclusive values and standards, and an open climate where all students are welcome. All teachers, students and other personnel have to find fellowship in the concept of diversity - in our college this is defined as a broad spectrum from the mother with 5 children who wants to obtain a bachelor's degree, to the student with dyslexia, or the student who is multilingual because of another social cultural background. Within this pillar we focus on sensitising the entire staff and organising educational days on the theme of diversity.

During these educational days, we inspire the lecturers with success stories about student diversity and reflect on our own attitudes and students' attitudes towards students with a diverse background. In order follow up on the educational days, tailor made trajectories are made to further work on shared values and standards concerning student diversity.

**Secondly, universal design for learning.** We are building an inclusive education community by using inclusive strategies in practice following the principles of universal design for learning. By building our courses keeping in mind the unique strengths, talents and learning needs of each student, a very powerful learning environment can be created. In this second pillar we focus mainly on professionalising teachers to focus on talents. For example, we use a broader evaluation process, whereby students will become more and more owners of their learning process. The student then chooses, based on his talent, a particular evaluation format, for example, a presentation, written, or oral submission. This led to empowerment of students but also produced some stress about making the 'right choice'.

Using differences between students as a tool to increase engagement in classes is strong leverage for academic success.

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**Thirdly, our diversity policy.** We should not ignore the challenges of student diversity and must be open to dialogue. Talking together about barriers and seeking good practice are the first steps towards anchoring a solid diversity policy. Within the policy, we are installing a broad basic care for all students according to the principles of universal design and broad evaluation (CAST: About Universal Design for Learning, z.d.) as blueprints for further policy plans. In order to shape these plans, we created different expert cells, each of which explores and elaborates a theme. For example, there is a team of experts around the influx of minority groups in higher education; there is a cell around developing talent profiles for students and there is a cell around creating a powerful learning environment based on UDL. The managers of these cells come together in a steering group that then translates the work into an implementation strategy for practice by anchoring these themes into the policy plan. Conversely, the steering committee also determines which themes are on the agenda and will be elaborated. The interaction between the steering group and the expertise cells makes sure that there is a great deal of support for the different themes. This way, both bottom up and top down approaches are ensured in working on diversity policy.

**By focusing on these three key pillars,** we connect talent with diversity. Working on a talent-based approach makes it possible for us to take advantage of the unique differences between the students and thus to create a powerful learning environment for all. As metaphor we picture the idea of a boat. We are heading towards inclusion with the main compass being respect for difference with a focus on the talent base, we see talent as the boat that takes us along the way with universal design for learning as the wind in our sails.

For more information on our policy, please contact our diversity coordinator [elke.emmers@odisee.be](mailto:elke.emmers@odisee.be).

## References

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Elke Emmers is professor (Tenure) in Educational Studies at UHasselt, lecturer at KU Leuven and board member of EAPRIL. Previously, she was responsible for the expertise centre Inclusive Society (research coordinator) at UCLL and diversity coordinator at Odisee University College. Together with her growing research team, she studies inclusion, diversity and excellent learning environments according to the principles of UDL. Her work is spread across several scientific publications, as well as publications for educational professionals and books. Elke Emmers is regularly invited as a keynote speaker and is a regular guest at national and international conferences.

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