

Sensitivity to Diversity in Education: A Work in Progress

English summary of the evaluation report of the Project 'Sensitivity to Diversity in Education' at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Thea van Lankveld & Anne de la Croix, LEARN! Academy VU Amsterdam

November 2016

Management summary

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam) aims to

VU Amsterdam aims to offer its students a learning environment based on *inclusive excellence*, where ‘differences are valued, approached with confidence, and actively utilized’ and in which ‘the presence of differences, creativity and the development of talent are encouraged to the maximum possible extent.’¹ According to VU Amsterdam’s educational vision, this involves more than mere collaboration, learning and research. Other crucial elements include: ‘creating connections, identifying solutions together, exploring together, discussing prejudices together, making it possible to air grievances, being open to criticism, ensuring mutual understanding, being aware of cultural differences and being able to interpret and accept these.’ The student population of VU Amsterdam is highly diverse, not only in terms of cultural background, but also in terms of gender, sexual orientation, religion and socio-economic background. Which tools and resources do our educators need to actively utilize and value the diversity that exists among our student population?

A second aim of VU Amsterdam is to deliver graduates who can contribute to society in a professional and responsible way, who can adopt a range of different perspectives in their professional lives and who can relate effectively to those of different cultural backgrounds. This is clearly reflected in the university’s diversity policy, which states that ‘every student comes into contact with the aspects of diversity that are relevant to their own field,’ which includes the cultural aspects of knowledge and the intercultural skills that are relevant to their own degree programme. The question then becomes: what does this imply for the education that we provide? For example, what is required from the degree programme in Management and Organizational Science in order to ensure that it does in fact prepare graduates to run an effective management team with a diverse composition? What is required from the programme in Medicine to provide doctors with sufficient insight into the cultural and gender differences in the field of human health? How can our teachers, lawyers and dentists be prepared to handle the high level of cultural and religious diversity in professional practice? And what about our theologians - how can they be equipped to build bridges between diverse faiths, viewpoints and philosophies in our post-Christian and post-modern society? And, what does all this demand of the teaching staff who help to provide these degree programmes?

These questions were all central to a two-year project entitled ‘Sensitivity to Diversity in Education’ at VU Amsterdam, which aimed to contribute to these goals by developing and implementing the following:

- a) training programmes for lecturers/tutors, and increased attention to diversity in the programme leading up to the University Teaching Qualification;
- b) support for curriculum development in the field of sensitivity to diversity;

Five university faculties were involved in the project: Theology, Social Sciences, Behavioural Movement Sciences, Law and Medicine.

An evaluation has been conducted, exploring both the experiences and the benefits of both aspect a) and b) described above. The evaluation might draw lessons for the faculties involved in the

¹ KNOW VU (2015). *Onderwijs op koers: Onderwijsvisie VU geconcretiseerd*. Amsterdam: VU Amsterdam.

project, as well as other university faculties. This evaluation was based on observations of the training programmes, on surveys completed by training programme participants, and on interviews with some of the participants, the co-trainers, and the coordinators from the respective faculties and project staff.

Training programmes for lecturers/tutors were provided for all the faculties involved, and were adapted to the specific context and requirements of each faculty. The training programmes lasted either one or one-and-a-half days, depending on the faculty. In two of the faculties, training programmes were provided specifically for tutors, and at the other three faculties the training programmes were aimed at lecturers who, unlike tutors, are also responsible for educational development. A total of 84 members of teaching staff participated during the period covered by this evaluation.

Teaching staff and tutors were predominantly positive about the training programmes: participants described the programmes as interesting, relevant, inspiring, open and providing a secure environment. The objectives of the training programmes were achieved. In specific terms, these were: (1) to create greater awareness of implicit assumptions and their impact on teaching and education; (2) to provide teaching staff with more tools to deploy in this area; and (3) to work on educational development (in the case of the programme for teaching staff). Although the training programme could have been shorter according to tutors in the Faculty of Social Sciences, many participants from Behavioural and Movement Sciences as well as Theology and Law said that they would have preferred a longer programme - as far as they were concerned, this programme was only a start. Students' own stories about their experiences of teaching were particularly effective both in improving the awareness of teaching staff and providing them with more tools and strategies for action in this field. Teaching staff also said that they liked the fact that the programme stimulated dialogue and communication between colleagues.

Support for curriculum development in respect to diversity has been implemented in different ways, depending on specific needs of the faculty. In two of the faculties, there was an assessment of how degree programme students are being equipped to handle diversity dilemmas in their future professional careers. The aim was twofold: 1) to provide an overview of best practice, and 2) to make proposals for improving teaching and education where necessary. At a third faculty, the recently implemented diversity-themes teaching was evaluated with students, and at a fourth faculty teaching staff received support for incorporating diversity into a curriculum review that is currently under development.

The evaluations of curriculum development support were primarily positive. The expertise of the project officer was rated highly, and the support available provided an opportunity to look at issues which would otherwise have remained unaddressed. The project officer was an outsider with an objective point of view, which was also valued. Participants particularly valued the methodology for assessing diversity matters in relation to their specific courses/programmes, as well as receiving suggestions for making improvements to these programmes.

In addition to the insights provided into the strengths and weaknesses of specific degree programmes, the project also led to the development of tools and examples of good practice. These will be made freely available online for use by other degree programmes. The benefits were the greatest for those faculties and programmes where project activities were embedded in broader

policy and supported by programme and educational managers. The cooperation between diversity experts within the faculty and diversity experts from outside the faculty (educationalists) was constructive.

The evaluation of this project shows that an integrated approach works well, with attention to both professional development among teaching staff, curriculum development and policy development. Developing a vision on diversity and its relevance appeared to be a crucial factor, as did the development of faculty-level objectives. Another important factor is ownership: handing responsibility for implementation specifically to a faculty coordinator or team. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not work: focusing on diversity and sensitivity has a different meaning in each faculty and will take a different form in each faculty, just as each faculty will wish to emphasize different aspects of its own diversity objectives. Remarkably, many faculties have no insight into student perception of the curriculum and learning environment. This insight is necessary when building a curriculum that is sensitive to diversity and achieving the objectives of VU Amsterdam's diversity policy. Similarly, not all faculties have an understanding of the questions and dilemmas that teachers face, even though such an understanding is essential in developing appropriate professional development activities for teaching staff.

The project has achieved a great deal, but it remains just a first step and there are still many more steps in the process to come. In order to achieve VU Amsterdam's objectives, serious investment and long-term commitment are required. At least three aspects are important here: (1) an external stimulus to encourage faculties to achieve their goals and specify a working method for achieving those goals; (2) accessible and high-quality support for faculties to achieve those goals; and (3) encouraging the exchange of expertise between faculties.

Based on the above, the following recommendations can be formulated.

A. Recommendations for faculties

1. Choose for an integrated approach to professional development, curriculum development and policy development

Recent experiences at the various faculties show that professional development for teaching staff, curriculum development and policy development can best be approached in an integrated and coordinated manner. The maximum effect was achieved in those faculties where professional development and policy/curriculum development went hand in hand. At those faculties, relevant themes, sensitivities and learning needs were unveiled in the curriculum development activities, leading to more tailored training programmes for staff members. At the same time, the discussions that took place during the training programmes provided useful input for the development of an educational vision, as they revealed different perspectives on diversity within the faculty. By contrast, at faculties where professional development, curriculum development and the educational vision were not well integrated, these opportunities did not present themselves.

2. Develop a vision on the relevance of diversity in the faculty and communicate this explicitly

The faculties involved in the project vary in the extent to which they have developed a vision on the relevance of diversity in the faculty, and they vary in the extent to which this has been explicitly communicated to staff members. However, a clear position at the administrative level and clear communication about this position appear to be important factors. At the Faculty of Theology, for example, despite initial reluctance in some quarters, teaching staff ultimately appreciated the fact that managers sent out a clear signal that the issue was a priority. They did so by requiring teaching staff at the faculty to attend the training programme. When developing a vision, it seems that the following points are particularly important:

- A vision of whether and why a focus on diversity within the programme is necessary;
- A vision of how sensitivity to diversity is important within the programme;
- A vision of what the faculty wishes to achieve in the long term in terms of sensitivity to diversity.

3. Formulate diversity objectives and place tasks and responsibilities for implementation in the hands of a faculty coordinator or team

It is not only an administrative vision that is important; a faculty policy focusing on diversity in education is also key. Some faculties involved in the project had already reflected the objectives of the training programme and the desired results of the curriculum scan. At other faculties, although some individuals recognized the importance of focusing on diversity, there was a lack of underlying organization and a lack of sustained focus on integrating diversity into policy-making and implementation. At these faculties, there is a risk that the activity undertaken in recent years will be limited to a one-off event.

The experiences at the five faculties have taught us that it is important to set faculty-level objectives in the field of diversity in education and to choose appropriate interventions, that can be deployed in the short to medium term in order to achieve those objectives.

In order to identify achievable faculty-level objectives and interventions, it seems that knowledge on the following matters is important:

- A vision of what the faculty wants to achieve in the long term in the field of diversity;
- An overview of the obstacles and opportunities for teaching students to function in a modern, globalized society and making the most of the diversity of the student population in teaching;
- A vision of how best to incorporate diversity into the primary work of teaching staff.

The diversity scan developed as part of this project may provide a tool that can be used to understand these areas.

The experiences at the five faculties show that it is crucial to designate one staff member to take responsibility for formulating and achieving faculty-level diversity objectives. Without this clear assignment of duties and without specific project objectives, diversity may well become buried under the pressure and time constraints of everyday work. These faculty-level diversity coordinators can then be supported by the experts in the area of diversity-sensitive education based at the

LEARN! Academy. However, they do not need to work alone in their respective faculties; many of the teaching staff members who participated in the training programmes demonstrated their commitment to this theme and their motivation to continue working on it. The faculties could utilize this motivation and momentum by bringing these staff members together in alliances or networks. For example, the participants in the first training programme could, if they wish, take on a leading role in reaching out to those staff members who have not yet played a role and involving them too.

4. Take the specific context of the faculty into account (no 'one-size-fits-all' approach)

Our experiences during the project taught us that each faculty is different and each faculty finds itself in a different phase when it comes to diversity-focus. Some programmes have been working on diversity for some time already, while for other programmes this is something quite new. Some faculties have not developed a vision on diversity, while other faculties have done so but many teaching staff remain unaware of its existence. Furthermore, teaching staff members differ both within and between faculties in the extent to which they are aware of their own implicit assumptions and attitudes. Faculties also differ with regard to student population and teaching staff, which are more diverse in some faculties than in others. There are differences between faculties in terms of the extent to which diversity requires attention within the curriculum in order to prepare students for an increasingly globalized and diverse professional field. For programmes that prepare students for professions with much interaction with clients or patients, the need to reflect on diversity is greater than for other programmes, for example. And finally, the faculties vary in terms of the change and renewal processes that are currently underway. At the same time, however, the diversity policy of the university does apply equally to all faculties and disciplines. In order to address sensitivity to diversity in education, it is therefore important not to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, but to take account of the specific context and starting point at each individual faculty.

5. Enter into a dialogue with students and/or undertake research into how they perceive and experience the curriculum and the learning environment in their programme

Interestingly, at the faculties involved in the project, with the exception of VUmc, there was little insight into the students' experiences and perceptions of the curriculum and their learning environment. Do students, at the end of their programme, feel adequately equipped to 'contribute to society in a professional and responsible manner' and 'to adopt different perspectives in their professional activities and interact effectively with those from different cultural backgrounds,' in line with the university's aspirations?² And are we providing VU students with a learning environment in which students feel respected, taken seriously and not stigmatized?

Our evaluation shows that finding out how students experience teaching and education, provides a very rich source of information that can be used to further improve sensitivity to diversity in education, and is also the most persuasive way of convincing teaching staff of its importance. Hearing students' own experiences and stories makes teaching staff more aware of the potential

² <http://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/profiel-en-missie/diversiteit/index.aspx>

impact of their conduct. At VUmc, there is already a high degree of awareness of how students experience diversity within the curriculum because regular research is carried out. There is a constant dialogue with the students who formed the D.O.C.S. association, and it appears that this dialogue with students is an essential link in improving teaching and education, and in raising awareness in teaching staff. It is important that programmes engage in a dialogue with students, or investigate how students perceive the curriculum and the learning environment in which they study. Finding out more about student experiences is a specific component in one of the phases of the methodology used in the diversity scan. Training and professionalization for teaching staff is one possible place to begin this dialogue, or to continue it and take it to the next level. Other ways to gain a better understanding of the learning environment as perceived and experienced by students are to incorporate this into course evaluations and curriculum evaluations, or to carry out specific research.

6. Ensure that professionalization reflects the questions and requirements of teaching staff

To achieve the university's objectives in the field of diversity in education, it is essential to take the questions and dilemmas raised by teaching staff seriously. The experiences of this project show how important it is to listen to and understand these questions and dilemmas, so that these can be reflected in training as much as possible. At the faculties where training for teaching staff better reflected their requirements, the training programme achieved better results than in those faculties where this is less true.

A related question is whether it is advisable to make training programmes compulsory. The various faculties have made different choices in this area. At those faculties where the training programme was not compulsory, the participants were often those lecturers and tutors who already had an interest in this subject, while others did not participate. At those faculties where the training programme was compulsory, the training programme reached more staff members but there was some resistance that had to be overcome at the start of the training programme. To answer the question of whether making the training programme compulsory is the right way forward, we therefore need to reflect carefully on how important it is for each faculty to reach as many members of teaching staff as possible. But preparation and the wider faculty context are also important here: staff members need to be convinced of the importance of the training, for example, and of why they should take part. If the ground has been laid in advance through wider faculty-level developments, staff members will be more receptive and more likely to engage constructively with the training programme. It would therefore seem sensible to inform and involve teaching staff at an early stage in policy development in the field of diversity in education.

In addition to a training programme for teaching staff, other forms of professional development are conceivable. One could think of regular meetings to develop joint education, like those that occurred for the programme in Educational Sciences. At these workshops, guided by an expert in the field of diversity in education, a number of questions arose naturally, such as: what impact does diversity of the student population have on education? How can the education system accommodate this? This approach enables collective and supervised educational development to take the form of professionalization for teaching staff members. Peer review meetings are another example of this. Many of the participants in the training programmes indicated that they would benefit from such

meetings. The choice between one form or the other will depend on the specific target groups within the faculty: which staff develop education in the field of diversity, and which do not? What is the best way of reaching the different target groups?

7. Use the tools developed and the expertise available at the LEARN! Academy in the field of diversity and sensitivity in education

As part of the project, a number of tools were developed which the faculties can use themselves to assess existing curricula as part of their focus on diversity. Expertise has also been developed on the formulation of policies and methods of intervention in the field of diversity in education, and on monitoring progress. Our experiences at the five faculties showed us that examples of and ideas about diversity-focused education are useful for many staff members. Specific expertise in the field of diversity-sensitive education proved indispensable during the meetings with staff members, facilitating substantive reflection and helping the process of exchange to proceed smoothly.

Also as part of the project, expertise was developed in the field of training teaching staff in the field of diversity-sensitive education. Our experiences at the five faculties taught us that it can be beneficial when the training programme is provided by an outside party, because he or she can adopt an independent viewpoint.

A model for cooperation between faculty-based experts and experts in the field of diversity (educationalists) proved to be a suitable model. While the faculty-based experts know how diversity is significant or may be relevant to the particular disciplines involved, the educationalist experts are able to translate this into implications for education. Both sides inspire and reinforce one another.

B. Recommendations to the Chief Diversity Officer and the Executive Board

The project Sensitivity to Diversity in Education at VU Amsterdam started in 2014, with the idea that an inclusive learning and working environment requires a *sustained* focus on diversity. For this, the profile of diversity needs to be raised, and subsequently needs to become a standard aspect of policy, teaching and professional development for our teaching staff. The first stage of this process has now been launched at five faculties. Improvements are currently being implemented in the teaching of four degree programmes so that students will learn to integrate different cultural perspectives into their professional activities. Furthermore, 84 teaching staff members have participated in training programmes on how to foster an inclusive learning and working environment; at some faculties this programme has been integrated into the existing training provided for tutors, and it will be shortly also be integrated into the University Teaching Qualification and be made available as part of the range of open training programmes for teaching staff at the university.

However, there is still a long way to go in this process. Although the first steps towards diversity-sensitive education have been successfully taken at the faculties involved in the project, diversity in

education is not currently a standard aspect of education policy or a standard aspect of the toolset available to staff members. Targeted policy measures are required at the five faculties in order to reach other staff members and other programmes. We do not have extensive information about the situation at the faculties that were not involved in this project (Humanities, Natural Sciences, Earth and Life Sciences, Economics and Business Administration and ACTA).

The project Sensitivity to Diversity in Education at VU Amsterdam has ensured that five of our faculties have, over recent years, focused on this area which is so important to the university. This has helped to initiate a conversation within the faculties, and to make substantial progress in strengthening the sensitivity to diversity of curricula and teaching staff. It was essential that the university allocated time and money to this project, without the efforts made and the activities undertaken as part of the project, these faculties would not be where they are today. However, the experiences at these five faculties have also shown that diversity is not necessarily always a priority and that faculties have limited (human) resources available.

The project is almost complete, and this may lead some to believe that the university has achieved its objectives. Nothing could be further from the truth. A long-term and serious commitment is required in order to achieve the objectives of the university's diversity policy. To continue working on diversity-sensitive education, at least three requirements must be met: (1) an external stimulus to encourage faculties to achieve their goals and specify a working method for achieving those goals; (2) accessible and high-quality support for faculties; and (3) the exchange of expertise between faculties.

8. Ensure that external incentives are in place

If the university really aims to offer an inclusive learning environment and aims to prepare its students thoroughly for a future in a globalized society, it is imperative that the faculties have strong incentives to formulate short-term and long-term diversity goals and to specify how these goals can be achieved. The current diversity policy provides a basis for such an external incentive.³ The evaluation of this project shows that it is also useful to place responsibility for achieving those goals in the hands of a faculty staff member or team, and to allocate time required to undertake the required activities. In this way, the faculties will be encouraged to articulate specifically what needs to be done in terms of diversity within each programme and for each staff member. It also means that a particular individual or team is accountable and will be held responsible. Finally, it is important to include follow-up action in the regular administrative meetings with the faculties, including a thorough check whether the goals are being achieved.

9. Provide accessible and high-quality support.

In recent years the LEARN! Academy has built up expertise in the field of diversity-sensitive teaching. This project has led to the development of a number of tools and materials that can be used to gauge and enhance sensitivity to diversity in the curriculum. These tools and materials will now be made freely available, along with the best practices documented. Faculties can approach LEARN! Academy for any human resources (trainers, supervision of curriculum and policy development)

³ Van Oudenhoven-van der Zee, K. (2016). Het schort niet aan de studenten: Koersen op diversiteit in hoger onderwijs. *Tijdschrift voor Hoger Onderwijs en Management*, 2, 13-16.

required for implementation of new practices. The associated costs for faculties might constitute a potential obstacle to the further development of diversity-sensitive education at the university.

10. Encourage faculties to exchange their experiences.

In addition to faculty teams, there also seems to be interest in a VU-wide network through which the various faculty-based coordinators could contact one another. One possible goal of such a network would be to exchange knowledge and experiences. A second goal would be to identify possible obstacles and opportunities with regard to achieving the objectives of the university's diversity policy, especially when it comes to applying a diversity-focus onto teaching and education. Both LEARN! Academy and the Chief Diversity Officer could play a role in establishing and maintaining this university-wide network.