

Offline Versus Remote Teaching: Exploring Cultural Minority Student and Teacher Perceptions of Inclusive Learning Environments in Higher Education

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Abstract

Perceived inclusiveness of higher education (HE) learning environments plays a major role in the academic outcomes and well-being of cultural minority students. Teachers create more inclusive learning environments through practices (i.e., culturally responsive teaching), especially if teachers share their students' cultural minority status. In this qualitative study, we investigated how cultural minority students and teachers perceived changes in the inclusiveness of their HE learning environment during the transition from offline to remote teaching (RT) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted online focus group interviews with twelve cultural minority students and five cultural minority teachers at a large urban university in the Netherlands. Thematic analysis revealed four teaching principles that contributed to the perceived inclusiveness in both the offline and RT learning environment: an inclusive curriculum, culture-related and caring teaching practices, cultural representation, and available (tech) resources. Students and teachers perceived caring teaching practices to be more important in RT compared to the offline learning environment. Teachers considered access to technological resources particularly important for making RT more inclusive for students. Findings emphasise the need for empirical research on online pedagogies during RT, incorporating the perspectives of cultural minority students and teachers.

Keywords: Higher education, remote teaching, inclusiveness, cultural minority, qualitative research

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While many educationalists around the world strive to achieve inclusivity in higher education (HE) many students of cultural minority groups are struggling to fit in the educational system (Shyman, 2015; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). In this study, the term cultural minority is used as umbrella term to entail ethnic minority, racial minority, national minority, and/or persons with a migration background, as is common in European scholarship (e.g., Vietze et al., 2019). Perceived inclusiveness of learning environments in HE is defined by Lee et al. (2014) as making students feel welcomed, respected, valued, and supported. According to these authors, achieving an inclusive learning environment is necessary to make each student feel comfortable and to allow students to integrate academically.

Despite the importance of inclusion for all students, current HE learning environments are often tailored to students from cultural majority groups (García et al., 2021), undermining the potential positive effects of an inclusive learning environment for cultural minority students' well-being and academic achievement (Lee et al., 2014). From a teacher perspective, while creating and sustaining an inclusive HE learning environment can be challenging in offline, face-to-face education (Civitillo et al., 2017; Schachner et al., 2016), remote teaching (RT) as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to additional difficulties, such as connecting to students in terms of building trust and a bond with each other (Fletcher et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2023; Korthals Altes et al., 2023). RT is a momentary shift of teaching instruction to an alternative form due to crisis circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, extreme weather conditions or circumstances where refugees do not get the opportunity to follow education at a safe place, versus online learning environments where the online courses are pre-planned (Jiang et al., 2023).

This qualitative study aims to better understand cultural minority students' and teachers' unique experiences of remote learning in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we investigated how cultural minority students and cultural minority teachers perceived inclusiveness of RT during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to mainly offline learning environments before the COVID-19 pandemic.

An Inclusive Higher Education Learning Environment

Prior studies on campuses in the United States have shown that it is important to create a diverse and supportive learning environment to make all students feel included (Dayley, 2020; Lee et al., 2014). Teachers play a significant role in fostering inclusiveness in any learning environment, for example by making students feel seen and heard (Bhatti et al., 2019; Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015). It starts with teachers recognising their students' need for more inclusion (Banks, 1993; Gay, 2013; Sandoval et al., 2020).

Multiple theoretical frameworks regarding diversity and inclusion propose that a focus on teaching through cultural diversity as well as a non-discriminatory climate at an educational institution may positively impact the learning outcomes of all students, including cultural minority and cultural majority students (Baysu et al., 2023; Civitillo et al., 2019; Gay, 2013; Schachner, 2019). For example, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is described as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of students to teach them effectively (Gay, 2002). By referring to existing prior knowledge of students, the learning content becomes more meaningful for them and therefore increases their interest and facilitates (deep) learning

(Civitillo et al., 2019; Gay, 2013). Including ethnic and culturally diverse content in the curriculum is an aspect of CRT that is often researched and found to have a positive impact on cultural minority students' success (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2013). This aspect emphasizes that a course should be created to suit diverse learning environments (Gay, 2002). Another aspect within CRT is cultural scaffolding, which involves leveraging students' own cultural backgrounds and experiences to broaden their intellectual horizons and enhance their academic success. Cultural scaffolding includes teachers showing culturally sensitive care and fostering culturally responsive learning environments (Gay, 2002).

Whereas much research on cultural diversity in education focuses on teacher attitudes, the actual perceptions of teaching practices remain understudied (Civitillo et al., 2019). Like CRT, the framework of cultural diversity approaches in schools encompasses both beliefs and practices related to the inclusion of culturally diverse students in education (Civitillo et al., 2019; Schachner et al., 2021). On the one hand, schools can promote *equality and inclusion*, meaning that they prefer to not focus on differences but rather similarities between students in a classroom. On the other hand—and sometimes even simultaneously—schools can promote *cultural pluralism*, meaning that they acknowledge and promote cultural differences, see diversity as a resource and an added value, and represent different cultures in teaching materials (Schachner et al., 2021). Whereas both approaches may aim to increase the inclusiveness of an educational environment in their own way—one by ignoring, and the other by acknowledging differences—we still lack a substantial understanding of how minority students and minority teachers in Europe perceive and promote these approaches in HE teaching practices. The present study will investigate the perceptions of cultural diversity teaching practices to determine which practices became more relevant to cultural minority students and teachers in RT times.

To be able to create a complete view and deep understanding of inclusive HE, we need to include the unique perceptions and experiences of cultural minority students and their cultural minority teachers (Navarro et al., 2022; Schachner, 2019). In this study, cultural minority members provide their own rich experiences of navigating RT during COVID-19, therefore adding important—yet in Europe understudied—narratives of the success, resilience, and empowerment of cultural minorities in HE (García et al., 2021; Shyman, 2015). Also, contrasting student and teacher perceptions of equality and diversity in this study allows us to identify the necessary areas of teacher training but also competencies of students and teachers for effectively promoting inclusive learning environments (Fine-Davis & Faas, 2014; Kim et al., 2024).

Inclusiveness in Offline Learning Environments versus in Remote Teaching

Offline learning environments, or on-campus education, has been studied elaborately in the last few decades (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018; Meskhi et al., 2019). Inclusive pedagogies, such as CRT, have also been studied extensively in offline learning environments (Civitillo et al., 2019; Schirmer & Lockman, 2022). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education worldwide needed to shift to RT without adequate tools or infrastructure for teachers (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023). This presented teachers with abrupt and unique challenges for creating not only pedagogically sound, but also inclusive learning spaces. During RT, teachers need to adapt to different circumstances and tools compared to the offline environment (Carrasco-Hernández et

al., 2023; Rice & Deschaine, 2020), and RT can benefit from the lessons learned from research in online education. For example, research in the United States showed that the perceived sense of connectedness of online students influenced the likelihood to continue with online courses (Tseng et al., 2022).

Earlier empirical findings have been inconclusive whether online learning environments are by default less inclusive than offline learning environments. Despite best-practice examples for creating inclusive online environments (e.g., Woodley et al., 2017), teachers may not always succeed in fostering high levels of community among online learners, due to an ineffective instructional design or a lack of directed facilitation of contact among students (Shea et al., 2006). Importantly, a qualitative study with African-American and Hispanic students showed that the mere lack of physical and social presence in online learning environments may be linked to experiences of isolation and frustration and directly affect students' communication and relationships with classmates (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018). In contrast, findings from universities in Russia considered access to online education as the first principle to create more inclusive learning environments for students (Meskhi et al., 2019). An explanation could be found in research from the United Kingdom, suggesting that the way of communication in online education is one of the reasons the online learning environment lacks inclusiveness (Funes & Mackness, 2018). Funes & Mackness (2018) state that due to reduced contact between teachers and students in online education, communication and presentation of learning content became more important than in an offline learning environment.

Recently, CRT in online learning environments has received increasing attention in educational research (Kim et al., 2024; Schirmer & Lockman, 2022; Woodley et al., 2017). Whereas CRT may be less evident in discussion forum posts and responses (Schirmer & Lockman, 2022), this theoretical framework covers mutual and different understandings, strategies, and challenges of students and their teachers related to inclusive online learning environments (Kim et al., 2024). However, little is known about the stability or adaptiveness of these understandings, strategies, and challenges over time and under changing contextual conditions. In the current study, we explore to what extent the perceptions related to CRT changed during the transition to RT as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research on the sudden impact of COVID-19 on education showed that because of the emergency situation educators were mostly focusing on the structure of their courses, by setting up online tutorials, lectures, and exams (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023; Thompson & Copeland, 2020). Exploring the possibilities of making online education inclusive for students was often neglected by teachers due to a shortage of resources. The shift in study routines and adjustments to course formats not only made students long to be heard and seen but also to feel less lonely during the sudden change of life and learning environments (Platt & Warwick, 2020; Thompson & Copeland, 2020).

In the present study, we explored the overarching question of how cultural minority students and teachers perceived inclusiveness of their learning environment in HE after the transition from offline to RT during the COVID-19 pandemic. We answered this question by exploring two sub-questions:

RQ 1) How important are inclusive elements of the offline learning environment and RT perceived by cultural minority students and teachers?

RQ 2) What are similarities and differences in inclusive elements of offline and RT HE learning environments?

By researching these questions, we aim to provide insight in the added value of the perspectives of both cultural minority students and teachers in HE.

Methods

Design

The present study is a qualitative study using focus group interviews with cultural minority students and cultural minority teachers in the Netherlands. Focus groups are well suited to provide rich and meaningful data on the topic of inclusiveness in HE (Barbour & Morgan, 2017; Leyerzapf & Abma, 2017). We conducted these focus groups between February and April 2021, after students and their academic institutions had experienced multiple transitions between offline teaching and RT since March 2020. Each transition, prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown rules, lasted from several weeks to several months.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

This study focused on the perceptions of cultural minority students and teachers who identified themselves as being part of a minority culture group in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2021). To recruit participants, we employed convenience sampling, including a combination of criterion sampling and snowball sampling (Barbour & Morgan, 2017). The recruitment of participants took place from December 2020 to February 2021. First, the first author e-mailed social sciences Bachelor students from a large research university in the Western part of the Netherlands. Students were asked to reply if they were interested in the study and fit the following criteria: (a) currently studying or having studied at the university at the moment of data collection; (b) identifying as part of a cultural minority; (c) speaking Dutch fluently, as the focus group interviews were conducted in Dutch; (d) started studying before December 2019 and/or gained extensive experience in the offline environment. Next, we recruited students through the snowball method (Barbour & Morgan, 2017), in which the first author and study participants informed fellow students who fit the inclusion criteria. In parallel, the second author recruited cultural minority teachers through email. The inclusion criteria to recruit teachers were: (a) teaching or having direct teaching responsibilities at university (such as planning, execution, and/or evaluation of teaching); (b) identifying as part of a cultural minority; (c) speaking Dutch fluently; (d) started working at the university before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019.

The final sample consisted of twelve cultural minority students and five cultural minority teachers (Table 1). The student sample consisted of both females ($N = 8$) and males ($N = 4$), and the teacher sample consisted of only females. The age range of the students was 21 to 28 ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.42$), and for teachers the age range was 30 to 39 ($M_{\text{age}} = 34.20$). The sample represented a range of the largest cultural minority groups in the Netherlands, such as Turkish, Surinamese, and Moroccan (Statistics Netherlands, 2021). All participants, except one student, were connected to the social sciences faculty. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most participants had

not followed online or hybrid education. Only two students of our sample had experienced some type of online education prior to COVID-19, as part of studying abroad. The other participants had no prior experiences with online education.

We conducted five focus group interviews and one individual interview with a teacher. First, four students participated in a pilot focus group interview but did not meet all final sampling criteria (i.e., had not experienced RT) or were not studying at the moment of data collection). Because they provided rich descriptions of personal experiences regarding inclusiveness in offline HE, we decided to include the pilot data for parts of the analysis (i.e., only regarding the offline learning environment). After finalizing the sampling criteria based on the pilot study, we interviewed two additional groups of cultural minority students and conducted three focus group interviews with cultural minority teachers. Apart from one interview that was conducted with a single participant, the focus groups varied in size from two to five participants.

Data Collection Procedure

We conducted the focus group interviews online via *Zoom* between February and April 2021. The goal of the focus group interviews was to explore cultural minority students' and teachers' perceptions of inclusiveness in the offline learning environment and during RT in HE. The focus of the interviews was to identify elements that would make learning environments more or less inclusive for cultural minority students. Thus, next to teachers' personal experiences of inclusion in HE, teachers were also asked questions regarding how they perceived, anticipated, and facilitated inclusive learning environments for their students.

To ensure methodological integrity, we created an interview outline (see Appendices 4 and 5) (Levitt et al., 2017). We created separate topic lists for the student and teacher interviews. To facilitate the flow of the focus group interviews and provide valuable context information, participants completed a short questionnaire before the interviews including personal data such as name, age, study programme, and with which culture they identify. The latter was an open question in which participants could describe their own culture, while some example answers were given (e.g., Dutch, Surinamese, Dutch-Surinamese...). Additionally, they graded how included they felt at their current university from 1 (= not included at all) to 10 (= very included). These grades were later used to prompt discussion during the focus group interviews. To facilitate storytelling, we asked the participants to think of concrete examples of inclusive and non-inclusive experiences at the university in preparation for the focus group interview.

To create a safe space for the participants to share their experiences, each focus group interview started with a short introduction round. To establish the main topic, the participants were first asked to define inclusiveness in their own words. After that, the interviewer provided a working definition of an inclusive learning environment in HE, namely, making students feel welcomed, respected, valued, and supported (Lee et al., 2014). To facilitate the conversation around inclusive learning environments, participants ranked inclusive curriculum elements (Radstake, 2017), first for the offline and then for the RT learning environments and elaborated on their ranking choices by use of concrete examples. Inclusive curriculum elements included for example "teaching and learning contexts," which can be described as course contents and teaching materials consisting of inclusiveness-related theoretical and practical knowledge (Radstake, 2017). The ranking was based on what the participants perceived as the most

important (1) to the least important element (7) to feel included at university. At the end of the interview, there was room for the participants to share more experiences regarding inclusiveness at university.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics (Students and Teachers)

Name (Anonymized)	Role	Gender (M/ F)	Age	Cultural Self Identification	Study Programme	Grade Inclusive -ness Students (1-10) ^a	Grade Inclusive -ness Teachers (1-10) ^b
Brandon	Bachelor Student	M	24	Dutch- Indonesian	Psychology	8	-
Chayenne	Master's Student	F	25	Dutch- Surinamese	Governance and managemen t of complex systems	7	-
Norah	Master's Student	F	23	Curaçaoan	Educational Sciences	4	-
Roshni	Bachelor Student	F	22	Dutch- Hindu- Surinamese	Pedagogical Sciences	9	-
Saphira	Master's Student	F	28	Surinamese- Creole	Public Administrat ion	7	-
Tano	Master's Student	M	22	African- Dutch	Psychology	6	-
Tijana	Master's Student	F	24	Dutch- Serbian	Clinical Child and Family Studies	7	-
Halima	Course coordinat or & tutor	F	39	Dutch- Moroccan	-	7	7

Irmak	Tutor	F	35	Turkish-Dutch	-	7	6.5
Jaanvi	Tutor	F	30	Dutch-Surinamese-Indian	-	6	7
Özlem	Practical coordinator	F	36	Dutch-Turkish	-	7	6.5
Ruby	Course coordinator & tutor	F	31	Belgian	-	6	6.5

^a Students graded how included they felt in their current (RT) learning environment. Teachers anticipated how included their students felt in the current (RT) learning environment.

^b The participants reported how included they felt in their current working environment.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2020). The focus within the analysis was on two different learning environments, namely the offline and RT learning environment, and on two different perceptions, namely of the cultural minority students and cultural minority teachers. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

We coded the data with the software *ATLAS.ti* (Syed & Nelson, 2015). The manner of coding was deductive and inductive, as both theories of culturally responsive teaching (CRT; Gay, 2002) and cultural diversity approaches (Civitillo et al., 2017; Schachner et al., 2016), and information from the interviews were used to create codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A first draft of the codebook was based on the theoretical frameworks, which we used to code two student focus group transcripts. The final codebook consisted of 25 codes, of which 13 codes were derived from cultural diversity approaches (Civitillo et al., 2017; Schachner et al., 2016) and five codes from CRT (Gay, 2002). The remaining seven codes were inductive, of which five codes were related to an inclusive climate and two codes specifically described the characteristics of participants.

In line with the constructivist paradigm, participants and researchers were considered as active co-constructors of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure trustworthiness, the first author constantly reflected on her role as a cultural minority researcher and how this may have influenced the data collection and analysis (Morrow, 2005). To improve the research rigor, we adapted the research tools (i.e., interview outline, questionnaires) after the pilot study (Levitt et al., 2017). Furthermore, fidelity was enhanced by following the guidelines to plan and conduct focus group interviews, and thematically analyse them (Barbour & Morgan, 2017).

The first and second author analysed and coded the data, which ensured reliability as we discussed the codes together and adjusted the codebook along the way. We calculated inter-rater agreement through *ATLAS.ti* with Krippendorff's alpha (α) using a full student focus group

interview. The inter-rater agreement of $\alpha = 0.84$ meant that coding was assumed reliable and there was sufficient agreement between the coders (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

Ethics

Prior to the focus group interviews, the participants filled in and signed a consent form. In this consent form, all the participants gave their informed and active consent for audio recording and use of the focus group interview data for research. The participants received an alias to ensure the anonymity of the data. Additionally, personal information given in the interview itself was anonymised. During the focus group interviews, a safe environment was created by giving the participants the freedom to leave the interview at any moment if they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. The study design was approved by the ethics committee of the HE institution where the research was conducted (application number #19-056a).

Results

The focus of this study was to compare perceptions of inclusiveness of offline and RT learning environments in HE by cultural minority students and cultural minority teachers. By means of thematic analysis, four themes emerged that represented core teaching principles that contributed to the perceived inclusiveness of the learning environment, namely (1) an inclusive curriculum, (2) culture-related and caring teacher practices, (3) cultural representation, and (4) available (tech) resources. In total, we coded 252 segments. The results are reported in the order of the four themes. Within each theme, we first describe the most important elements for perceived inclusiveness of the offline learning environment and then RT (RQ1). Second, we elaborate on similarities and differences between the offline learning environment and RT, and between student and teacher perceptions (RQ2). Finally, we provide summary of the most important findings. To illustrate the findings, we use pseudonymised coded segments from the focus group interviews. In Table 2 below, we have given an overview of perceived inclusive aspects in offline learning environments and in RT environments. We highlighted aspects that are different in italics.

Table 2

Overview of Perceived Inclusive Aspects in Offline Versus Remote Teaching Learning Environments

Themes	Offline learning environment	Remote teaching
1) Inclusive curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including articles of diverse authors • Learning focused on different (religious) beliefs and groups • Learning not to discriminate based on cultural background • Including diverse examples in learning materials • Use cultural scaffolding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including articles of diverse authors (mentioned by students only) • Learning focused on different (religious) beliefs and groups • Learning not to discriminate based on cultural background • Including diverse examples in learning materials • Use cultural scaffolding

2) Teacher practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a safe environment • <i>Not discriminating between students</i> • <i>Asking about cultural experiences (e.g. 'How is this experienced in your heritage culture?')</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A suitable way of assessment (mentioned by students only)</i> • Creating a safe environment • <i>Being approachable for students</i> • <i>Asking about student well-being (e.g. 'How are you doing?')</i> (mentioned by students only)
3) Cultural representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of students and teachers • <i>Lectures from culturally diverse teachers</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of students and teachers • <i>Out-of-classroom experiences strengthening the bond with fellow students</i> (mentioned by students only) • <i>Promoting culturally diverse student organisations</i> (mentioned by students only)
4) Available (tech) resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Facilitating student performance by supporting learning materials</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Facilitating a working laptop with a camera and microphone, and a stable internet connection</i> (mentioned by teachers only)

Inclusive Curriculum

The theme “inclusive curriculum” is described as a curriculum covering inclusive elements in HE. This means that the curriculum is designed with diverse topics suiting various cultural experiences but also learning intercultural competences. This theme consisted of 56 coded segments and is in line with the theoretical aspect “designing a culturally relevant curriculum” of CRT (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, in line with promoting cultural pluralism (Schachner, 2021), according to participants it is important that learning examples are focused on different religious beliefs and groups, but also on how people from different cultures can have different beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, students perceived being taught not to discriminate based on cultural background and to intervene when they witness ethnic discrimination as key elements of an inclusive curriculum. Effective discussions and conversations between students seemed to enhance the understanding of the curriculum as well as each other.

Most of the students and teachers considered inclusive curriculum elements as the most feasible option to increase the inclusiveness of the learning environments. Student Malini shared that the learning contents could be made more inclusive by including diverse examples: “I think that for example in the study programme of Psychology, we followed problem-based learning with those vignettes, you can easily adjust those and make it inclusive.” Another student emphasised the importance of integrating articles of diverse authors. Her perception was shared by most students and teachers and nuanced the theoretical aspect promoting cultural pluralism (Schachner, 2021):

I am very disappointed that in the years I have been studying at the [name university], the diversity in authors of suggested articles was very low. (...) I think of all the articles I had to read, only one article was written by a coloured person. (Chayenne, student)

Participants revealed that an inclusive curriculum is even more important during RT compared to the offline learning environment. A shared perspective of most of the students and teachers was that due to the sudden change to RT during COVID-19, the curriculum was one of the elements which needed to suit the students the most. As examples for an inclusive curriculum, participants revealed that assessments needed to be more inclusive as these were perceived to favour the majority culture students. Tano (student) elaborated on how important assessments are: “You should not be affected by the method of assessment because you have a different background et cetera. Assignments should not favour the cultural majority students more than the cultural minority students.”

An example of a teacher’s perspective on an inclusive curriculum is the quote of Özlem, a practical course coordinator, who perceived making the curriculum more inclusive as one of her most important tasks: “Education needs to contain it. (...) I would even adjust my teaching content if the university wouldn’t support it because I find it of high importance, and it is my duty.” Furthermore, teachers emphasised the need of focusing on students’ knowledge and earlier experiences. A general perception of the participants was that more diverse examples and nuanced cultural perspectives needed to be covered in the learning content. Additionally, cultural scaffolding could be used to let students identify more with the learning content, which consequently would result in positive learning outcomes.

To conclude, certain elements of the curriculum were perceived as important by students and teachers to enhance the inclusiveness of the learning environments. These included covering diverse examples, adding non-Western literature to learning materials, transforming these materials into relatable prior (cultural) knowledge and experiences of students, and making assessment methods more inclusive, especially during RT compared to the offline learning environment.

Teacher Practices

The second theme “teacher practices” is the whole of teacher efforts, beliefs, attitudes, and activities that are meant to make students feel more included in the HE learning environment, such as being open to prior (cultural) experiences of students and use them as an asset for discussions. Overall, 89 coded segments were covered by this theme. Different aspects of CRT were comparable to this theme, for example “demonstrating cultural caring and building a learning community” (Gay, 2002). Furthermore, similar to the aspect “fostering equality” of cultural diversity approaches (Schachner et al., 2021), equal treatment, support for contact, and cooperation among students and teachers were considered important to feel included in learning environments. In general, teachers demonstrating care for students was perceived as one of the key elements to create an inclusive learning environment.

Notably, students perceived the role of the teacher as essential to create a safe learning environment. Roshni shared: “It starts with the teachers, they can make things open for

discussion”. Another student, Nigel, explained that students will be encouraged if teachers create a safe and inclusive atmosphere “for students to feel free to express themselves.” In contrast, some teacher practices were perceived to make students feel discriminated against. An example of a non-inclusive learning environment, where the teacher’s attitude affected the student is illustrated by the following experience of a student. A teacher questioned her multiple times at the very beginning of her master’s programme if she was at the correct place, which made her uncomfortably conscious about her cultural background:

It was the first day of my master’s. (...) A coordinator or some other teacher was standing next to the door and for every student, the door was opened, and he heartily greeted everyone. Only when I entered (...) that teacher asked me three or more times if I was at the correct place and if I needed to enter there. (Chayenne, student)

Students perceived that it was easier to become invisible in the online classroom, and more challenging for teachers to prevent this. Saphira shared that teachers tried to enhance this process by putting students in smaller groups, in so-called “break-out rooms” in *Zoom*. She added that she found it pleasant that some teachers were approachable if students needed to share anything personal. Overall, teachers found it easier to create an inclusive learning environment in the offline classroom compared to the online classroom, as Jaanvi (teacher) shared “when you sit in a room with each other, you depend more on each other.” Nevertheless, demonstrating care towards the students, especially in challenging times like the COVID-19 outbreak, was perceived as highly important for teachers.

Both students and teachers shared the importance of teachers in creating an inclusive offline and RT learning environment. Perceptions differed on how much assistance was given by the university for creating inclusive learning environments. Ruby, a course coordinator and teacher, shared that she was actively trying to make her teaching more inclusive. However, she emphasised the importance of guidance from the university in creating an inclusive learning environment, and that she currently felt she had to figure it out by herself. A teacher who had a background in educational sciences was aware of CRT in her practices:

You must show interest to make students feel appreciated and seen. But also, from the didactic or educational perspective, it is important to spark the interest of students and suit their world to make sure the learning content sticks. (...) Because it then links to their knowledge or experience. (Irmak, teacher)

In conclusion, teacher practices such as attitudes and activities towards students are perceived to make students feel included in the learning environments in HE. Thus, it is crucial to create safe and inclusive learning environments for all students. Findings suggested that teachers need tools and more guidance to enhance the inclusiveness of the learning environments.

Cultural Representation

The third theme, “cultural representation,” refers to the diversity of students as well as teachers, but also the availability of and familiarity with student organisations. This theme not only covers the presence of diversity within students and teachers, but also the representation of

authors who are not from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) countries in suggested literature in curricula. In total, 53 of the coded segments were related to cultural representation. Different elements of “promoting cultural pluralism” of the cultural diversity approaches (Schachner et al., 2021) were found to have a positive impact on feeling included in the learning environment. For example, participants revealed that visual representation of different cultural minorities increased the sense of feeling at home. Noticing diverse students on the campus or being with them in the tutorial or practical groups, but also seeing diverse teachers lead (guest)lectures, tutorial, or practical groups decreased individual students’ feelings as the odd one out. Illustrating this, Heru (alumnus) shared that he felt more included in his master’s because he could “meet people from various cultures and countries.” Chayenne (student) added that she found it important to relate her experiences with the experiences of the teachers.

During RT, students indicated that opportunities to represent different cultures were essential to feel included. Students needed more spaces of cultural representation than only in the curriculum. Malini shared that she longed for an online place where she could share experiences or expectations. Between the offline learning environment and RT, there were not many differences in cultural representation. However, having contact with fellow students is perceived as harder during RT, which makes it even more difficult for students to find other students they can identify with. The university promoting diverse student organisations and illustrating them equally as the majority culture organisations seemed to strengthen the sense of feeling included as perceived by cultural minority students. This was highlighted by the quote of Chayenne, in which she addressed the importance of promoting culturally diverse student organisations: “I think a lot of students would love to get in contact with a fellow person of colour who understands your situation better. It would be nice to highlight them [culturally diverse student organisations] more.”

When student and teacher perceptions were compared, students seemed to emphasise the cultural representation in out-of-classroom experiences more. According to the participants, the importance of cultural diversity among teachers were perceived similar. Teachers seemed to recognise the need for cultural representation, which was illustrated in the following quote:

For students, it is quite exceptional to see someone with for example a Moroccan background in front of a lecture hall. I got feedback from a girl [student] that, you know that you are the first person I kind of look like? Because you have curls too. Youknow, it is that simple. (Halima, course coordinator and teacher)

Additionally, a teacher (Jaanvi) confirmed the lack of cultural diversity in her department staff. She considered this lack a “shame” and stressed the value of diversity: “For students coming from a village, they have never seen coloured people. (...) I think that as a teacher you can contribute, when having a different background, to various knowledge and different experiences.”

Altogether, being culturally represented in fellow students and teachers seemed to play a major role in feeling included. The findings suggested that the diversity of teachers and fellow students were both playing a key role to feel included as a student. The teachers considered the

current lack of cultural diversity in teachers as a point of improvement for the university. Out-of-classroom experiences, such as the availability of and familiarity with culturally diverse student organisations boosted the feeling of being represented as connections between students seem to be strengthened.

Available (Tech) Resources

The fourth and final theme was “available (tech) resources,” which consisted of 30 coded segments. This inductive theme covered the need of students for technological resources to study and communicate with teachers and fellow students, such as a laptop. Although students mentioned the need for the university to facilitate their learning process, this theme mainly focused on the needed (tech) resources during RT as it was perceived as more important compared to the offline learning environment.

When participants were asked how they would define inclusiveness of the learning environment in HE, most of them mentioned the need for support to perform well. Ratna (student) shared that when she would define inclusiveness, she would think of “everyone getting equal opportunities to perform and get the needed sources.” This perception was shared by other students as well, such as Brandon, who emphasised the importance of the university in creating equal opportunities. Universities ought to be responsible to facilitate learning, “if it is harder for certain people.”

The main difference between the offline learning environment and RT was the access to online education. Most teachers emphasised the importance of facilitating the needed sources for students to support creating an inclusive learning environment. Technical elements, such as a working laptop, a microphone, a camera, and a stable internet connection were perceived as very important to follow online education, which was considered as the basic need to include all students. Halima (course coordinator and teacher) perceived that it is much harder to create inclusiveness because “you miss that connection with the students.” Circumstances of online education seemed to make it harder to create an inclusive learning environment:

Sometimes you do not know who is in front of you, as in sometimes the camera does not work. (...) Because communication is difficult, I do notice that I have much less time and room for attention to inclusiveness. (...) So, to be able to take a step back and just have a conversation, that’s not possible with the online or recorded lectures.
(Halima, course coordinator and teacher)

While teachers were very particular about facilitating resources for students during RT, it was noticeable that the students did not emphasise the general need for extra support for resources during RT. In general, they did express their need for facilitating their performance, but specifically technological resources are mentioned by teachers only.

To conclude, findings suggested that the university was perceived to facilitate the students’ learning by offering resources. This theme was thought to be more important during RT, as the teachers emphasised the need for technological resources to follow online education smoothly by students without any limitations which could lead to an inclusive learning environment for all students.

Other Perceptions of Inclusive Learning Environments

Next to the four above-mentioned teaching principles, some other perceptions of inclusiveness of the learning environment were related to university policies regarding diversity and inclusion. As examples, students named the slogans used by the university which could enhance feelings of inclusivity by the choice of words. In addition to university policy, a general sense of belonging due to other characteristics than cultural background (e.g. social preferences) seemed to play a role too. This is illustrated by a perspective from a student who describes how initiatives from students fostered inclusiveness:

The inclusiveness I experience just comes from what we as students organize I think. So by contacting each other and by having group conversations [during RT]. It is not like I experience it from the university (...). It is because you search for things to be included. (Tano, student)

Furthermore, these characteristics played a role in the level of feeling included in the learning environment, such as relationships with other students, interest, and agency in bonding with others. Other experiences, such as working at the university also seemed to have a positive impact on the level of feeling included.

Difference in Perspectives Between Students and Teachers

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, students found that contact with teachers and fellow students was more important for feeling included than other aspects that were necessary in offline learning environments. Not all teachers appeared fully aware of their new caring role during RT, as they understandably focused more on transitioning to online education. Saphira (student) elaborates on her need to be heard by her teachers of the course, by the following quote:

I believe there are differences within the university, promoting feeling included, as you can say. For an example it would matter if a teacher actually explicitly says something like ‘if you want to share anything, you can always contact me for a Zoom conversation’ or something like that. (Saphira, student)

Due to the added vulnerability of cultural minority students during the pandemic, caring conversations were more valuable. These interpretations of the above-mentioned results are necessary to understand cultural minority students and teachers’ perspectives when generalising the findings to create inclusive learning environments.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate how cultural minority students and cultural minority teachers in HE perceive the inclusiveness of offline learning environments and RT. The perceived important inclusive elements are discussed (RQ1), as well as the similarities and differences of these elements between the two learning environments and student and teacher perspectives (RQ2). Focus group interviews with cultural minority students and cultural minority teachers revealed that perceptions of inclusiveness differed during RT compared to the offline

learning environment. Key findings indicate that both students and teachers view the teacher's role as crucial in creating an inclusive learning environment. However, students and teachers tend to focus on different aspects of teaching practice. RT needs to be inclusive on several domains, besides merely making teaching materials available online.

Regarding the first research question, students perceived teacher practices as important in creating an inclusive offline learning environment as well as during RT. Understanding the cultural characteristics and contributions of different cultures, using cultural scaffolding and using diverse culturally relevant examples in instruction are important elements that seem to have a positive impact on creating an inclusive learning environment. These findings reinforce the theoretical guidelines for CRT (Gay, 2002). As practical implication, teachers in HE may use cultural scaffolding in teaching culturally diverse students. Through cultural scaffolding teachers utilise their cultural knowledge and experiences to teach students, such as sharing culturally relevant experiences (Gay, 2002). Universities can support by organising workshops that focus on specific teaching strategies to create an inclusive environment, such as embracing the need to use caring teaching practices and valuing cultural pluralism (Civitillo et al., 2019; Rice & Deschaine, 2020; Robson et al., 2018). Awareness of the impact of caring practices by teachers (Kim et al., 2024), through discussing this concept with teachers and providing or co-creating tools for using caring practices, can be integrated in supporting workshops for teachers and through other forms of support.

Additionally, cultural representation was perceived as one of the most important inclusive elements of the offline learning environment. This can be explained by the need for feeling represented to increase the sense of belonging (García et al., 2021). Students will be able to connect more easily with teachers or fellow students when they have similar backgrounds (García et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2014). Cultural representation is still valued much during RT, but more on the level of student organisations where students can meet fellow cultural minority students. A possible explanation is a need for more connections during RT due to students' increased feelings of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020; Tseng et al., 2022). Based on these findings, universities are recommended to consider the level of cultural representation when forming their teaching team—which is dependent on the institutional policies as well as institutional practices regarding hiring procedures. Furthermore, not only the most popular student organisations that mostly endorse the majority culture should be promoted but also cultural minority student organisations (Campbell-Whatley et al., 2015).

Available (tech) resources are perceived to be the most important element during RT by teachers. The reason for this might be the extra sources needed to follow online education, such as technological resources (Funes & Mackness, 2018). While it might be possible to find or ask for these resources more easily in the offline learning environment, it is harder to do during RT (Jiang et al., 2023). Besides, the fact that not all students can follow online education can also be explained by financial differences between students (Gravlee, 2020). To make it possible to create a strong base for an inclusive online environment, it is recommended to make sure that all students have the technological resources (Meshki et al., 2019). Potential extra measures taken by universities to provide these resources need to be communicated clearly to the students.

Regarding the second research question, looking at the perceived similarities of both the

offline learning environment and RT, it seems that having an inclusive curriculum contributes to feeling included in both learning environments. Students perceive that learning about fellow students' heritage cultures, especially through discussions of personal experiences, enhances the feeling of inclusiveness in the learning environments (Banks 1993; Schachner et al., 2021). However, it seems more important during RT, as the sudden change to online education has created an unfamiliar situation (Jiang et al., 2023; Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020). The curriculum is perceived as one of the elements which needs to suit the students the most in emergency situations such as COVID-19 pandemic. It is recommended to make necessary adjustments alongside making learning materials available online, such as creating suitable assessment methods and content (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023; Thompson & Copeland, 2020). When comparing the experiences of both learning environments, the findings suggest that social presence is valued as an asset in fostering inclusion (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018).

Notably, one of the perceived differences between the two learning environments is teacher practices focused on creating an inclusive learning environment. In the online learning environment, teachers seem to play a significant role in creating an inclusive HE learning environment. Teachers demonstrating care towards the students are perceived as very valuable, for example by asking informally about how students are feeling. This could be explained by the sudden impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the well-being of students (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020). Since students have less contact with others, the need of feeling cared for increased. Future research should also include cultural majority teachers for inclusion workshops to better suit all teachers (Lee et al., 2014).

Finally, the perspectives of students and teachers seem to differ more in RT in comparison to the offline learning environment. This could be explained by the fact that other factors may play a role in feeling included during RT, compared to the offline learning environment (Funes & Mackness, 2018; Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018; Meskhi et al., 2019). When suddenly transitioning to RT, it is not only important to move the learning content into online lectures and tutorial groups, but the teachers and the students also need to be prepared for the change of learning environments (Jiang et al., 2023; Thompson & Copeland, 2020). Furthermore, students seem to long for out-of-classroom experiences and perceive these experiences as crucial in enhancing feeling included and in strengthening connections to other students (Dayley, 2020). In contrast, the teachers seem to value in-class experiences more, as they appear to have more control over these experiences (Jiang et al., 2023; Sandoval et al., 2020). We recommend for future research to focus on the difference in perceptions between students and teachers as they seem to be highly meaningful to minimise the obstacles for students of cultural minority groups to perform well and protect their well-being (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2014).

Participants in this study held contrasting opinions about the need for available (tech) resources during RT. Teachers experienced a lack of technological sources for students and perceived this lack as an obstacle to follow online education for students. These available (tech) resources can not only increase the inclusiveness of the learning environment but also enhance learning outcomes, such as being able to follow a full online tutorial without losing the network connection (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023; Platt & Warwick, 2020). Differences in social-economic status among students could cause unequal access to the needed resources for RT, such

as a laptop with access to a camera and microphone (Platt & Warwick, 2020; Tamtik & Guenter, 2020). However, in contrast to teachers, students did not specifically mention the lack of technical resources. Students did emphasise the importance of the university offering resources to facilitate learning (Lee et al., 2014), but more research is needed to explore the specific needs of students during RT (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023).

As most cultural-diversity research has focused on teaching attitudes, in this study we wanted to fill the gap in the understudied perceptions of teaching practices (Civitillo et al., 2019). The theoretical frameworks we used for coding were diversity perspectives (Civitillo et al., 2019; Schachner, 2019) and CRT (Gay, 2002). The findings suggested that teachers were mostly occupied with general teaching practices during RT, such as shifting to online courses and available (tech) resources, instead of culturally sensitive teaching practices. Students perceived caring teacher practices valuable, as teachers' caring conversations and gestures were much needed to feel inclusive during RT. Earlier research has shown that these caring practices of teachers are similarly valued in online learning environments (Gardner & Leary, 2023; Kim et al., 2024).

Limitations

This study explored perceptions towards inclusiveness of the offline and RT HE learning environments by cultural minority students and teachers. Nonetheless, some limitations should be noted. A first limitation was that the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult to find enough participants. Consequently, some focus group interviews were organised in smaller groups or even one interview with one participant. This could have an impact on the discussions held within the focus groups. Secondly, the experiences of the students and teachers were influenced by the complex and drastic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for students' and teachers' daily lives (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020; Thompson & Copeland, 2020). Due to these circumstances, these findings are specific to the context and experiences of our study/participants.

During RT, it seems to be important to offer the needed resources to make the students feel included. Teachers should receive more guidance and training in increasing the inclusiveness of the learning environment, by emphasising the need for demonstrating more care towards the students and including other aspects of CRT (Gay, 2002; Gay, 2013). Furthermore, universities should facilitate online education by making technological resources available to students such as affording study places with computers or laptops with working camera, microphone, and a stable internet connection. Finally, when students feel more culturally represented through the curriculum, teachers, and fellow students, they can experience a learning environment that can boost them to reach great academic heights (Schachner et al., 2021).

Conclusions

This study explored the perceptions of inclusiveness of HE learning environments by cultural minority students and teachers after the transition to RT during the COVID-19 pandemic. To feel included in a HE learning environment, cultural minority students need an inclusive curriculum, culturally relevant and caring teacher practices, cultural representation, and available (tech) resources. These teaching principles align with earlier research (Civitillo et al.,

2019; Gay, 2013; Schachner, 2019), except for the theme *available (tech) resources*. This theme adds to the canon of inclusive higher learning environments.

As empirical research on the perceptions of cultural minority students and teachers in HE in the European context is scarce, we believe that the current findings could be a starting point for investigating inclusiveness in blended learning environments (Korthals Altes et al., 2023) that have gained in popularity since the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are interesting for universities across Europe where RT is needed.

As instruction has moved to online, hybrid, and blended in HE in the past years, these findings can be interesting when conducting further research integrating online elements in education (Funes & Mackness, 2018). As students were forced to follow online education during the COVID-19 pandemic and will most likely follow some sort of hybrid education in the future, it is crucial to better understand its consequences for inclusiveness in the learning environment (Carrasco-Hernández et al., 2023; Gravlee, 2020; Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020). We believe that future studies with a longitudinal, quantitative design can help test and possibly generalise our findings in other learning environments containing online elements and other study populations. It is essential to involve cultural minority students' and teachers' perceptions in working towards inclusive learning environments. Their voices are often unheard, but most important to make a positive difference in diverse learning environments in the near future.

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