Using UDL to redesign education in response to diversity

Introduction

In a competitive higher education landscape and as a result of the changing social and demographic context, institutions can no longer afford to leave diversity on the margins of policy and practice. Diversity is currently explicitly addressed in almost all mission and vision statements of higher education institutions in Europe. However, the student population of these institutions still does not reflect the diversity present in society as a whole.

Although diversity in higher education is increasing, the access for many social groups is still too narrow and the dropout rate during the course of study is still too high. In Belgian higher education institutions the proportion of 18-20 year-olds has increased spectacularly over the past fifteen years (Agentschap voor Onderwijsdiensten, 2021; Cincinnato et al., 2020; Groenez, 2004). However, this does not automatically imply that all individuals or all social groups have equal opportunities to participate in higher education. On the contrary, research has shown that study performance and study progress of students are highly determined by socioeconomic background (Hemelsoet, 2021).

In this contribution, we call upon policymakers, teachers, academic professionals, admissions and career officers, disability and access officers, as well as students, in short, all parties involved in the design and organization of higher education, to redesign this education in response to diversity. We argue that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a good starting point.

A focus on diversity

While diversity in the public debate is often narrowed down to issues of ethnicity, migration and integration, in this contribution we explicitly use a broad definition of diversity. Diversity then refers to differences in, among others, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnic and cultural background, physical and mental abilities, socio-economic background, language, level of education, worldview, migration history, nationality and residence situation.

Diversity should not just be a slogan for the website or a mission statement of an institution of higher education. Diversity is a multi-faceted story. It refers to the diversity among students, but also among the staff of these institutions. Diversity concerns the curriculum, the language policies of the institutions, the personnel policies, and the way in which decolonization processes and tensions resulting from racism and exclusion are addressed. This means that diversity, or responding to increasing diversity, is not only a matter for faculty members, but for all professionals in the context of higher education: reception staff, researchers, managers, staff in student administration, technical services, libraries, student services or marketing and communications.

It is precisely there, at the intersection of these different facets, that diversity and inclusion meet: diversity as a reality in society and inclusion as a lever to make diversity work in higher education (Barton, 1997). Developing a diversity and inclusion policy is about providing quality education for all students, about striving for equal educational and success opportunities for all students, about combating racism and discrimination both within and outside one's institution. It is about the accessibility of campuses, of study materials and facilities. It is about

creating meaningful learning contexts, about the educational curriculum, the place of diversity in it, and the knowledge sources and practices that feed the curriculum.

It is also about developing a vision, taking advantage of the opportunities that diversity offers, and negotiating the adjustments that diversity requires. It is about building an inclusive learning community where everyone is welcome, everyone matters, belongs, can be themselves, contributes, and challenges existing practices. It is about embodying and communicating this vision as an educational institution. It is about working with the experience and agency of students and equipping them with new knowledge and skills to actively participate in a democratic and diverse society. These issues are not tied to one or more programs or disciplines, but to all and are essential to providing inclusive, high-quality higher education that is state-of-the-art and also diversity-sensitive.

Diversity-sensitive higher education environments are those in which the educational concept is tailored to meet the learning needs of each student in the diverse student population. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to a strong learning and living environment for each student. Broad-based care is the breeding ground for an inclusive educational community, with a learning environment that encourages the utilization of student differences (Pulinx et al., 2021).

Universal design for learning

An excellent educational strategy for equal educational opportunity is UDL (universal design for learning) (Meyer et al., 2014). UDL offers a way of removing barriers in the learning process. It is about challenging lecturers and other educational professionals to see the curriculum - rather than their students - as "maladapted" (Gradel & Edson, 2009).

We give a concrete example of how UDL actively contributes to an inclusive learning environment where there is a barrier removed such as stigma.

Imagine an auditorium with 400 seats, where in a few moments a written exam will take place. A white sheet is placed on 390 benches, a yellow sheet on the remaining 10, together with noise-cancelling headphones. The yellow sheets are markers for students with a certificate of reasonable accommodation. This is the way such exams are still organized at most universities.

However, according to the principles of UDL, there would be 400 white exam bundles and a box of 50 noise-cancelling headphones at the front of the auditorium. Anyone who wants to can take one. Regardless of whether you have a certificate (with a diagnosis) or not.

Similarly, UDL is about creating a powerful learning environment in which barriers are lowered, for example through the use of accessible fonts, alternative text to images, and democratically available study materials rather than (often) expensive textbooks.

UDL is also about powerful (digital) learning environments. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it very clear that education should no longer be dependent on time and place. Digital education is not simply suitable for everyone or can be taken for granted in our education system. Yet, provided that the barrier of accessibility is removed and a completely new and more inclusive learning environment is designed, digital education could be a

way to create more equal opportunities (Agirdag & Elen, 2020; KU Leuven, 2021). Alternatively organized education according to the principles of UDL is thus a powerful engine for a true democratization of higher education.

The UDL framework provides a tool for educators and policy to take into account the full range of talents of each student. Indeed, with UDL, instruction and the educational environment are tailored not to a student's modal or individual needs (such as providing reasonable accommodations), but to a group of potential students that reflects the diversity in society. In addition, reasonable accommodations for specific students will continue to be possible and necessary.

When an inclusive culture that believes diversity is worthwhile is merged with a robust inclusive practice, the space, time, and resources to invest in inclusive policies are firmly established, with procedures focused on inclusive intake, progression, and outflow.

A policy of zero waste of talent

If we do not want to exclude anyone, we need to work towards inclusive policies, where higher education can take the form of an inclusive place of learning for all. A place where social and academic integration go hand in hand for all students and where structural support around diversity is established. The complex reality calls for a prioritization of inclusion in higher education, with an ongoing commitment to creating that diversity-sensitive culture in higher education and policies that allow for experimentation to implement inclusive practices. In other words, realizing diversity is not about quick fixes and methodology, but about bringing about a mind shift where dialogue and connection are central, where there is a lot of room for professionalization around diversity in higher education. Only in this way can we reverse the lack of action that often prevails today.

Professionalization involves much more than just the transfer of target group-specific knowledge; it is also about attitudes, exchange, and having the opportunity to practice. A one-off study day or a short workshop is not enough. We make a case for second-order teaching, especially as a teacher who acts diversity sensitively towards students and equips students to act in a diversity sensitive way later in their own professional context.

The complex reality compels us to a layered and more sustainable professionalization in which **infusion** is central rather than **stand-alone** or **ad hoc** initiatives. Professionalization should therefore at least build on informal learning and collaboration with colleagues regarding students in vulnerable positions and peer review on challenging diversity themes. But in addition, it is also about providing didactical support in the pursuit of inclusive, purposeful and activating forms of work according to the principles of UDL, with attention to the self-reliance of faculty and staff, as well as targeting group-specific content.

In conclusion, professionalisation should focus on **accountability,** so that faculty, staff and policy feel responsible for developing an inclusive higher education community where every student is welcome and can learn, so that exclusion will be the exception.

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