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Embracing diversity through inclusive pedagogy: a comparative study of university faculty attitudes, competencies, and perceived challenges in Romania and Latvia

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University faculty face multifaceted challenges when facilitating inclusive learning activities in courses attended by diverse student audiences. Their attitudes toward inclusive learning play a crucial role in shaping their approach; while some faculty members enthusiastically embrace inclusivity for its potential to enhance student engagement, others express uncertainty about managing diverse groups or harbor skepticism regarding its effectiveness. To successfully design and implement inclusive strategies, faculty need a comprehensive skill set and resources, including the ability to create inclusive learning activities, manage group dynamics within diverse classrooms, and effectively utilize technology. Challenges such as ensuring cultural sensitivity, accommodating different learning styles, overcoming language barriers, and handling complex group interactions significantly affect the efficacy of inclusive learning. Furthermore, limited resources, such as insufficient time and a lack of institutional support, often hinder these efforts. This study investigates the attitudes, capabilities, and concerns of university faculty from Romania (the University of Bucharest) and Latvia (Daugavpils University) regarding inclusive learning facilitation. Employing a mixed-methods design, the quantitative phase surveyed 33 faculty members (20 Romanian, 13 Latvian) using a structured survey focused on core inclusive pedagogy principles. The qualitative phase comprised semi-structured interviews with five faculty members from each country, providing in-depth insight via thematic content analysis. The findings indicate that faculty in both countries demonstrate a willingness to adapt teaching methodologies to meet varied learning needs, reflecting a proactive commitment to inclusive education. Additionally, positive responses highlight efforts to increase awareness about students' learning requirements, adapt to diverse learning approaches, and foster perspective-taking in discussions related to cultural, social, and other differences without judgment.

KEYWORDS

inclusive pedagogy, diversity, university faculty, student-centered learning, comparative study

1 Introduction

The demographic composition of university classrooms is rapidly evolving, reflecting greater cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity among students (Banks, 2016). This diversification results from globalization, increased international student mobility, shifts in national education policies, and the widening participation of historically underrepresented groups in higher education (Jacobs, 2022). Consequently, traditional teaching approaches, which often assume a relatively homogeneous student body (Lindner et al., 2019), are increasingly inadequate to meet the varied learning needs, prior knowledge, and cultural experiences that students bring to the classroom (Brown, 2003). This shift necessitates a critical re-examination and transformation of pedagogical strategies to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. Inclusive pedagogy emerges as a dynamic and transformative educational framework aimed at embracing and celebrating diversity rather than merely accommodating it (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). It challenges deficit-based views that position diversity as a problem to be managed and instead recognizes diversity as a source of enrichment for teaching and learning (Bhardwaj et al., 2025).

Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to adapt their teaching methods to meet the multifaceted and intersecting needs of learners, including, but not limited to, cultural differences, language proficiencies, learning preferences, and abilities (Loreman et al., 2005). By fostering a learning environment that values diverse perspectives and experiences, inclusive pedagogy not only supports improved academic outcomes but also promotes social justice by addressing systemic inequities within education (Slee, 2011; Korkie et al., 2025). Furthermore, this approach cultivates a strong sense of belonging among students, which is closely linked to higher motivation, engagement, and retention in higher education settings (Pedler et al., 2022). In this way, inclusive pedagogy functions as both a pedagogical and ethical commitment, seeking to transform the culture of education to be more responsive, respectful, and empowering for all learners.

In the present study, inclusive pedagogy in higher education is defined as proactive and intentional approaches to teaching, course design, curricula, and assessment that promote equity through carefully structured, learner-centered opportunities for engagement, self-awareness, self-regulation, and autonomy among all stakeholders in higher education (Katsampoxaki-Hodgetts, 2022).

1.1 Embracing diversity through inclusive pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy has emerged as a critical educational approach in response to the increasing diversity of student populations in higher education institutions worldwide (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). As societies become more multicultural and interconnected, the need for teaching strategies that recognize and embrace learner diversity becomes both a pedagogical and ethical imperative. Inclusive pedagogy centers on the belief that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or identities, have the right to equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities. This approach moves beyond simply accommodating differences, instead fostering learning

environments that celebrate diversity as a resource rather than a challenge (Salehi et al., 2021; Alhassan et al., 2025).

At the core of inclusive pedagogy is the commitment to creating learning experiences that affirm the value of every student. This involves recognizing the multiplicity of learners' identities and designing instruction that is responsive to varied cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional needs. Research has demonstrated that when teachers adopt inclusive teaching practices, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and universal design for learning, student engagement and achievement tend to improve (Santamaria, 2009; Sanguinetti, 2024). These strategies not only facilitate access to content but also cultivate a sense of belonging and agency among students who might otherwise feel marginalized in traditional classroom settings.

A key aspect of inclusive pedagogy involves shifting the focus from perceived student deficits to the capacity of the learning environment to accommodate all learners. Faculty members are encouraged to critically examine their assumptions, biases, and teaching methods to identify barriers to participation and success. This self-reflective stance is vital in fostering equity in education, especially when teaching students from historically underrepresented or underserved communities. For instance, addressing language diversity in the classroom through multilingual support, or embedding multicultural perspectives in course materials, can help bridge gaps in understanding and representation (Akintayo et al., 2024). Moreover, inclusive pedagogy invites teaching staff to engage with students' lived experiences, validating their knowledge and identities within the academic space.

The implementation of inclusive pedagogy is not without challenges. University faculty may encounter institutional constraints such as limited time, inadequate resources, or a lack of professional development opportunities. Additionally, there may be uncertainty or resistance from faculty members who feel unprepared to manage diverse classrooms or who question the effectiveness of inclusive approaches. Nevertheless, studies suggest that when faculty receive support and training, their confidence and capacity to implement inclusive strategies significantly improve (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Institutional leadership thus plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive practices by embedding them into policies, curricula, and evaluation systems.

Inclusive pedagogy also has a transformative potential beyond academic achievement. It fosters empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding, i.e., skills essential for thriving in pluralistic societies. By modeling inclusive values in the classroom, faculty members contribute to the cultivation of socially responsible graduates capable of contributing to democratic and equitable communities. In this way, inclusive pedagogy aligns with broader goals of social justice and human development. The lived experiences of teachers provide crucial insights into the practical enactment of inclusive education policies (Florian and Camedda, 2019; Allassaf, 2025).

In conclusion, embracing diversity through inclusive pedagogy requires a conscious, sustained effort from faculty members and institutions alike. It entails not only the adoption of inclusive teaching methods but also a deep commitment to equity, respect, and student-centered learning. As higher education continues to evolve, inclusive pedagogy remains a foundational strategy for addressing the needs of diverse learners while enriching the educational experience for all.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research aim

This comparative study aims to investigate the attitudes, competencies, and perceived challenges faced by the faculty members in Romania and Latvia regarding the facilitation of inclusive learning activities for diverse student populations. By examining these perspectives, the research seeks to understand better how inclusive pedagogy is conceptualized and enacted in different national and institutional contexts, specifically between the University of Bucharest and Daugavpils University.

2.2 Methods and participants

To explore this aim, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining both quantitative and qualitative research strategies to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The quantitative component of the study involved the administration of two surveys to the faculty in the two participating institutions. A total of 33 academics took part in the survey, 20 from the University of Bucharest (Romania) and 13 from Daugavpils University (Latvia). The modest sample size (33 respondents) imposes constraints on statistical power and representativeness. While the findings offer valuable insights, replication with larger cohorts is necessary to validate the results and strengthen their applicability.

The selection of Daugavpils University in Latvia and the University of Bucharest in Romania provides a meaningful comparative framework for research on inclusive education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Student-centered learning has been a core principle of the Bologna Process since 1999, shaping national policies and institutional strategies across Europe (European Commission, 2020; European Ministers of Education, 2009). Daugavpils University, as a leading regional university, reflects Latvia's long-standing alignment with these frameworks through strategic documents that emphasize learner-focused environments, competency-based curricula, and support mechanisms for underrepresented groups (Daugavpils University, 2021). Supported by EU-funded initiatives, such as its governance and management competence-building project, Daugavpils University exemplifies how regional universities embed student-centered and inclusive practices within broader national modernization agendas (Daugavpils University, 2020; Gibbs, 2013; Ministry of Education and Science, 2021).

At the same time, the University of Bucharest represents a metropolitan counterpart where institutional autonomy, scale, and resources enable the implementation of inclusive policies in a very different environment. Bucharest's role as Romania's economic and political hub affords the University of Bucharest access to a wide range of partnerships, funding streams, and international networks. Initiatives such as the Learning Center and the COALITION project demonstrate how the university invests in faculty development, personalized student services, and innovative pedagogical approaches. Particular attention has been paid to preparing doctoral students for teaching roles, with structured training in inclusive pedagogy to address the challenges of diverse classrooms (Brussino, 2021; Myronova et al., 2021). These efforts underscore the University of

Bucharest's dual role as both a research-intensive institution and a laboratory for developing systemic approaches to equity and inclusion.

Juxtaposing Daugavpils University and the University of Bucharest thus allowed us to capture both regional and metropolitan perspectives on how inclusive education is operationalized under the Bologna framework. Daugavpils University contributes insights into how student-centered and inclusive policies are adapted within resource-constrained, multilingual, and aging demographic contexts, while the University of Bucharest illustrates how large, research-oriented universities implement comparable policies in dynamic, urban, and highly resourced environments. Bringing these two sites together within one research design strengthens validity by highlighting not only the contextual contingencies of inclusion but also the shared European policy frameworks that underpin them. This comparative perspective expands the generalizability of findings and situates them within the broader transformation of higher education across the EHEA.

This study forms part of a broader investigation carried out within the framework of an Erasmus+ project Coaching Academics as Learners for Inclusive Teaching in Optimal Networks (acronym: COALITION, project no. KA220-HED-8399197) involving six partner universities. In order to ensure consistency and adherence to the highest ethical standards across all institutions, the consortium agreed to follow the guidelines and procedures established by the Research Ethics Committee at Leiden University, the coordinating institution. A formal application for ethical approval was submitted to the committee, outlining the research aims, methodology, data management procedures, and strategies to protect participant rights, privacy, and confidentiality. The committee carefully reviewed the documentation and granted ethical approval for the study. The approval is registered under the reference number IREC_ICLON 2022–12.

The survey was designed around four key statements, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly agree") to 5 ("Strongly disagree"). The statements targeted core aspects of inclusive pedagogy, including attitudes toward student diversity and instructional responsiveness. The survey was developed collaboratively by the project consortium during the first face-to-face meeting of the project. At this stage, representatives from each partner institution contributed to the formulation of the items, ensuring that the instrument reflected the shared objectives of the project while also being sensitive to the specific contexts of the participating universities. The process was highly participatory, combining both theoretical input from consortium members with practical considerations regarding clarity, accessibility, and applicability for the intended target groups. As a result, the initial draft of the survey items was designed to capture nuanced insights into the experiences of both faculty and students, while also aligning with the overall goals of the project.

The scale was designed specifically for this project by the COALITION consortium. Rather than relying solely on pre-existing instruments, the consortium opted to construct a contextually tailored scale to ensure that the tool addressed the particular research questions at hand. Following its initial development, the scale was piloted within a partner university to check its feasibility, clarity of items, and the time required for completion. This preliminary trial provided valuable feedback that informed the refinement of the survey prior to broader piloting. The scale underwent a structured validation process through national piloting in each partner country. Each

consortium member piloted the survey with a small group of university teachers to test its reliability, cultural relevance, and comprehensibility. The feedback gathered during this stage was systematically analyzed, and adjustments were made to ensure that the final version of the survey was both valid and appropriate across the diverse educational contexts of the participating countries. This multi-site piloting not only enhanced the psychometric soundness of the scale but also ensured its adaptability to varied higher education systems. Based on the outcomes of the piloting phase, the survey was finalized with revisions that improved item wording, structure, and thematic coverage. The iterative development and validation process strengthened the reliability and validity of the instrument, making it suitable for cross-national comparative use. By combining collaborative authorship, local piloting, and validation across multiple countries, the research design ensured that the survey could serve as a robust tool for collecting consistent and meaningful data. Details of the university faculty members' survey are presented in Appendix 1, while the interview questions are provided in Appendix 2.

A descriptive analytical approach was employed to interpret the data (de Fontenay, 2008; Kemp et al., 2018), taking into account both institutional contexts and individual perspectives. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants: five faculty members from each country. These interviews were designed to provide deeper insight into the personal experiences, strategies, and values that shape inclusive teaching practices. The data were processed through a content analysis approach (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011), allowing researchers to reduce complex qualitative material into clear, thematically coded findings. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and returned to participants for validation. To preserve anonymity, participants were labelled using a country code and number (e.g., RO Faculty Member 1, LV Faculty Member 3). Four thematic categories guided the coding process: awareness of students' learning needs; embracing diverse learning approaches; encouraging nonjudgmental discussion of cultural and social differences; and fostering diversity in the classroom. Participation in the research was voluntary, and all ethical standards were observed, including prior approval from the institutional review board.

The data analysis combined both statistical procedures for the closed-ended items and qualitative thematic analysis for the open-ended responses. The questionnaire included a series of Likert-type items, which were treated numerically to facilitate statistical analysis. Responses were coded on a five-point scale, with values ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). This allowed the research team to calculate descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, valid percentages that excluded missing data, and cumulative percentages. These descriptive indicators provided a clear picture of how participants from each partner university distributed their responses across the different levels of agreement. In cases where comparisons between institutions were of particular interest, cross-tabulations were performed to examine similarities and differences in response patterns. In addition, mean Likert scores were calculated for specific items, enabling a straightforward comparison of the average level of agreement across different groups of respondents.

The qualitative component of the interviews was derived from the open-ended questions that invited participants to elaborate on their views and perspectives. A thematic analysis approach was used to capture the richness of these responses. Initially, two researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading all the responses in

full. They then proceeded to independently develop preliminary codes that represented recurring ideas and perspectives. After this initial round of coding, the researchers compared their coding frameworks, discussed any discrepancies, and refined a shared codebook that captured the most relevant categories. This process ensured consistency in the subsequent coding of the full dataset. To minimize researcher bias, intercoder reliability was prioritized, and reflexivity was integrated throughout the process. Researchers maintained reflective notes to account for their own perspectives and assumptions. In cases where disagreements could not be resolved, a third member of the research team was consulted to arbitrate and achieve consensus.

Once the final coding scheme was agreed upon, the coded data were clustered into broader themes that reflected underlying patterns in the responses. These themes included, for example, the importance of empathy and perspective-taking as central values in inclusive teaching, the pedagogical strategies that foster constructive dialogue around cultural and social differences, and the challenges faculty members face in implementing such practices. By triangulating the statistical results with these qualitative insights, the analysis not only identified the overall levels of support for perspective-taking in the classroom but also illuminated the deeper reasoning and lived experiences behind participants' choices. This integration of quantitative and qualitative perspectives enhanced the validity of the findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of how university faculty and students perceive the role of nonjudgmental discussion in inclusive education.

This article focuses specifically on the fourth thematic category, i.e., fostering diversity in the classroom, as part of a broader study conducted within the framework of the Erasmus+ project COALITION. The findings presented in this article contribute to a deeper understanding of how Romanian and Latvian faculty members perceive and enact inclusive pedagogy, particularly in relation to their capacity to foster diversity within academic settings.

3 Results

The data gathered from Daugavpils University and the University of Bucharest reveal a shared positive attitude among faculty members toward the importance of developing awareness of students' learning needs – a key principle of inclusive pedagogy (see Table 1).

Across both institutions, all valid respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, indicating widespread recognition of the relevance of inclusive practices in higher education. At Daugavpils University, the majority of respondents (69.2%) strongly agreed with the statement, reflecting a high level of commitment and conviction. This strong consensus may suggest that inclusive pedagogy is already well embedded within the institution's teaching philosophy or that there has been substantial prior training or emphasis on inclusive approaches.

In contrast, responses from the University of Bucharest showed a different distribution. While all valid responses were also positive, a larger proportion (66.7%) of respondents chose "Agree," and only 33.3 percent selected "Strongly agree." This suggests that although the faculty are supportive of inclusive pedagogy, the intensity of agreement is more moderate compared to their Latvian counterparts. Additionally, two responses were missing from the University of

TABLE 1 Frequencies for the statements concerning faculty members' perspective regarding the importance of developing awareness about students' learning needs.

Which university do you come from?	I think it is important to develop awareness about students' learning needs	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Daugavpils University	Agree	4	30.769	30.769	30.769
	Strongly agree	9	69.231	69.231	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	13	100.000		
University of Bucharest	Agree	12	60.000	66.7	66.667
	Strongly agree	6	30.000	33.333	100.000
	Missing	2	10.000		
	Total	20	100.000		

Bucharest, which may indicate either hesitation or non-participation, though the small number limits interpretation.

These quantitative trends are further illuminated by the qualitative responses provided during the interviews. One lecturer from Daugavpils University emphasized the practical application of inclusive pedagogy, describing the use of “*different teaching methods, strategies, individual approach, respect for students' learning needs, [and] individual support*” (LV Faculty Member 4). This statement aligns directly with the high level of strong agreement observed in the Latvian case, suggesting that these beliefs are not only theoretical but actively translated into classroom practices.

Meanwhile, a more reflective and developmental perspective was brought into light by a faculty member who highlighted the importance of knowing students as individuals, particularly in relation to their social and cultural backgrounds. She also underscored the value of self-awareness, both for herself as a lecturer and for her students: “*I think it is important to empower students to know themselves. I teach a class close to personal development and I know that knowing oneself is the key*” (RO Faculty Member 3).

This insight complements the more moderate level of intensity shown in the Romanian quantitative data. It suggests that while the belief in the importance of attending to students' learning needs is strong, it may be approached more from a personal growth and identity-building standpoint, rather than structured pedagogical differentiation alone.

Overall, the findings indicate a firm belief in the importance of recognizing students' individual learning needs across both universities. However, the degree of emphasis and internalization of this belief appears somewhat stronger among respondents from Daugavpils University. These results could inform future professional development efforts, suggesting that while the general attitude is positive, further engagement or reinforcement of inclusive principles, particularly at the level of conviction, may still be beneficial, especially in contexts where agreement is more moderate.

The statement “*I think it is important to adapt to students' different ways of learning*” received full endorsement from academics across both Daugavpils University and the University of Bucharest, reflecting a strong, shared belief in the principles of inclusive pedagogy (see Table 2). At Daugavpils University, all thirteen respondents expressed agreement with the statement, with just over half (53.8%) strongly agreeing, and the remaining 46.2 percent agreeing. This unanimous response, with no missing data, indicates a deeply ingrained

understanding among Latvian faculty of the need to respond to student diversity through flexible teaching methods.

The voices of the Latvian faculty themselves further illuminate the strength of this conviction. One lecturer described how learning in her university is structured to promote student engagement and leadership. She reflected on the use of varied discussion formats, stating: “*It's hard to say, it was discussed in brainstorming discussions about a current topic. We are changing the discussion leaders and discussion moderators. When the classes were remote, they could discuss in groups, deciding for themselves who would take the initiative. The 'Six Hats' method allows everyone to be leaders and join the group*” (LV Faculty Member 2). This testimony offers a vivid picture of pedagogical practices that embrace flexibility, collaboration, and student autonomy—key elements of adapting to diverse learning preferences.

At the University of Bucharest, responses followed a similarly positive trend, though the pattern differed slightly. Out of the twenty surveyed participants, eighteen provided valid responses. Of those, exactly half agreed and the other half strongly agreed, suggesting a balanced commitment to the principle. While this may indicate an equally widespread belief in differentiated instruction, the even split between levels of agreement might reflect ongoing challenges or constraints in fully enacting such practices. It is also noteworthy that two respondents did not answer the question, possibly pointing to uncertainty or hesitation.

The qualitative insights from Romanian faculty provide depth and context to these statistical findings. One lecturer offered a clear example of how she adapts her teaching in practice: “*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*” (RO Faculty Member 1). Her attention to accessibility demonstrates a conscious and compassionate approach to inclusion, extending beyond teaching techniques to include the restructuring of materials to meet specific student needs. She went on to describe how she supports students with emotional vulnerabilities: “*In situations where I identify students with mental fragility, I offer them additional support in carrying out activities or try to integrate them into team activities.*”

These narratives reveal that while both groups of teachers are committed to inclusive teaching, how this belief is put into practice may differ. Latvian lecturers appear to emphasize adaptable classroom

TABLE 2 Frequencies for the statements concerning faculty members' perspective on adapting to students' different ways of learning.

Which university do you come from?	I think it is important to adapt to students' different ways of learning	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Daugavpils University	Agree	6	46.154	46.154	46.154
	Strongly agree	7	53.846	53.846	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	13	100.000		
University of Bucharest	Agree	9	45.000	50.000	50.000
	Strongly agree	9	45.000	50.000	100.000
	Missing	2	10.000		
	Total	20	100.000		

structures and peer-led engagement strategies, creating a dynamic and collaborative learning environment. Romanian faculty, on the other hand, focus on targeted individual support, particularly in cases where students face visible or invisible barriers to participation.

Together, the statistical data and faculty reflections provide a coherent and compelling picture of inclusive pedagogical values in action. The alignment between what academics believe and how they teach underscores a deep-seated recognition that learning is not one-size-fits-all. Across both national contexts, there is a clear and conscious effort to honor the diversity of student needs through pedagogical flexibility, empathy, and a willingness to innovate.

The responses to the statement “I think it is important to encourage perspective taking in the classroom based on nonjudgmental approaches to discussing cultural, social, or other types of differences” suggest that academic staff from both Daugavpils University and the University of Bucharest largely endorse the importance of encouraging perspective taking and fostering nonjudgmental discussion around diversity in their classrooms (see Table 3). However, a closer look at the distribution of responses reveals a slight divergence in the depth and consistency of this belief across the two institutions.

At Daugavpils University, the majority of respondents – 61.5 percent – strongly agreed with the statement, demonstrating a clear affirmation of inclusive dialogue differences. An additional 23.1 percent expressed agreement, yet notably, a small group (15.4%) chose the neutral option, indicating neither agreement nor disagreement. This neutral stance, though representing only two out of thirteen valid responses, introduces a subtle note of reservation or uncertainty about how such discussions should be approached or perhaps how comfortable faculty feel facilitating them. There were no missing responses, which reinforces the reliability of the pattern observed.

The slightly more varied response profile from Latvia is intriguing when placed alongside the insights shared by academics in interviews. While no direct reference to cultural discussion was made in the Latvian interview cited earlier, the broader pedagogical strategies described, such as rotating discussion leaders and using methods like the Six Hats technique, suggest that the structure for open and equitable exchange does exist. Still, the lower percentage of “Strongly agree” compared to other inclusive statements may hint at a less consistent emphasis on explicitly cultural or social diversity as a topic of classroom discussion.

In contrast, responses from the University of Bucharest present a more unified and affirmative stance. Among the eighteen valid responses, over

half (55.6%) strongly agreed, and an additional 44.4 percent agreed. No respondents selected the neutral option, and while two individuals did not respond, the clear majority embraced the value of perspective-taking in a nonjudgmental learning environment. This data reflects a high level of commitment among Romanian university faculty to cultivating classroom dialogue that acknowledges and respects difference.

The qualitative insights from the Romanian context further support this finding. One lecturer shared her regular use of free, student-led discussions as a central strategy in her teaching:

“To facilitate initiative, I usually start free discussions on various topics after ensuring that I have created a safe space in which they can express themselves freely, and I invite everyone to express their views on the respective topic. This often becomes the starting point for the course topic.” (RO Faculty Member 5)

Her intentional focus on creating a safe and inclusive space for diverse voices shows how values expressed in the survey are being actively put into practice. Furthermore, she described using the PhotoVoice methodology, which empowers students to construct their own vision and understanding of the course content:

“Another activity I constantly do is integrating the PhotoVoice methodology into courses on various topics, which transfers ‘power into their hands,’ giving students the opportunity to structure their own vision of the subject.” (RO Faculty Member 2)

This approach reflects a pedagogical philosophy that not only encourages perspective taking but also places students in a position of ownership and agency, particularly in exploring complex or personal themes.

Taken together, the data suggest that while both institutions affirm the importance of fostering open, culturally responsive dialogue, the Romanian faculty appear to place a stronger emphasis on the deliberate creation of spaces for these conversations to unfold. Their commitment is reflected in both the uniformity of their responses and the richness of their classroom practices. Meanwhile, the Latvian faculty responses, though still overwhelmingly positive, show slightly more variation, possibly pointing to a need for further discussion or support around how best to facilitate conversations that center social and cultural difference.

TABLE 3 Frequencies for the statements concerning faculty members’ perspective regarding the importance of encouraging perspective taking in the classroom based on nonjudgmental approaches to discussing cultural, social or other type of differences.

Which university do you come from?	I think it is important to encourage perspective taking in the classroom based on nonjudgmental approaches to discussing cultural, social or other types of differences	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Daugavpils University	Agree	3	23.077	23.077	23.077
	Neither agree nor disagree	2	15.385	15.385	38.462
	Strongly agree	8	61.538	61.538	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	13	100.000		
University of Bucharest	Agree	8	40.000	44.444	44.444
	Neither agree nor disagree	0	0.000	0.000	44.444
	Strongly agree	10	50.000	55.556	100.000
	Missing	2	10.000		
	Total	20	100.000		

Ultimately, both groups demonstrate alignment with the core values of inclusive pedagogy, but they bring slightly different emphases and expressions to this belief. The integration of frequency data and interview insights offers a nuanced understanding of how the principle of nonjudgmental, perspective-rich teaching is being interpreted and enacted in different university settings.

The statement on embracing diversity in the classroom received strong endorsement from both Daugavpils University and the University of Bucharest, highlighting a broad consensus among academics in support of inclusive pedagogical values (see Table 4). At Daugavpils University, all thirteen respondents gave positive answers: 61.5 percent strongly agreed with the statement, and 38.5 percent agreed. No respondents selected a neutral or disagreeing option, and no responses were missing, which confirms the consistency of belief among Latvian faculty members regarding the importance of diversity in academic environments.

Similarly, responses from the University of Bucharest revealed almost identical levels of support. Among the eighteen valid responses (two were missing), 61.1 percent of respondents strongly agreed, and 38.9 percent agreed with the statement. This striking similarity in perspectives between the two institutions suggests that embracing diversity is not only a shared principle but also an increasingly essential part of how academics across different countries conceptualize their roles and responsibilities in contemporary higher education.

These affirming frequencies are further enriched by the insights shared through interviews with participating academic staff. A Romanian lecturer explained how she fosters student engagement in small group settings where learners feel more comfortable expressing their views. She reflected as follows:

“I try to make sure that I am aware of who was responding during the seminar and who was not. Usually, working with smaller groups makes it easier to empower students to take initiative and engage in conversation because they feel less group pressure. But this does not happen all the time or during courses where I also want to hear my students’ voices and ideas regarding the discussed topic”. (RO Faculty Member 3)

This respondent’s comment reveals an active effort to monitor participation and ensure that every student feels seen and heard, an

essential practice for embracing diversity, not only in identity, but also in expression and learning style. Furthermore, she highlighted how short, supportive feedback after student contributions helps others gain the confidence to speak up. This shows a thoughtful and inclusive facilitation style that encourages equal participation across different temperaments and backgrounds.

From the Latvian side, one respondent highlighted the value of continuous feedback as a strategy to accommodate diversity and nurture individual student growth. She stated:

“I regularly give students feedback both in written and oral form, which allows them to understand their strengths and weaknesses, which allows for the selection of thematic fields and the most suitable tasks for future classes based on mutual agreement”. (LV Faculty Member 3)

Her approach reflects a commitment to personalized learning and collaborative planning, where students are supported in shaping their own educational paths. This attentiveness to student needs and preferences reflects the deeper meaning of embracing diversity – not only recognizing difference, but also creating the space and structure for it to thrive.

Both narratives demonstrate that faculty members in Latvia and Romania are not only aware of the role of diversity but also actively engage in practices that support it. The consistency of the survey data, with all valid responses indicating agreement or strong agreement, reinforces the idea that inclusive teaching is becoming an essential part of professional identity in higher education.

Yet, the interview insights also point to important nuances: embracing diversity is not always about grand gestures or policy-level reforms. Often, it takes the form of small, thoughtful choices-calling on the quieter student, providing reassuring feedback, or adjusting tasks to suit the learner’s path. Together, these actions build classroom cultures where diversity is not just acknowledged but actively supported.

In sum, the data indicate a strong, shared belief in the value of diversity across both institutions. The faculty members’ reflections offer compelling evidence that these beliefs are lived out through reflective and responsive classroom practices, anchoring inclusion not only as a pedagogical goal but as a daily, relational process.

TABLE 4 Frequencies for the statements concerning the faculty members' perspective regarding the importance of embracing diversity in the classroom.

Which university do you come from?	I think it is important to embrace diversity in the classroom	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Daugavpils University	Agree	5	38.462	38.462	38.462
	Strongly agree	8	61.538	61.538	100.000
	Missing	0	0.000		
	Total	13	100.000		
University of Bucharest	Agree	7	35.000	38.889	38.889
	Strongly agree	11	55.000	61.111	100.000
	Missing	2	10.000		
	Total	20	100.000		

4 Discussion

The findings from this comparative study between faculty members in Romania and Latvia reveal a robust and shared commitment to the principles of inclusive pedagogy, particularly in relation to recognizing students' learning needs, adapting to diverse learning styles, encouraging nonjudgmental dialogue, and embracing diversity in the classroom. While attitudes are generally positive in both contexts, variations in the intensity and expression of these beliefs offer nuanced insights into institutional and cultural influences on inclusive teaching practices.

Across all measured dimensions, faculty from both Daugavpils University and the University of Bucharest consistently expressed agreement or strong agreement with key inclusive education statements. This supports earlier studies asserting that faculty attitudes are a foundational component of inclusive education success (Boyle et al., 2020; Charitaki et al., 2024). Faculty members' motivation and commitment to developing inclusive practices and supporting the inclusion of diverse students, particularly those with special needs, are shaped by their conceptions, prior experiences, and personal characteristics (Carballo and Cotán, 2024). However, academics in Latvia tended to express stronger overall agreement, particularly in recognizing the importance of addressing students' learning needs and adapting teaching methods, which may reflect more embedded institutional support or prior training in inclusive pedagogy, as also discussed by Subban and Sharma (2005).

In contrast, Romanian faculty responses, while equally supportive, were slightly more moderate, suggesting that while the values of inclusion are well-recognized, there may still be space for further professional development to deepen confidence or implementation skills. This aligns with research indicating that positive beliefs alone are insufficient without structural reinforcement and pedagogical scaffolding (de Van Pol et al., 2010).

The stronger endorsement of inclusive pedagogy among faculty members at Daugavpils University may be understood in light of its unique institutional and regional context. Located in a multicultural and multilingual city, the university operates in an environment where diversity of languages, backgrounds, and perspectives is part of daily life, which naturally fosters sensitivity to the need for adapting teaching to different student needs and views. Moreover, Daugavpils

University has a long-standing tradition of working with sustainable education initiatives, which conceptually align with the principles of inclusion by emphasizing equity, participation, and social responsibility. By contrast, while faculty members at the University of Bucharest also expressed strong commitment to inclusive pedagogy, their responses were somewhat more moderate, reflecting the complexities of implementing inclusive practices within a large, research-intensive metropolitan institution.

The qualitative findings provide critical depth to these patterns. The faculty members from Latvia emphasized collaborative, student-led strategies such as rotating leadership roles and using structured discussion methods like "Six Thinking Hats" – tactics aligned with constructivist approaches that empower learners (Haripottawekul and Wang, 2025). These strategies demonstrate a strong alignment between belief and practice, echoing Florian and Spratt (2013) argument that inclusive education requires not only belief in diversity but also the design of learning that actively reflects it.

Romanian faculty, meanwhile, highlighted practices rooted in empathy, individual support, and identity development, such as adapting materials for students with impairments and using methodologies like PhotoVoice to amplify student voice. These approaches reflect a more personalized, relational model of inclusion and mirror the findings of Loreman and Earle (2007), who argue that emotional intelligence and teacher self-awareness are essential for effective inclusive practices.

Interestingly, when it came to encouraging nonjudgmental dialogue on social and cultural issues, Romanian faculty showed slightly higher levels of uniformity and intensity of agreement. This may reflect a cultural or curricular emphasis on values education and reflective dialogue, aligning with Noddings (2012) ethics of care model, which highlights the importance of fostering emotionally safe environments that encourage open and respectful discourse.

The study also confirms that inclusive practice is not monolithic but contextually shaped both by institutional culture and by faculty members' personal teaching philosophies. While Latvian faculty appear to focus on dynamic, peer-oriented classroom structures, Romanian lecturers gravitate toward supportive individualization and critical self-reflection. Both approaches serve inclusion, yet they emphasize different pedagogical pathways.

The findings of this study hold important implications for faculty practice, administrative policy, and institutional strategy in higher education. For faculty members, the value of inclusive

pedagogy lies not only in acknowledging difference but in actively harnessing it as a resource for deeper learning and collaborative inquiry. This calls on educators to design learning experiences that are responsive to cultural, linguistic, disability-related, gendered, and socioeconomic diversity – treating these differences as assets rather than obstacles. Such an approach fosters conditions in which all students can participate meaningfully, develop agency, and assume ownership of their educational journeys. Crucially, these strategies cannot transform curriculum into praxis through theoretical alignment or isolated efforts; inclusive pedagogy becomes truly impactful only when faculty work with students as collaborators rather than for them. For administrators and policymakers, the comparative findings provide evidence-based insights to strengthen professional development, embed inclusion within broader modernization and sustainability agendas, and promote equity at a systemic level. Taken together, these implications highlight the need for higher education institutions to commit to inclusive pedagogy not as an abstract principle but as a guiding framework for practice, policy, and strategy.

This study offers unique value by providing a comparative perspective on faculty attitudes toward inclusive pedagogy in two distinct higher education contexts: Latvia and Romania that are underrepresented in the existing literature. By juxtaposing a regional, multilingual university with a large, research-intensive metropolitan institution, the study generates new insights into how institutional traditions, cultural environments, and resource conditions shape the intensity and expression of faculty commitment to inclusive pedagogy.

In conclusion, the results underscore the importance of sustained professional development, institutional support, and cross-national dialogue in promoting inclusive practices in higher education. They also suggest that inclusive education is best understood not merely as a set of strategies but as a mindset – deeply relational, responsive, and evolving. Future initiatives should prioritize cultivating both the technical and emotional dimensions of inclusive teaching to ensure that diverse student needs are met with competence, creativity, and care.

4.1 Limitations of the study

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and focus on two universities restrict the extent to which the findings can be generalized across all higher education contexts. In addition, reliance on self-reported data may have introduced a degree of social desirability bias, and the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in faculty perceptions or practices over time. Nevertheless, these restrictions do not diminish the value of the study as an exploratory contribution. Instead, they highlight the importance of future research with larger, more diverse, and longitudinal samples to build on the insights presented here.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Leiden University. The approval is registered under the reference number IREC_ICLON 2022–12. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

EM: Data curation, Writing – original draft, Methodology. LB: Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Validation. MK-P: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Supervision. IP: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1682404/full#supplementary-material>

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