

## Chapter 18

# Universal Design for Learning: A Best Practice Flemish Case Study

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Diverse learners are increasingly present in Flemish higher education (Belgium) and represent a significant percentage of the student body. Universal design for learning (UDL) offers a convenient framework to design inclusive classes and services that embrace the needs of diverse learners. This chapter presents the inspirational case study of Odisee University of Applied Sciences, a Flemish higher education institution that increasingly implements universal design principles in its educational policy and practices. The value of implemented measures in the domain of curriculum development, teaching and learning, and assessment will be discussed and analyzed through the UDL lens, as well as focus points and directions to take.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

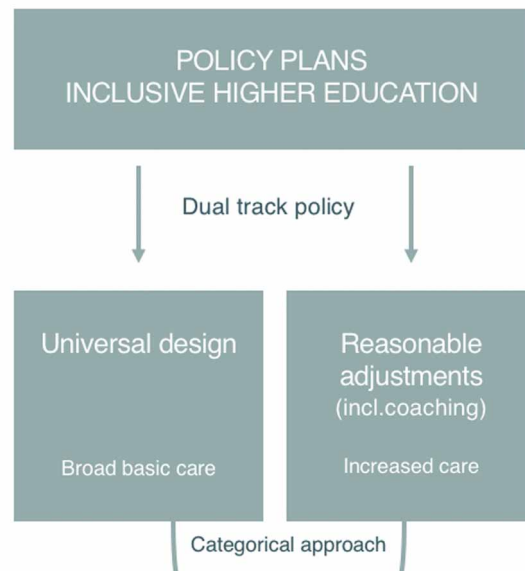
The number of students with disabilities in higher education (HE) institutions in Flanders (Belgium) has gradually increased with a notable rise in the proportion of individuals with mental health conditions and developmental disorders (e.g. autism spectrum disorder). On average, students with a declared disability represent 8% of the Flemish HE student population (Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education [SIHO], 2017). Also, an increasing number of working students, students with a migrant or refugee background and mature students with family obligations and caring responsibilities is attending HE. In this context, both access to education and inclusion have become a strategic topic for Flemish institutions. Many of them undertake actions to find new ways to increase the learning opportunities of the diverse student population (Flemish Interuniversity Council, 2018; SIHO, 2017).

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As stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), inclusive institutional learning environments should be achieved by proactively implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is designed to meet the needs of all students. Instead of approaching diversity as a side issue or only on a case-by-case basis, UDL refers to the use of flexible goals, methods, materials, and forms of evaluation to provide effective education for all students. By proactively addressing the barriers experienced by disadvantaged students on the one hand and building in the greatest possible diversity on the other hand, reasonable adjustments to support disadvantaged students are less often required (SIHO, 2017, 2019; UN General Assembly, 2007).

With the ratification of the UNCRPD by Belgium and the installment of the ‘Incentive Fund to embrace diversity’ by the Flemish government in 2009, HE institutions mainly focused on the development of target group policies where granting reasonable adjustments and guidance services to neutralize barriers of disadvantaged students (e.g. students with disabilities) were central (so-called target group policy). The UDL policy track to realize inclusive learning environments by increasingly implementing UDL principles remained less explored (SIHO, 2017, 2019; UN General Assembly, 2007). Rather, diversity was approached in a categorical way (see Figure 1). In this approach, adjustments are reserved for student groups that meet certain predefined criteria (e.g. students with disabilities, students with migration background). Since diversity should not only be the starting point in education, but should also form the starting point in student services, the general term universal design (UD) instead of UDL is put forward in Flanders.

*Figure 1. Dual track policy inclusive HE: Categorical approach*  
 Source: Support Centre Inclusive Higher Education (2019)



The new policy document called ‘Regulation Inclusive HE’, however, served as a turning point for Flemish HE institutions in 2017. With the ‘Regulation Inclusive HE’, every institution for higher education in Flanders carries the full and sole responsibility for organizing support for students with specific

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