

# Diversity-sensitive teaching



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Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (University of Antwerp)

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‘Diversity should be a natural part of the question: what are we ultimately educating students for? This is a question we should ask ourselves more often. What should our graduates know and be able to do? This comes first, and only then can we decide what to include in the curriculum. Any reflection on this – especially in big cities – will also touch upon the issue of what do with the diversity of our students, and partly of our colleagues.’

— A lecturer at a university of applied sciences and arts in the Netherlands, in [Naber & Knippels, 2013](#)

This ECHO teaching tip outlines what diversity-sensitive education is, explains why it’s important, and provides lecturers with tools and guidelines to optimise their diversity-sensitive educational approach.

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## What is diversity-sensitive education?

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The current generation of students is more heterogeneous than ever before. They have different socioeconomic and ethnic-cultural backgrounds, and they also differ in terms of their prior education, age, world view, gender and sexual identity (Pulinx, Schrooten, & Emmers, 2021). No student can be pigeon-holed. Every individual is made up of different sub-identities that influence one another. The intersection of all these identities determines who you are and how society perceives you (Arikoglu, Scheepers & Kumi, 2014).

Diversity-sensitive education takes into account these differences by tailoring the education to the diverse group of students. This is done by adapting the teaching methods to the heterogeneous group and by making the learning content fit in with the different backgrounds and lifestyles of the students to the fullest extent possible.

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## The importance of diversity-sensitive education

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Every student has a right to high-quality education. Diversity-sensitive education is the key to ensuring this right can be exercised. It increases the chances of equal educational opportunities for all students.

Today, there is a large gap between students with and without a migration background when it comes to academic success (Noppe et al., 2018). This gap is wider in our country than in our neighbouring countries, which has to do with the fact that our education is often insufficiently geared towards the diversity of student groups (Van den Broucke, et al., 2015).

Investing in diversity-sensitive education also means investing in the quality of education. In diversity-sensitive education, learning content is considered from different angles, and various underexposed voices from a subject area are included in the curriculum. This widens the view of both lecturers and students. In addition, students learn to think critically and to appreciate important intercultural aspects. Want to know more about intercultural aspects? Check out the learning materials from the [ECHO Session On Intercultural Communication](#) (March 2022, in Dutch).

*[Women in European Cultural History](#) is a programme component in the Bachelor of History at UAntwerp that focuses on the socio-cultural position of women throughout Western history. Students are introduced to important but often underexposed developments in the relationship between men and women in Western history from the Middle Ages to the present day.*



*Mind the Gap* is a clinical handbook on symptoms typical of black and brown skin. The aim of the project was to highlight the lack of diversity in medical literature and education.

Equally important is the fact that diversity-sensitive education increases overall student well-being (Siebrecht & Jansen, 2021). By responding to the students' need for diversity in both the learning content and the teaching methods, students from different backgrounds can be made to feel more at home at the educational institution. They feel seen, recognised, and more connected to the subject matter (Clycq, 2019).

European research has shown that students perform better when diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of students are recognised and embraced within the educational institution. It's also worth noting that an intercultural approach not only improves the performance of students with a migration background, but that of other students as well (Celeste et al., 2019).

By investing in diversity-sensitive education, the university underlines the societal importance of diversity sensitivity. This means the university acts as a role model by emphasising that diversity is a source of enrichment.

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### Getting started with diversity-sensitive education

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How can diversity-sensitive education be put into practice? Let's look at four distinct domains and provide a number of guidelines to get started.

#### (1) Lesson content

Ask yourself what you consider to be standard knowledge in a certain domain, and whether this is justified. If necessary, adapt the lesson content to start from a **shared and sustainable level of basic knowledge**. Students often have different levels of prior education and/or different cultural frames of reference. What's obvious to one student may not be that obvious to another. It's important to communicate clearly and transparently about the required initial competences and content-related expectations right from the start.

**As a lecturer, you should reflect on your own views and beliefs.** What's your frame of reference? How can you break free from it? Are there any blind spots in your knowledge? Any presuppositions that can or should be

questioned? Be aware that as a lecturer, you're also a role model.

*'Consciously we teach what we know, unconsciously we teach who we are.'*

— Don E. Hamachek

Provide **multi-perspectivity**. Consider the authors you mention, the examples you give, the sources you discuss, and the role models you refer to.

*For example, take a world map and colour all the countries where your sources come from. Which countries or continents are missing?*

*List the number of female and male authors you quote. Is this a balanced ratio?*

**Give a variety of examples**, so that every student comes into contact with something unfamiliar, and is therefore extra instructive. Find something outside everyone's frame of reference, or provide examples from the students' **various frames of reference**. Encourage understanding of other cultures and/or ways of thinking.

*During a mock consultation in the Master of Medicine, a simulated patient is used: an elderly man who can't read. This type of person is usually not part of a student doctor's frame of reference, so initially the student will tend to ignore the fact that the man can't read.*

**Encourage students to approach problems from different angles, including less familiar perspectives.** This could be a group assignment where you try to create diverse groups of students (see also [this ECHO Teaching Tip](#) from 2019 on creating heterogeneous groups, in Dutch).

#### (2) Teaching method

**Engage in dialogue** with the students. Consider the heterogeneous group of students as a resource you can use to include different perspectives and schools of thought in your teaching content. Also encourage dialogue among students. Ensure a **safe class atmosphere** where students are not afraid to speak up, express a different opinion, or ask questions.

*Provide clear communication guidelines and rules of conduct, highlighting aspects such as letting the other person finish, respecting silence, and accepting other points of view. You can find more inspiration on how to create a positive classroom climate in the ECHO Teaching Tip*



[‘Positive vibration, yeah!’ \(2020\)](#) and in the [‘Anti-oppression toolkit. A facilitator’s guide’](#).

**Involve visiting lecturers** in your programme component. This can be done physically, but is often easier to organise online. Other lecturers will tend to emphasise different things and may have different prior education, allowing them to present different insights. Thanks to new developments in online education, guest experts can be included relatively quickly and easily, without the hassle of practical and/or sustainability issues such as long-distance travel and high travel costs.

**Communicate clearly about what is expected of the students.** Which competences should students ultimately master and how will this be tested? Not every student has a network of family or friends who have pursued higher education and who can explain how written or oral exams usually go (see also [this ECHO Tip](#) from 2018 on promoting the progress of disadvantaged groups).

Make sure the lesson content is properly **structured**. Link different parts of the subject matter together and ensure that the interrelatedness of different topics is made explicit.

**Familiarise yourself with both faculty-specific and university-wide support measures**, so you can actively use them or point students in the right direction to find certain information. For more information, consult the [Pintra page of the Study Advice and Student Counselling Services](#) and the [Blackboard page with info on student support](#) (accessible only to UAntwerp staff, in Dutch).

### (3) Language

Make sure there is a **shared vocabulary** and that everyone has mastered it. Create an overview of important terms or concepts related to your course and provide an appropriate explanation.

Be aware that **cultural factors are reflected in the vocabulary used**. As a result, in the perception context of some groups of students, certain words may have a different meaning, or no meaning at all. Sayings and idioms, for instance, can get lost in translation and are also much more common in English than in other languages.

During online lectures or feedback sessions, give students a choice between speech or chat.

**Chat** is an accessible way to communicate in writing, especially for students who don’t speak Dutch at home.

Be aware that the language you use during online lectures or screencasts is often more formal, and therefore more difficult, than in face-to-face teaching. **Therefore, be sure to take time to explain difficult concepts.** Want to know you can make screencasts more effective and enjoyable? Check out [this ECHO Tip](#) from 2017 (in Dutch).

### (4) Community building

Make sure you always **stay in touch with your students**. Motivate them to engage with your course. Keep activating them and try to prevent social isolation by encouraging social participation.

#### **Motivate**

- Show your commitment to your students’ learning process and the problems they may experience.
- Send an encouraging message that is not an assignment.
- Show that you’re confident in your students’ abilities.
- Appreciate students for their participation in learning activities, both on campus and online.

#### **Activate**

- Set interim deadlines and organise interactive Q&A sessions in the e-learning environment.
- Give students some say in their learning process (e.g. in the way they work on an assignment).

#### **Foster social interaction**

- Encourage contact among students, both on campus and online.
- Ensure sufficient diversity when dividing students into groups. Wherever possible, group students from different cultures and/or disciplines together and stimulate their intercultural and/or interdisciplinary competences.

For more info on group work, see the ECHO Teaching Tips on [cooperation competences](#) (2018, in Dutch) and on [diving students for group work](#) (2018).



## Want to know more?

### ECHO Teaching Tips (in English)

- [Theme page 'Diversity'](#)
- [Positive vibration yeah! A positive classroom climate \(2020\)](#)
- [Promoting the progress of disadvantaged groups \(2018\)](#)
- [At-risk students: study progress and diversity \(2017\)](#)
- [Online education: Students in charge of their own learning \(2020\)](#)
- [Differentiated teaching in higher education \(2021\)](#)
- [Think big, act small! The first steps to sustainability education \(2022\)](#)

### ECHO Teaching Tips (in Dutch)

- [Ondersteunen van studenten met een functiebeperking \(2014\)](#)
- [Bijzondere faciliteiten en examens \(2019\)](#)
- [Heterogene groepen samenstellen \(2019\)](#)

### Sources accessible only to UAntwerp staff (login required, in Dutch)

[Part one of the Diversity Action Plan \(2018-2024\)](#) consists of actions to promote the inflow, through-flow and outflow of students from disadvantaged groups.

['Hoe geef je online les op een diversiteitsensitive manier?'](#): screencast developed by the Diversity Team (University & Society Department, UAntwerp)

### Literature

Arikoglu, F., Scheepers, S., & Kumi, A. K. (2014). *Intersectioneel denken. Handleiding voor professionelen die intersectionaliteit of kruispuntdenken in de eigen organisatie willen toepassen*. Ella vzw. <https://ellavzw.be/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Handleiding-Intersectionaliteit-ELLA-VZW.pdf>

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['Diversiteit in het onderwijs. Voorbij enkele mythes'](#), Lecture by Noël Clycq, in November 2019 at UAntwerp.

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[Mixed Classroom - LEARN! Academy - Meer over - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam \(vu.nl\)](#)

Noppe, J., Vanweddigen, M., Doyen, G., Stuyck, K., Feys, Y & Buysschaert, P. (2018). [Vlaamse Migratie- en Integratiemonitor 2018](#). Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur.

Naber, P. & Knippels, V. (2013). [Diversiteit in Vakmanschap: Opleiding met gevoel voor diversiteit](#). Retrieved on 11 February 2022 from 2955\_Diversiteit-in-vakmanschap.pdf (edufit.nl)

Pulinx, R. Schrooten, M. & Emmers, E. (2021). *Diversiteit in het Hoger Onderwijs*. Academic & Scientific Publishers (A.S.P.).

Siebrecht, P., & Jansen, J. (2021). Welkom voelen in de leergemeenschap. Kracht zit in verschillen, niet in overeenkomsten. In R. Pulinx, M. Schrooten, & E. Emmers (Eds.), *Diversiteit in Hoger Onderwijs* (pp. 97-11). Academic & Scientific Publishers (A.S.P.)