

## University teachers' willingness to support inclusive and effective student-centered learning

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### Abstract

Teachers' beliefs regarding inclusive pedagogy and sustainable and effective student-centred learning play a crucial role not only in fostering a positive attitude towards inclusive education but also in implementing inclusive teaching practices. Embracing underpinning inclusive student-centred pedagogies (I-ScP) is essential for teachers so that they can consciously employ instructional methods that benefit all learners and cultivate a sense of community to promote inclusive education (Florian, 2014; Erby et al., 2021). Without a structured process for teachers to reflect on their knowledge, comprehension, and approaches to developing suggested inclusive strategies, a shared information is lacking (Moriarty, 2007; Glowacki-Dudka, et.al., 2012; Loreman, 2017). This study attempts to investigate and evaluate university teachers' readiness to support a student-centered I-ScP learning methodology that prioritizes inclusivity and effectiveness, taking into account the perspectives of university educators. A mixed-methods approach, involving university educators from both Romanian and Greek institutions. They were first asked to complete a questionnaire, and a subset of participants was then selected for interviews. The quantitative analysis focused on several key areas: the perceived importance of understanding students' learning needs, strategies for accommodating diverse learning styles, and methods for promoting perspective-taking in the classroom through non-judgmental discussions about cultural, social, and other differences. The data revealed a notable difference in perspectives between teachers and students on four specific aspects: the recognition of the significance of understanding students' learning needs, the adaptation to diverse learning styles, the cultivation of empathy in the classroom, and embracing diversity in the educational setting.

**Keywords:** inclusive student-centred pedagogies (i-ScP), identifying student needs, re-aligning lessons and syllabi, diversity and choice

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive and effective learning environments include creating an educational setting where all students feel supported and valued, and can engage in active and meaningful learning experiences. In order to do so, university teachers can appreciate, embrace, and respect their students' cultures, values, experiences, and perspectives by creating an environment of openness and acceptance for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or power (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Inclusivity in the classroom is related to teachers' willingness to use teaching strategies to account for the different learning styles of their students by offering hands-on, group and individual learning opportunities, matching their curriculum to each student's interests and strengths (Avramidis, et al. 2019). Also, facilitating communication and collaboration largely serves to help students develop interpersonal skills, gain new insights, and learn from others with different backgrounds and perspectives. This can be easily achieved through group projects, peer coaching, and other interactive activities (Brundiers & Wiek, 2017).

A growing body of literature calls for the need to steer away from the medical model of inclusion, which aims to 'fix' student deficit, disabilities, or learning difficulties (Armstrong and Barton, 1999). Instead, by adopting social models of inclusion for all students (Tinklin, Riddell, and Wilson, 2004), teachers can design their lessons providing inclusive support systems that focus equally on access, engagement and output opportunities for all students without stigmatizing a particular group or individual. By incorporating active engagement components in the HE syllabus design, teachers can align expected learning outcomes with evidence-based and measurable activities that students in HE is engaged in (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2022). This is why inclusive support systems should be geared towards empowering students and academics to make appropriate decisions in order to proactively create and sustain inclusive learning environments for all (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2023). In line with this, teachers can provide timely feedback to students to understand their progress, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and improve their performance. This can be done by providing feedback on multiple aspects of students' work that can encourage them to view mistakes as learning opportunities (Brookhart, 2017). Also, teachers can help students become self-directed learners by empowering them to choose their own learning goals, interests, and strategies, create their own projects, and decide how they want to learn. This can create a sense of freedom, involvement and ownership amongst students (Lapan, et al. 2002). A growing amount of literature encourages engaging students as equal partners in instructional choices and provision of feedback (Cook-Sather, 2016; Cliffe et al, 2017). Yet, as this proposal challenges established hierarchies in academia, it may be faced with resistance by academics and students alike. As stated by Cliffe et al. (2017: 3) "too many times, assumptions are made and protected, such as about who has knowledge about teaching and learning... Students as Partners, however, challenges those dynamics and provides insight into what faculty may not always realize".

In order for university teachers to be able to live up to all the listed responsibilities to develop an inclusive learning environment, training is needed. Unfortunately, in many European countries, university teachers are not required to possess accredited teaching qualifications (Parsons et al., 2010), and their career advancement and university funding predominantly hinge on research outputs rather than the quality of their teaching. Additionally, there is resistance among university teachers to embrace bottom-up, student-centered, or inclusive interventions (Zhidong, 2012; Bovill, 2016), and there is a scarcity of time and incentives for university teachers to undergo training in didactics (Jacob et al., 2017). The consequences are apparent, with a substantial number of university teachers in EU countries (and internationally) tending to employ teacher-centred approaches that may not be tailored to the specific needs of their students (Shah et al., 2017; Singh and Phoon, 2021). In such educational environments, university teachers often overlook the development of faculty inclusive

student-centred pedagogies (i-ScP) competences and students' academic competence-building (Dewsbury, 2017; O'Leary, Shapiro, Toma, S. et al., 2020).

Herein, Inclusive student-centred pedagogies (i-ScP) are defined as the proactive and intentional input (content and presentation modes), teaching and learning activities, course design, curricula, assessment and resources, which foster equity during carefully designed learner-centred opportunities for student engagement, self-awareness, self-regulation, and learner autonomy for all stakeholders in higher education (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2023). There is a pressing need for academics to adapt their roles and take on the responsibility of fostering an inclusive educational environment. Thus, the aim of this research is to portray the level of willingness of university teachers to support inclusive and effective student-centred learning.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Research aim**

The objective of this research is to examine and assess the willingness of university teachers to endorse a student-centred I-ScP learning approach that is both inclusive and effective, considering the viewpoints of university teachers.

### **2.2. Methods and participants**

This study consists of descriptive research with qualitative approaches. A content analysis method was used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The purpose of the content analysis is to summarize a large amount of data in such a way as to achieve well-supported and interpreted results (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). All interviews were recorded, transcribed and the recordings were sent for feedback to the respective respondents. The data was coded and then categorized under common themes such as: willingness to develop awareness about students' learning needs; embracing students' different ways of learning; encouraging perspective taking in the classroom based on non-judgmental approaches to discussing cultural, social or other type of differences; and accepting and embracing diversity in the classroom. Participation in the study was voluntary, research subjects were anonymized, and the research protocol was approved by the coordinating university to ensure the protection of human subjects. Five participants per country (total number of  $n=10$ ) were selected and participated in the process. To ensure anonymity of the data, the respondents were coded by numbers (e.g., I1 to I5) and only using their country initials, as follows: Greece- GR; Romania- RO.

## **3. Results & Discussion**

Recognizing teachers' beliefs about inclusive pedagogy is considered a crucial element not only in cultivating a positive stance towards inclusive education, but also in implementing inclusive teaching practices. According to Florian (2014), it is important for university teachers to conscientiously adopt teaching methods that benefit all learners and cultivate a sense of community in order to promote inclusive education. A structured mechanism for university teachers is needed in order to self-evaluate their knowledge, comprehension, and methods for implementing suggested inclusive approaches.

### **3.1 University teachers' understanding of inclusive pedagogies**

When asked about their understanding of inclusive pedagogies during interviews, the teachers provided a range of responses. These varied from viewing them as a strategy or a mindset aimed at engaging and involving all students, ensuring that no student is left behind, and considering the specific needs of students with special requirements. It also encompassed the idea of having a well-planned pedagogical approach with a set of activities for a course as portrayed by a Greek academic:

*'One word (for inclusion): no student left behind...that is, all students should be somehow involved, somehow learning. I'm going to get a student involved who may have a visual difficulty a ...a student who has a learning difficulty, a student who has ....many students and particularly in our schools have anxiety disorders, they have other difficulties: to engage, they have different things, so yeah...kind of a little bit to understand them. Within that context I do something else at the beginning of ... of the course. I give a questionnaire anonymously of course, to understand some of these things and the peculiarities that students have. How much stress they have, what difficulties they might have. (I4\_Gr)*

The teachers acknowledged the diverse needs of students, including those with learning difficulties, disabilities, different language backgrounds, and varying worldviews. One teacher stressed the distinction between students' learning needs and their diverse backgrounds. For the teachers, inclusivity meant not only providing equal access to a safe learning environment, but also offering equal opportunities for growth and development, making education meaningful for all. Some teachers highlighted the value of considering what students can contribute, drawing from their own experiences and backgrounds. Additionally, the teachers highlighted the importance of avoiding any comments that may be deemed racist or sexist.

*'I believe that inclusive education is an essential aspect of higher education. Inclusive education means that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or abilities, have the opportunity to learn and succeed in an environment that values diversity and promotes equity. Inclusive education practices can benefit all students, including those with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, and first-generation college students. I consider that universities have a responsibility to create an inclusive learning environment that welcomes and supports all students. This includes providing accommodations and resources to students with disabilities, promoting cultural awareness and diversity, and addressing systemic barriers that may limit access and opportunities for marginalized students' (I4\_Ro).*

One teacher raised concerns about the competitive nature of higher education, noting that certain programs and courses may predominantly attract students from privileged backgrounds, potentially leaving others with fewer opportunities due to high demand. This can lead to more homogeneous groups that are inadvertently exclusive.

Regarding the fit of inclusive teaching in higher education, the teachers expressed a strong belief that it not only fits, but is indeed a necessity, as one interviewee pinpointed:

*'yes, I strongly believe so. The educational pathway of students with disabilities should not stop at high school. Universities have enough resources to provide educational accommodations , but should also invest in providing support mechanisms that will target students' academic success, '(I1\_Ro)*

Some teachers acknowledged that adopting inclusive education requires a shift in mindset, as higher education has historically been exclusive in nature (O'Leary, Shapiro et al., 2020) and teachers have tended to prioritize dissemination of content while often neglecting students' academic competence-building.

The interviewees suggested that universities may need time to adapt, but emphasized that inclusive education is the way forward. One teacher noted the importance of inclusive education in preparing individuals to be active participants in a democratic society, equipping them with the necessary skills, especially in an era of misinformation and the need for critical thinking.

### **3.2 Developing awareness about students' learning needs**

In the interviews, academics often acknowledged the need for more cooperation between students and academics. While there may be an implicit expectation that students must be aware of their

needs, this is a complicated matter and cannot be taken for granted as students' needs in higher education are diverse and often unexplored:

*"What we expect from students when they come to tertiary education is [...] to know what are their needs and expectation as student." (I1\_GR)*

The same interviewee expressed that university teachers have a responsibility in :

*„we need to create learning environments where students can detect what they need and want through questions or questionnaires. To achieve this, I often ask questions with regards to participation needs or group dynamics. I try to encourage students to share their opinions and thoughts, I explain them the challenges of group dynamic." (I1\_GR)*

In the interviews, teachers gave examples of interactive course design as a way to meet student needs and one example involves asking the students in the beginning of a course if there is something they think the teacher should know about them from the start.

*`I put a lot of attention on course content: creating a curriculum that incorporates diverse social and cultural perspectives and on teaching methods: developing a broad repertoire of teaching methods to address learning ... of students from different social backgrounds more effectively` (I3\_Ro)*

Another aspect pointed out by a teacher is that not all students like to read, and it may be good to have lectures recorded for those who struggle with the reading. Assessment is mentioned as a critical element where students with dyslexia for instance may need other ways of presenting their knowledge than in a paper and pencil test.

*`Depending on the students' characteristics, I make sure that they all have access to materials and activities we do. For example, I have had several students with visual impairments in several courses, so I needed to ensure that the information reaches them through a non-visual channel, and the activities were adapted so that they could participate` (I1\_Ro)*

Teachers mentioned having a dialogue with students with special needs as regards options in assessment format and procedure. One teacher explained that teachers need to be sensitive to different needs, so that they can recognize when they meet students with certain needs.

### **3.3 Adapting to students' different ways of learning**

Multimodal input and engagement opportunities in and out of class is also suggested as a viable means of implementing I-ScP:

*"Courses are both online and face-to-face. So, we don't exclude anybody in that respect do we? Also, the material is not only reading, it's also video, so in that respect anyone can access it according to their particular needs" (I5\_Gr).*

Additionally, some teachers share instances where students request special accommodations that could potentially alter the intended course goals and the skills the course aims to develop, potentially compromising the course's integrity. One teacher explicitly emphasizes the need for discernment in determining when accommodations are feasible, especially when a physical disability poses a genuine obstacle to performing certain activities, and when an accommodation would entail a different task altogether.

*`when I teach in amphitheatres that do not have modular desks is a huge problem. I used to have a student in a wheelchair and she had to stay just in front of the first desk. It was so uncomfortable for her, because she wanted to stay next to her colleagues. In some old university buildings, we do not have an elevator and I think some classes have a smaller entrance door that will not enable a student in a wheelchair to enter. Other missing resources are: the lack of a tactile rug for blind students because at our university, at my department of special education we always have visually impaired students. But we also need some sound amplifiers for our students who have problems with hearing...I think that is necessary in all the students secretariat office because there is just a small open window between students and*

*the secretary responsible, I think we could all benefit from this resource even if we have or do not have hearing impairment (I3\_Ro)*

In the interviews, teachers are queried about how they encourage students to take the lead. A common response is through the implementation of interactive teaching methods that foster engagement in classroom discussions. They also highlight the significance of group work and assigning small research projects to activate students.

Personalized feedback, with the help of technology, is identified as a pivotal tool for empowering students to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Providing students with clear instructions and information about expectations also contributes to empowerment and inclusive education, according to one teacher. Another teacher underscores the importance of maintaining high expectations for students, accentuating that they are present to learn and should come prepared for seminars, without considering lowering standards. This aligns with the think-pair-share principle, wherein students are encouraged to contemplate before class, engage in paired or small group discussions, and share their thoughts collectively.

### **3.4 Encouraging perspective-taking in the classroom based on non-judgmental approaches to discussing cultural, social or other types of differences**

In the interviews, teachers emphasize that inclusive teaching involves considering diverse backgrounds. One teacher advocates for a perspective-based approach that allows for the presentation of different viewpoints, ensuring that all perspectives are valued equally without showing favoritism. They provide an example of how students from various backgrounds can serve as valuable resources, acting as "living encyclopaedias" and explaining how to approach sensitive subjects from their own perspectives. This approach involves actively including the students by asking for their input. Also, in line with recent literature, providing students with reasonable choices fosters inclusive learning environments (Collins, Azmat & Rentschler, 2019; Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2023). As one teacher aptly puts it, embracing differences enriches us.

*'I usually assign group projects or allow students to take turns leading class discussions or activities because this can give students a sense of ownership and responsibility over their learning. I am very keen on providing opportunities for students to make choices about their learning and by this, I mean I encourage them to select their own topics for research papers, choosing from a variety of project options, or selecting the format for a presentation' (I1\_GR).*

In this response, it is germane to note that i-ScP practices include allowing students to make research choices and act as equal partners by presenting new input. It also indicates teachers' awareness of group dynamics and instructional choices being conducive to student agency and ownership.

Another effective method of empowering students is to foster an environment where questioning is encouraged, and students feel accepted for who they are, treated with respect and feel that their teacher is there for them, willing to listen and give advice if necessary:

*'To build trust, I give them space and freedom to ask questions and ...and solve things on their own and I see that working.' (I2, Gr). Also, 'in the first class I tell them that I'm available by mail, phone and office. You can bother me at any time... also at the end of the course [...]they come and ask me and so I take all the questions, [...]and I see that slowly building and more and more people are coming. Still, I tell them that if anyone wants to tell me anything personal and so on, the office is open' (I2\_Gr)*

Moreover, teachers pointed out the importance of focusing on the entire group as a unified entity, rather than singling out individuals or subgroups. This approach underscores inclusivity, focusing on unity rather than highlighting differences.

Another critical component of I-ScP is personalized learning opportunities. As vast student numbers in a lecture theatre can become a learning barrier, students may feel that the teaching style or lecture



delivery is quite impersonal and generic, and this feeling may be intensified if they do not receive adequate and diversified feedback. To tackle this issue, university teachers are looking for ways they can strengthen this component by providing examples of diverse perspective-taking and feedback through online quizzes or videos: '[Students] send [the teacher] videos and [the teacher] responds to them in videos. [...] I have the text, on which I have put my comments on but at the same time I show the text in the video and at the same time I am correcting the video ....in the video while I am correcting it I am showing it.' [I5\_Gr].

Time allocated to formative assessment and experiential learning is another way suggested by teacher as a form of establishing I-ScP:

*"Participatory learning and [...] formative assessment means I'm putting in assignments, I'm in class with the students participating. That's very important in formative assessment, that is the experiential part that we talked about before. They are all connected to each other, they are not concepts in isolation. We cannot see them in isolation, there are links in this chain whose end is LEARNING."* (I5\_Gr).

As shown in this response, creating experiential tasks as part of formative assessment does not only increase student participation but also their sense of belonging in an inclusive community of learning. This response is in line with Swanson & Deshler (2003) who maintain that formative assessment in the form of mini products can raise student awareness regarding their own strengths and weaknesses facilitating self-regulation through adequate support and feedback.

Other ways of amplifying the sense of personalized feedback is by utilizing peer-feedback opportunities in or out of class: 'when I'm doing this assignment for the evaluation, the evaluation is given for the students. So, there's what we call the mutual teaching .... the evaluation should not be punitive...evaluation needs to be done in many ways and from many angles to ensure objectivity. The goal is improvement with the goal of learning' (I5\_Gr).

This response indicates that multimodal feedback and peer-feedback can be of value to students as teaching models steer away from the assumption that the lecturer is the only one correct authoritative source of knowledge.

However, teachers also acknowledge the challenges that can arise when not all students appreciate the importance of considering different perspectives, and they must navigate these situations.

*'Sometimes it's difficult, especially when there are many, but I try to offer them a safe space, a space where mistakes are a learning context. I always tell them this to alleviate their fear of making mistakes and ridicule, which often inhibits initiative. I think I succeed most of the time, in general, after the first meetings, they understand that we have an open environment where they can express themselves' (I5\_Ro)*

### **3.5 It is important to embrace diversity in the classroom**

In the interviews, teachers are queried about how they ensure they reach all of their students. This question prompts some teachers to reflect on whether they are achieving this goal or if it is even possible, despite it being their aim. Teachers acknowledge that smaller groups of students naturally facilitate this process. The strategies for reaching all students encompass various elements, such as leveraging communication technology and email, maintaining regular contact with students during office hours, and extending availability by staying a bit longer after class. Additionally, teachers call attention to the importance of employing diverse learning strategies and classroom activities to cater to students with different needs.

*'I think that meeting students' learning needs involves customizing instruction, teaching strategies, and assessments to fit each student's learning style, abilities, and interests. It is a lot of hard work but I tend to use different teaching methods and materials, if my technical*

*abilities allow me, multimedia or digital tools to make learning more engaging and accessible and relevant to them. I have a class where my students showcase some of the learning apps that they have discovered and this is how I learn from them, as well` (I4\_RO).*

In summary, although teachers perceive that inclusive teaching is already taking place to a significant extent, there remains room for improvement in ensuring that students perceive their needs are being met to the same degree as teachers believe they are. As most teachers expressed concerns regarding the feasibility of individual accommodations, given the vast student numbers in lecture theatres, we embrace the work of Lombardi, Murray, and Dallas (2013: 221) who called for the need to provide I-ScP academic development opportunities to 'promote universal design for student participation and success without extensive individualized accommodations and support'.

Another approach is for teachers to be more explicit about their inclusive practices, without singling out students or making them feel stigmatized, but rather by explaining how these approaches are universally applied for the benefit of everyone.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Teachers interviewed in this study verify underpinning principles of inclusive teaching practices published in the literature. Our findings reinforce the view that although they need further academic development opportunities, they acknowledge that potential barriers in I-ScP learning and assessment are not limited to disabled students and if designed proactively, they can benefit all students (Collins et al., 2019) and they are willing to improve their inclusive practices. As shown herein, I-ScP academic development can be implemented with the proviso that accessibility, engagement, learning output and self-regulation opportunities can be adequately designed and improved to benefit all students.

As such, academics can take responsibility for how their own instructional choices can improve inclusive student learning. In line with the social model of inclusion, using means of identifying potential learning barriers as a response to individual student needs may stigmatise students. By contrast, the provision of multimodal forms of input and output in conjunction with diverse inclusive choices can improve not only student contribution and agency in terms of access, engagement and student output, but also increase their sense of belonging and ownership for their own learning (Lapan, et al. 2002). This is also supported by Olivier (2021:22) whose work verifies that multimodal teaching strategies and assessment "attend to students' varying individual needs and [...] and can accommodate different learning styles of individual students."

The connection between the Bologna process and inclusive, student-centred learning lies in their shared objectives of enhancing the quality and accessibility of higher education across Europe. The process of "Bologna Declaration" that started in 1999 and still continues to shape the higher education systems across Europe is aimed at creating single European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with harmonized and interrelated national educational systems through fostering mobility, transparency and comparability among them. In this respect, inclusive student-centred learning is relevant to the objectives of the Bologna Process which includes engaging students as well as acknowledging differences among students. Universities can assist student movements within EHEA through adopting an inclusive mode of instruction that accounts for different student needs and backgrounds.

Moreover, some of the characteristics associated with student-centered education include action learning; team work; personalization; all these can lead to various competencies necessary for a successful student during his/her study period given the diversity produced by Bologna process on academicians' purposes. Consequently, a relationship exists between Bologna process and inclusion centred towards students because they both seek to improve higher education's quality inequity and pertinence across Europe.



To conclude with, the higher education system must continue put the stress on the fact that all students are entitled to more transparent and equitable learning systems that put forward the provision of adequate formative and personalised feedback that not only prevents student failure, but also empowers capacity building, self-regulation and progress for all students.

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