

Podcast Esther Van Zimmeren – transcriptie Engels

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (0:00 - 0:35)

Welcome to UAntwerp's podcast about diversity and inclusion in education. Today we have Esther Van Zimmeren, professor at the Faculty of Law, as our guest. She will explain how she creates a diversity-sensitive educational practice. We will discuss, amongst other things, structural power inequalities and how you can decolonise your course.

Esther, you are a coordinator and lecturer in the Diversity & Law module. Which courses does that involve exactly? In which years are they taught? And how is the content of these courses intertwined with topics relating to diversity and inclusion?

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (0:36 - 4:41)

It's very special to be here. Perhaps, before I answer this question, it would be useful to take a step back and explain a little bit about how I got into this area. My core business is intellectual property law. You might think it's not so obvious to develop a focus on diversity from there, but I take a rather economic approach. I am inherently interested in broader social themes, including social challenges such as sustainability, and I think diversity and inclusion are very important. And when our faculty was asked to take the initiative in setting up a sustainability and diversity learning network, I was quick to say: 'I would like to do that.' Not because I really consider myself an expert in this domain, but mainly because I think these are very important themes and I really enjoy working on them.

I also have a very international team of researchers and a very diverse group of students. I am mainly active at the master level, to answer your earlier question. There we have a mixed group of Flemish students and Erasmus students, plus an English-language master programme that draws students from all over the world. So you see the diversity in the classroom. Of course, you also see diversity around you in Antwerp, for example at my children's school. For me, it is obvious that it is important to engage with this, which I actually do at different levels. One could consider the learning network as a kind of macro level, where we look at the place of sustainability and diversity within the education, research and operations at the faculty. And where we organise training courses, sometimes together with you (Team Diversity & Inclusion). But you also already mentioned the fact that I am coordinator of the Diversity and Law module. For me, that is sort of the meso level, where I co-create and theorise together with the other lecturers in that module, which actually consists of four courses. I am only responsible for one of those. These courses include a fairly large one on gender, sexuality and law, so that certainly involves diversity. My colleague Elise Goossens teaches it. And then we have another fairly extensive course, called *Inclusive and Sustainable Cities and the Law*. That is the course for which I am jointly responsible, together with two other colleagues. We also have a course on migration law, and another one on labour law. Again, diversity is a very important theme in these courses. We also have an overarching module assignment, in which we try to pay a lot of attention to diversity as well. For example, it includes a workshop on intercultural communication. This is not a separate course, but an embedded one. And we also try to establish connections between the different courses. In *Inclusive and Sustainable Cities and the Law*, we also devote attention to decolonisation and human rights. That

is one of the themes that my colleague Koen De Feyter discusses. But I also teach a course on intellectual property law. I teach a course on the harmonisation of private law. I teach a course on economic integration and internal market. And in all those courses I try to work on diversity in different ways.

So yes, as I said before, to me this comes very naturally. To register it, to think about it, to learn about it, to take training courses. And I really enjoy doing so, because I see that it has an impact.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (4:42 - 4:49)

Definitely, Esther. And if I understand correctly, this is not your core business, but you integrate it wherever you can. How do you go about that?

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (4:50 - 8:10)

I'll give a concrete example. Several of those courses include group assignments. And you can of course take various approaches to such an assignment. You can let the students create their own groups, but I take matters into my own hands. I try to really get to know the students from the beginning. In the first introductory class, I'll ask questions about what intrigues people. If it is an elective course, why did they choose that course? What is their background? And when it's time for the group assignment, I try to get mixed groups so students are more or less forced to get out of their comfort zones and get to know other students. And as I said, I also try to throw that element of intercultural communication (that workshop) open for discussion. Why is it important to do that? Because students obviously see that I put that group together, that they weren't allowed to do so themselves.

I also try to explain why I do what I do. And then I practice with that a bit and provide help if there's something that's not going smoothly. Because you may not understand why someone does something. Or ask questions, make it a topic of discussion. And they can always come to me. Not just for course-related questions, but for much broader ones as well. I am here to support you. We see that group assignments are very important, also for future careers. Interdisciplinary ones would be even more helpful, but those aren't easy. And it is important to be transparent about that to students, so they understand that it is not easy. And that you are also available to help shape group dynamics and figure out which questions you can ask each other, even when things aren't going well.

I also make mistakes sometimes. It is not always easy to talk about themes such as decolonisation, for example. But just because something isn't easy doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. Sometimes I notice that if you discuss something, you can also make the impact that I referred to before in other ways. You can make an impact, of course, by transferring knowledge, and by teaching certain analytical skills that are important for lawyers. But I also think social skills, like listening to each other and asking questions, are very important. In my courses, for example on intellectual property law, you can approach the subject from a very procedural and economic perspective. But you can also pay attention to the power relationships that are there. Because when you talk about intellectual property law, particularly patents, a lot is hidden beneath the surface. So you can also take a look at the World Trade Organization and talk about related tensions. And there, of course, the legal and the political aspect are intertwined. This is something where you teach students to look at the matter much more critically instead of just learning the material, ensuring that they can provide advice in the future, as a lawyer

or another type of legal professional, while also ensuring they can take a very critical look at themselves and at the law. I think that's very important, important to the impact.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (8:12 - 8:17)

And when we zoom in on your teaching methodology, how do you discuss these sensitive themes with students?

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (8:19 - 12:20)

There are different phases in putting a course together. Of course, the easiest part is choosing the teaching materials. Which articles or manuals will you use? In any case, you should ensure the necessary diversity there, and make room for critical voices. You obviously first have to teach students certain basics so they can reflect critically on them. When it comes to the critical articles, it is also very important that there is a diversity of voices. If not in the articles, you can have these come to the fore in, for example, guest lectures. Since COVID, we have actually built a lot of experience with hybrid lectures. We've also done a bit of experimenting with guest lectures. And that actually motivated me to embed these elements in my courses to a greater degree. Sometimes it's only a small part. But take the course on the European economic integration and internal market. What are you going to cover there? The European Union, free movement, those kinds of things. So again, you can approach that from a very economic perspective. But what I've been doing is invite professors and lecturers from Africa, pretty much from the beginning of the course. We also have a very good in-house colleague who comes from Nigeria and who represents Africa's perspective on economic integration. And then I have two other guest lectures. One from someone from Asia and one from a visiting lecturer from Russia who introduces different perspectives on economic integration. Certainly, inviting that Russian lecturer in the context of the war in Ukraine makes for a sensitive situation, sensitive in a different way than the themes we might have thought of originally. But it is also very important to teach students that they may ask questions to this visiting lecturer. How are you going to do that? So, that's the guest lectures. It is very interesting to hear the different views on economic integration.

I then give the students an assignment where they do not have to indicate what other jurisdictions can learn from the European Union, but where they have to do the opposite. And that is not easy, because very often assignments are constructed in such a way that lessons are learned from the European Union, a very progressive vehicle of economic integration. But I flip that around. And for many students that is very challenging. But I also have a feedback moment at the end of that course. So there is no exam, but there is a feedback moment. And many students say: 'Yes, that was really eye-opening for me to approach this in a completely different way.' And they often bring up very interesting elements. Our students have not yet acquired much of the basics at the start of the course, but they are immediately invited to think critically. And of course, in assessing their efforts you don't look at very deep knowledge of the theme, because that comes later. But they immediately know what the intention is. They immediately know that there is room for their own opinions to be heard. And that it is mainly about studying something properly, coming up with arguments, listening to others, and trying to understand the differences and why they exist. After all, law does not function in a vacuum. It functions in a political, social, economic and social context. If you only look at the legislation, you see a very small part of the story. If you can teach students that at the beginning of a course, they can sometimes do a lot more than some lecturers think. And I like that, challenging the students and laying out a path for them where they are encouraged to be critical.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (12:21 - 12:35)

Very interesting. You also talk about creating a space where students can reflect critically and where they are encouraged to make their voices heard. How do you go about that exactly?

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (12:37 - 14:35)

First of all, by talking about this in the introductory lecture. And there are also websites that explain how to create a safe space. I have thought about it a lot myself as well, within the context of the learning network, and frequently exchanged views on the subject with other lecturers. Ultimately, it's a feeling that you have to give people. A feeling that says they can be comfortable here, even when we're dealing with these difficult themes. And that if they happen to use a word that makes someone else uncomfortable, there is room to discuss it. And that the other person can also mention that they don't feel good about you using that word. Maybe we can find out together how we can talk about this in a different way. I'm not going to talk about this for two hours in the introductory lecture. Because again, I'm not the expert either. It also comes down to experiencing and experimenting to see what feels good in different groups, because it's not the same for every group of students. Just like it wouldn't be for every group of employees.

You have to be able to sense these things, which involves learning-by-doing. So when we have a debate, especially about sensitive topics, what we never do is simply have the debate in front of the entire class. Always give students the opportunity to discuss in smaller groups first. And also tell them: 'You share what you want to share. Tell us if you need one of the lecturers or an assistant, if one is present, to provide assistance or join the group for a bit. Is that okay?' And I'm not going to be there all the time either. In that way, the students may also feel comfortable sharing things that they might not want to share with the whole group or with me. They feel a lot safer in a group of three people. And this ensures we can discuss these themes.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (14:35 - 15:03)

Very interesting, Esther. You also mention very interesting things. I would like to zoom in on two of those things. You were just talking about differences between cultures, about your own identity as a Dutch woman. But also about the fact that you show your vulnerability in class. And my question is whether, as a lecturer, you also indicate your own positionality as a highly educated, white Dutch woman in your teaching practice.

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (15:04 - 16:37)

Yes, so I also just mentioned those TED talks that I use. There is also quite a bit of material, for example, about implicit bias. And in that context, I ask students to read something about it. And then there is that workshop. It's not a very long workshop, so you also have to see what you can reasonably hope to achieve with it. But I also ask people to think about that themselves first, and possibly write something down about it before class if they want to do so. I also have to admit that I've never really thought about it that much before. And you are right, I am Dutch and highly educated. But of course I am also more than that. I am also a mother. And, for example, in my family I was the first person to attend university. And that is not always common in an academic context. So there's also that kind of diversity. In other words, my experience is not just that of being Dutch, but there are many more dimensions. And I try to emphasise that very clearly. So again, I don't put the emphasis on the cultures or the very specific aspects of a person, but actually that multidimensionality. Is that a correct word. You probably know what I mean. It's about the person and not the culture. It is precisely that bigger picture that is important. This is also important in starting that dialogue.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (16:38 - 16:52)

Esther, during this conversation you've mentioned structural power inequalities several times. You have also mentioned decolonisation before. I would like to zoom in on that. Why is that important to you? And how would you define it?

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (16:53 - 17:57)

I find it very difficult to really talk about definitions. I daresay that I am also still learning about different ways to decolonise our curriculum or decolonise the university or decolonise the faculty. For example, we did a kind of brainstorming session about this with our sustainability and diversity learning network. What does this or that mean? How can we tackle this or that? I think it's best to do things step by step, precisely because we are all still learning. More and more books are also being published about decolonising the university or decolonising our educational systems, including in the specific context of law faculties. There are also books about decolonisation and legal knowledge. And I am actually still deep in the learning process there. For example, we also have a reading group within the learning network themed around decolonisation and law.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (17:57 - 18:06)

If I understand correctly, you are trying to decolonise your course. Why is that important to you? Not only for you, but also for education.

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (18:08 - 20:18)

Like I said, I find it difficult to define decolonisation. I also find the 'why?' question quite difficult to answer because I actually think it is self-explanatory. I think that in order to remain relevant in the 21st century, the university must concern itself with this topic. So let me address the question of why it's difficult if I feel like it's self-explanatory. It's a very important theme everywhere in our society. Even in my children's primary school. It's up for discussion there, so it seems obvious to me that it must be at the university level as well and that we have to make room for it. And that we must also translate it into discussions about power relations, in order to work up the courage to take a critical look at our history and what happened in the course of it. Certainly in Belgium/the Netherlands we have an important responsibility in this respect. And when I look back at what I learned in primary school and in university, this was actually not discussed. I think it is very important that we make a major change in this respect. That change won't happen overnight. It is a cultural shift that requires a learning process, as I indicated earlier. But I think it's very important to go through this process. And the fact that this will also have an impact on the quality of education is a bonus, as far as I'm concerned. Because my starting point is that it's obvious we should be doing this. The subject should be up for discussion and debate. And we should also be passing on knowledge to our students by suggesting books and articles and embedding the subject in our education. It is not a separate course. It is not something that we can extract and say: 'Now let's do that.' But you are going to let it pervade, step by step, in different courses, in the bachelor, in the master. It won't be easy, but step by step I think we will get there together.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion (Fadima A.)] (20:20 - 20:33)

And with this we have come to the end of a very fascinating conversation with Professor Esther van Zimmeren. Is there any important message that you would like to convey to lecturers about diversity and inclusion in education?

[Prof. Esther Van Zimmeren] (20:34 - 22:38)

What I find very important is to deal with the subject in a positive way. Some people emphasise that this is an additional thing that we have to do. I think we should teach our students critical skills either way. And for me, this is part of it. So let's not see it as an extra burden, but as something that is part of our responsibility. And not only the responsibility of the individual lecturer, but also of the course coordinators, to think about this together, as well as of the faculty and the university; we all have a role to play in this. Thanks to initiatives like the learning network on sustainability and diversity, we can learn about this together. This also shows that this is not something that the individual lecturer must solve alone, but something that we can think about together and for which we have a shared responsibility. Perhaps other faculties can also set up such learning networks. Or perhaps we can collaborate or exchange more. We could take it to the next level. As far as I'm concerned, all of that's good, because it actually benefits us a lot. Lots of inspiration, lots of reflection from which we can draw ideas, for our research, for our education, for our operations, for how the faculty functions. And as far as I'm concerned, it impacts us in a positive way. Does that mean that we never have difficult conversations or difficult discussions within our faculty? Of course it doesn't, because we have a lot of different personalities. Fortunately, more and more walks of life are represented, which is part of the process. So let's be positive about it. I am a very hopeful person and I see many possibilities here for a very positive impact on students.

[Team Diversity & Inclusion Team (Fadima A.)] (22:39 - 22:52)

Collaboration and exchange, very valuable. Thank you very much, Esther, for this fascinating and informative conversation. To our listeners, if this podcast leaves you wanting to learn more, I advise you to keep an eye on our campaign.

Many thanks!