Navigating Diversity: Examining Curricular and Pedagogical Factors in Promoting Inclusion

How inclusive are the curricula and pedagogical practices at the University of Amsterdam? What factors hinder or promote inclusion in our international classrooms? How do international students assess the cultural competences and sensitivities of lecturers in the design and delivery of curricula?

To explore these questions, we organized a seminar on Friday, June 21, from 11:00 to 13:00, bringing together students from diverse faculties and departments. The seminar featured key highlights from two studies conducted with international students at the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities by Sonya Boyle and Anna Bonfiglio. These studies provided valuable insights into student perspectives and lived experiences.

Following the presentations, Dr. Ceren Abacioglu and Dr. Hülya Altinyelken led a collective reflection with the audience to interpret the findings and develop actionable recommendations and strategies to enhance inclusion in our diverse classrooms. This document presents the key takeaways from the student discussions divided into three sections: curriculum quality and inclusivity; classroom pedagogy; and teacher cultural competences.

Curriculum Quality and Inclusivity:

1. **Impact of University Demographics on Curriculum Expectations**
   The demographic makeup of the university affects students' expectations regarding diversity in the curriculum. Many students do not expect teachers to adapt to their needs; instead, they feel the pressure to adapt themselves to the established curriculum.

2. **Teachers' Knowledge and Engagement**
   Students expressed concerns that some teachers may lack the experience or interest to integrate diverse perspectives into the curriculum. This disconnect can lead to the reinforcement of value judgments that overlook different systems (for example, only mentioning things about the Chinese education system that are negative) and fail to highlight what is also positive about them. The challenge lies in encouraging teachers to recognize the value of diverse perspectives and integrate them into their teaching.

3. **Outdated Teaching Materials and the Canon**
   The curriculum often relies on an established canon of texts, many of which are outdated or reflect Western biases. Students suggested that providing context for these texts—explaining their limitations, biases, or historical roots—would enhance understanding. Additionally, discussions on who constructed the knowledge and the power dynamics behind what is considered "good" or "bad" could offer a more critical, inclusive perspective.

4. **Western-Centered Curriculum**
   Students noted that not only the texts, but also the curriculum is heavily Western-centered, and many teachers seem indifferent to this imbalance. The focus on the general history of the field often neglects other valuable perspectives, leaving the curriculum somewhat limited in scope.

5. **Diversity in the Curriculum**
   Defining and implementing diversity is complex, as it means something different to everyone. However, awareness of diversity can serve as a mediator for better learning outcomes. Students emphasized the importance of thinking from multiple angles, reading critically, and fostering a broader understanding of what diversity entails.

6. **Recommendations for Improvement**

- **More Involvement of Faculty Diversity Officers**
  Faculty diversity officers could play a greater role in working with professors and curriculum development, particularly to raise awareness of Western-centric approaches and consider the changing demographics of the student body.
- **Marketing to a Broader Demographic**
  More marketing efforts could target students who do not fit the typical university demographic, ensuring the student body becomes more diverse over time.
- **Hiring Younger Lecturers**
  There could be an emphasis on hiring younger lecturers who may be more open to incorporating diverse perspectives and updating outdated curriculum approaches.
- **Adapt the Classroom to the Students**
  Instead of expecting students to adapt to the existing curriculum, the classroom environment could be more flexible in adapting to the needs and perspectives of the students.

Classroom Pedagogy:

1. **Addressing Diverse Needs in the Classroom**
   Students have varying preferences—some prefer more structure, while others seek flexibility. Standardizing teaching methods can be challenging, but one key step is for teachers to explicitly emphasize the importance of respect within the classroom. For example, Dutch students speaking their language in international classrooms can exclude non-Dutch speakers. Encouraging inclusivity through language use is critical.
2. **Creating a Safe Learning Environment**
   Some students reported feeling unsafe in their educational environment, often due to the behavior of their peers. For instance, students with non-Western backgrounds mentioned experiencing micro-aggressions. To foster psychological safety, it is important to set clear guidelines for kindness and respect, especially in larger groups. In smaller settings, teachers should ensure that all students have the opportunity to speak without dominating the conversation. Teachers can also check in with students privately to ensure they feel heard.
3. **Building Teacher-Student Connections**
   A key factor in creating a safe space is the attitude of the teacher. Students noted that building rapport and having light-hearted interactions (such as making jokes) can make a significant difference. However, they also observed that older professors often seem more disconnected from students, which can hinder this connection.
4. **Focusing on Equity Over Equality**
   Teachers often focus on treating all students equally, but this can overlook the specific needs of some students. The focus should shift towards equity, providing support based on individual needs. Teachers may fear being accused of favoritism, but addressing inequities is essential for a truly inclusive learning environment.
5. **Timely Feedback Mechanisms**
   Students emphasized the importance of gathering feedback during the course, rather than waiting until the end. End-of-course evaluations can be biased by recent experiences or grades. Mid-course feedback gives teachers a clearer understanding of how students are doing and empowers students to shape their learning experience.
6. **Involving Course Coordinators**
   Course coordinators could be more actively involved in understanding the dynamics of the

classroom. Their awareness of student feedback and issues during the course can lead to better support for both students and lecturers.

7. **Enhancing Participation Through Online Tools**
   Using online discussion boards can help engage all students in class discussions. Anonymous contributions can be collected, and students can vote on which topics to discuss in class. This ensures that all voices are heard, and the discussion remains inclusive. Clear and structured assignments for these boards help guide participation.

8. **Diversifying Perspectives with Guest Lecturers**
   Inviting guest lecturers from diverse backgrounds can enrich the learning experience by introducing new perspectives. Teachers can also ask students with different backgrounds about their experiences. However, there needs to be a balance between highlighting underrepresented perspectives and avoiding making certain students feel like they must act as spokespeople for their backgrounds.

9. **Fostering a Safe Space for Questions**
   Teachers could foster an environment where students feel comfortable asking questions, by explicitly stating and demonstrating that there are no "stupid" questions. This encourages open dialogue and learning.

10. **Training in Diversity and Inclusion**
    Regular D&I (Diversity and Inclusion) training is essential for teachers to understand how to interact with diverse students. This includes awareness of differences in age, gender, culture, and other identity factors that affect learning dynamics.

Teacher Cultural Competences

1. **Promote Conversations About Inclusivity**
   Lecturers could actively engage with their colleagues on how to be more inclusive in their teaching practices. Regular discussions can help foster a more inclusive academic environment.

2. **Pedagogical Training for Inclusivity**
   Continuous pedagogical training is crucial. Lecturers could receive training that focuses on inclusion, helping them to understand and apply inclusive methods in their teaching.

3. **Facilitating Peer Learning Among Teachers**
   Lecturers could be encouraged to share their experiences and insights with each other, providing an opportunity to learn from one another's challenges and successes in promoting inclusivity.

4. **Yearly Reflection on Inclusion**
   A structured, annual reflection on the difficulties and successes related to inclusion would allow faculties to assess their progress and identify areas for improvement.

5. **Openness to Learning Among Younger Lecturers**
   Students noted that younger lecturers often display greater openness to learning and are generally more inclusive. This is an encouraging trend that faculties could support across all levels of teaching experience.

6. **More Time for Training**
   Allocating more time for lecturers to undergo training on inclusivity would ensure that they are better prepared to meet the needs of diverse classrooms.

7. **Genuine Attempts at Inclusion**
   It is essential for lecturers to be genuine in their efforts to be inclusive. Students value authenticity in their teachers' approaches to diversity and inclusion.

8. **Midterm Feedback**
   Students emphasized the importance of being able to give feedback during the term, not just at the end. This allows for timely adjustments in teaching practices.

9. **Flexibility, Openness, and Broad Knowledge**
   Flexibility, openness to different perspectives, and a broad knowledge base are key qualities students appreciate in inclusive lecturers. However, students also recognize that there is no such thing as a perfect teacher.

10. **Role of Moderators**
    When moderating discussions, neutrality is important. Moderators could assign groups with diverse perspectives and establish clear guidelines to ensure a balanced exchange of ideas.

11. **Learning Across Faculties**
    Lecturers could share best practices and learn from each other's experiences to continually improve their approach to inclusivity.