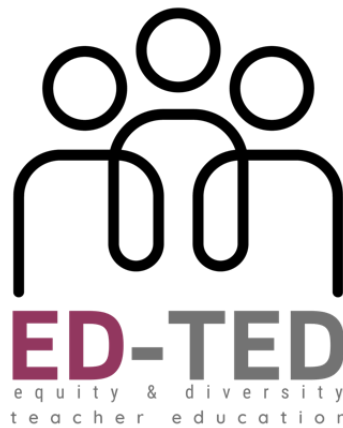




A narrative of provision for equity and diversity in Flemish teacher education

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[ED-TED project]

This narrative is a first output from the EU-funded Erasmus+ project '*Equity and Diversity in Teacher Educators' Professional Development*' (ED-TED). The ED-TED project aims to establish a European professional network of higher education teacher educators to support teacher educators' professional development as they strive to have the requisite competences to address issues of equity and diversity throughout teacher education programmes. More information and regular updates on the project can be found [here](#).

A key initial step in the project involves exploring existing provision for teacher educators and student teachers in teaching for equity and diversity across the seven participating countries—Germany, Finland, Flanders, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal. Following a systematic approach detailed below, we identified and assessed the quality of provision at three levels in all project countries: macro (national policies), meso (teacher education programmes and institutions), and micro (practices). This mapping initiative serves a dual purpose: to contribute to an online resource bank with equity and diversity practices in and for teacher education, and to inform policy recommendations for enhancing teacher educators' competencies at local, national, and European levels.

This narrative describes, interprets, and contextualises the findings from the mapping activity for teacher education in Flanders (Belgium). As a living document, it will be regularly updated based on ongoing consultations with key stakeholders throughout the project's next stages.

[Teacher education in Flanders]

In Belgium, the governance of education, including teacher education, has been the responsibility of the country's three language communities (the Flemish, French, and German-speaking communities) since 1989. This narrative specifically focusses on Flemish teacher education.

Initial teacher education (ITE) in Flanders has been aligned with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) since 2005. Teacher education is structured in three distinct programmes across levels 5, 6 and 7. These include associate degrees at level 5, which prepare teachers for the practice-oriented components of the vocational curriculum in technical schools. At level 6, colleges of higher education offer bachelor's level programmes (180 ECTS) focussing on preparing teachers for primary and lower secondary education. At level 7, university-based master's programmes (120 ECTS) are designed for those aiming to teach at higher secondary education. As of September 2025, a new master's level programme (60 ECTS) for primary education was added.

A key element in the regulatory framework for ITE in Flanders are the basic competencies - defined by the Flemish Parliament - that reflect society's expectations for teachers upon graduation. These competencies are directly derived from the standards established for experienced teachers. A single, unified set of basic competencies applies across all levels of education—early childhood, primary, and secondary. These competencies (e.g. 'the teacher as organiser', 'the teacher as member of the team', etc.) are considered the minimal requirements that all teacher education programmes must meet. However, within the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of education, individual programmes have the autonomy to determine how they will achieve these competencies through their curricula and pedagogical approaches.

[Research project methodology]

The mapping process across all project countries followed a consistent methodology, combining the analysis of key documents at the macro and meso levels with an exploration of practices through focus group interviews with student teachers and programme leaders. This section provides details on the sample used for the Flemish case narrative.



A comprehensive understanding of the policy frameworks, objectives, and measures regarding teaching for equity and diversity was obtained through the analysis of legislative acts (“decrees” in the Flemish context), policy statements, teacher standards, and related documents. Given the influential role of non-governmental bodies such as advisory councils, advocacy groups, and civil society organizations in Flanders, public statements from these organisations were also included in the analysis. The primary focus was on developments over the past 10 years.

The objective was to gain a direct and firsthand understanding of policies related to equity and diversity in Flemish ITE, and as such, secondary sources (e.g., studies and reports discussing policy documents) were not included.

In the second phase, equity and diversity provision for teacher educators and student teachers across 11 teacher education programmes was examined. This included 3 university-based programmes and 8 programmes organized by higher education colleges, ensuring diverse geographical representation. Our analysis combined a review of curriculum frameworks, website contents, vision statements, and other relevant programme materials with focus group interviews involving 6 programme leaders, who were also serving as teacher educators in their respective programmes, and 7 student teachers. These student teachers were enrolled in the programmes represented by the interviewed programme leaders, allowing for data triangulation.

Interview participants were selected to achieve maximum diversity based on relevant criteria, including programme type and size, geographical location, and varying levels of engagement with equity and diversity (as informed by the document analysis). All programme leaders combined their leadership roles with responsibilities as teacher educators. The student teachers were either in their final year of study or had recently graduated, enabling them to provide a comprehensive account of how their programme addresses issues of equity and diversity.

Macro level provision

Central to understanding the current macro-level provision around equity and diversity in Flemish education is the Equal Opportunities Policy ('Gelijke Onderwijskansen'), which has been in place since 2002. This act aims to provide all children with equal opportunities to learn and develop. The act is built on three main pillars: the right to enrol in a school of choice, initiatives to protect pupils' rights (such as local consultations between schools and community stakeholders), and support for schools that meet certain socio-economic indicators (including additional teaching hours or financial resources). However, persistent statistics, also from an international comparative perspective (e.g., the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment), show that student performance in the Flemish education system is disproportionately affected by socio-economic and migration backgrounds. These data evidence that the existing policy framework has not fully achieved its objectives.

High-level educational policy documents in Flanders demonstrate a clear awareness of the persistent challenges related to equity and diversity. There are frequent calls for more coordinated action at multiple levels—policy, school, and classroom. There is particular emphasis on addressing socio-economic disparities and the needs of students with migration backgrounds. The responsibility of schools and teachers to better respond to diverse student populations is recognised as a direct call for action for ITE providers. They are urged to update their programme offerings and curricula to better prepare future teachers for equity and diversity. Recent policy initiatives and communication place special emphasis on improving teacher candidates' Dutch language proficiency. An example is the entrance test ("starttoets") taken by teacher candidates before enrolling in Bachelor's level teacher education programmes for primary and lower secondary education. The entrance test was put in place in 2017 and assesses basic Dutch language skills, along with mathematics and French for primary education specifically. Although the test is not a mandatory admission requirement at the time of writing, and mainly serves to provide student teachers with an understanding of their level of competence, it underscores the significant role of language proficiency in discussions and policies related to equal opportunities and inclusion in Flemish education. Mastery of Dutch language is framed as crucial for educational success, both for teacher candidates and their future students.

Another closely related issue identified in education policy documents is the lack of diversity within the teaching workforce. The current teaching staff is predominantly white and female, which does not adequately reflect the increasingly diverse pupil population. Addressing this imbalance is seen as an essential precondition for creating a more inclusive education system. The lack of diversity among teachers is further compounded by the ongoing teacher shortages in Flanders. For example, during a series of hearings on the teacher shortage issue in the Flemish parliament in 2021, the under-recruitment of men and individuals with a migration background was described as "untapped potential". Despite the recognition of this issue, no specific policy measures or regulations have been implemented to date.

There is thus a strong awareness of equity and diversity-related challenges in education at the policy level, and consistent calls are made for teacher education to better prepare teachers. However, a significant gap remains in the form of specific guidance, expectations, and resources provided to ITE providers. The status of policy calls to action currently are recommendations that appeal to the autonomy and responsibility of ITE providers rather than binding regulations that must be followed. This situation has been identified as problematic by key advisory bodies, such as the Flemish Educational Council (VLOR) and the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (SERV). These bodies advocate for concrete policy guidance to support ITE in making diversity and equity central to their programmes. Recent reports from these advisory bodies have introduced the concept of "diversity-responsive education" (see Ponet et al., 2024) from the research literature. This concept emphasizes both

addressing the diverse intersectional positions of individuals to ensure effective learning and actively responding to social inequality. It marks a much-needed shift from merely acknowledging the challenges to taking actionable steps. In alignment with this perspective, the VLOR's 2019 advisory report calls for a more proactive approach to diversity in higher education, including teacher education, stressing the importance of creating inclusive environments and implementing diversity-responsive policies.

While coordinated policy action remains insufficient, there have been some noteworthy smaller-scale and ad hoc initiatives undertaken by the government. For instance, in 2021, the government launched a strategic call for *'pilot projects to strengthen teacher education.'* One of the focus areas within this call was diversity. The four selected projects within the diversity strand targeted various dimensions of diversity, including special needs and sociocultural aspects. So far, these projects have primarily impacted the institutions involved in these strategic partnerships. Whether these initiatives will be more widely integrated into the broader Flemish educational landscape remains to be seen, as was explicitly intended in the call.

Regarding teacher educator development related to equity and diversity, there is considerably less recognition of the need in official policy documents. Although advocacy groups occasionally mention the importance of supporting the professional development of teacher educators in these areas, these efforts are much less visible and lack coordination. Dedicated macro-level support is lacking, such as earmarked funding for teacher educators' professional development or the establishment of a professional profile similar to that of teachers. Such standards, which would define core competencies and guide programmes in delivering qualified teachers, remain absent. This reflects a broader ambivalence in policy towards teacher educator development. Despite the recognition that teacher educators are essential to the quality of teaching in schools and classrooms, structured support for their development is not a policy priority. For example, the Flemish Government previously funded a 20 ECTS credit professional development programme for teacher educators. This programme was led by two universities and overseen by a steering board with representatives from a large group of Flemish ITE providers and the Flemish Association for Teacher Educators (VELOV). Enrolment figures were low, and funding was prematurely cut after four years in 2021. Although the programme did not specifically address equity and diversity, it was the first - and so far, the only - form of structured, government-funded support for teacher educators.

These examples illustrate that while there is a clear recognition at the policy level that the conditions for education and teacher education are changing and require action, this awareness has not yet been matched by concrete policy guidance, resources, or professional development support. In the absence of macro-level initiatives, civil society organizations like LEVL¹ are stepping in to fill this void. They engage in practice-oriented research and provide schools and teachers with practical tools, while advocating for more decisive policy action. These bottom-up initiatives might be crucial in reshaping educational policies to better reflect and embrace the diversity of contemporary society.

Meso-level provision

In the absence of decisive macro-level policy guidance and expectations, institutions and programmes have the autonomy to prepare student teachers for diversity and equity according to their own pedagogical vision and priorities. This means that each institution decides the emphasis placed on

¹ LEVL is a network organization gathering civil society organizations, experts, governments, and academics, aimed at addressing the challenges that people with a migration background face in participating in society. Education is one of their key focus areas.

equity and diversity within its curriculum, the dimensions of diversity that are prioritised, and how these are integrated into the curriculum.

Most programmes in the sample have developed structured learning paths for equity and diversity, where student teachers progressively deepen their understanding and engagement with these issues throughout their studies. In the early stages of their education, the focus is typically on helping student teachers recognise and value diversity as an asset. As they advance, the emphasis shifts toward building the competencies necessary to address equity and diversity in classroom practice, including aspects of lesson planning, classroom management and assessment practices.

The approach to equity and diversity varies in terms of course requirements. In some programmes, courses dedicated to equity and diversity are mandatory, while in others they are optional or available as advanced tracks (e.g., 'diversity placements') for selected groups of students in the later stages of their studies. The variability in course requirements leads to significant differences in graduates' understanding and preparedness to handle diversity and equity in the classroom, even among those from the same programme.

The inconsistent status of equity and diversity-focused initiatives and courses across programmes also results in a varied approach in assessing teacher candidates' competencies in these areas. Some programmes include dedicated assignments, often linked to school placements and documented in portfolios, while in other programmes - where equity and diversity are more peripheral goals or generic orientations in the programme - there may be no formal assessment of these competencies at all.

Many programmes in the sample tend to prioritise preparing future teachers to support students with learning disabilities and language diversity. Other dimensions of diversity, such as socio-economic status, gender, or cultural diversity, often receive less attention, leading to an uneven focus across different aspects of diversity.

Despite the varied approaches to equity and diversity across programmes, both the focus group interviews and programme materials reveal a strong commitment to inclusive education. Most curriculum frameworks and vision statements explicitly emphasize the goal of teaching student teachers to value diversity as an asset rather than seeing it as a challenge or barrier to effective teaching. This aligns with the broader discourse of inclusive education and equal opportunities in Flemish education at the policy level (see above). The overarching aim is to prepare teachers who embrace diversity in their classrooms, and are capable of designing inclusive environments that nurture the full potential of every child. In the focus group interviews with programme leaders, this commitment was described as simply "good teaching". The idea is that effective teaching naturally involves meeting the needs of all students. Diversity was referred to as "variation", accepting the fact that all students differ from each other in multiple ways as a basic condition for teaching. This perspective was not only evident in programme materials and interviews with programme leaders but was also strongly reflected in the focus group discussions with student teachers. This consistency suggests that, even in the absence of macro-level guidance and despite the varied ways in which equity and diversity are operationalized within curricula, programmes are effectively raising awareness among student teachers about the importance of addressing inequalities and fostering a commitment to inclusive education.

Provision for teacher educators on equity and diversity at the institutional and programme level tends to be mostly ad hoc. The availability and nature of this support largely depend on the strategic priorities and decisions made by the institution with which a teacher educator is affiliated. In most institutions within the sample, offerings related to equity and diversity are generic and available to teaching staff across all faculties and programmes of study, rather than being specifically tailored to the needs of teacher

educators. Some institutions have prioritised development for teacher educator staff in this area by participating in research projects focused on equity or diversity or by collaborating with other institutions to create their own programmes. An interesting example is a one-time collaborative initiative from a consortium of universities, higher education colleges, and the Flemish Association of Teacher educators (VELOV) in 2021. This initiative included a series of keynotes, seminars and workshops over a six-month period, focusing on ethical practice as a teacher educator in an ethnically and culturally diverse society. However, these initiatives often remain limited to one-off, short-term projects, and their impact is not consistently monitored.

The extent to which teacher educators are involved with research is a key factor in their access to professional development opportunities. In some cases, teacher educators have the opportunity to engage in practice-focused research as part of their formal remit, including research on equity and diversity in education. This creates a strong dynamic where research-informed knowledge and understandings are immediately integrated into teacher education practice, and, conversely, models and tools are put to the test in practice settings. However, in other institutions, research on equity and diversity is not conducted by those directly responsible for teaching these topics. When research and teaching are structurally separated into different departments or sections of the organisation, the sharing of expertise becomes much more uncertain and is reliant on personal relationships.

It is noteworthy that, although most institutions lack specific professional development programmes for teacher educators, these educators are often involved in professional development initiatives for teachers and school leaders on these issues. This indicates a level of trust in teacher educators' capacities for equity and diversity-focused teaching within the teacher workforce. At the same time, focus group interviews with programme leaders suggest that more work remains to be done. It was suggested, for example, that teacher educators do not always fully understand or enact their crucial role in promoting equity and diversity-centred approaches, or in creating inclusive learning environments for student teachers themselves. Meanwhile, student teachers report that they do not always receive the guidance needed to fully understand and apply principles of equity and diversity in their own classrooms, an issue we will revisit below.

Micro-level provision

The value of diversity and inclusive education is clearly emphasized in programmes' vision statements and frameworks, and student teachers support this ethos (see above). However, students in the interviews express uncertainty about how to navigate diversity and equity in classroom practice. While they understand and support the principles of inclusive education, they feel they lack the necessary competencies to implement these principles effectively in their teaching. Students indicated that their placements are the part of the programme where they are most strongly confronted with this need. At the same time, most students recognize the immense value of the practical component in learning to teach for equity and diversity. In the focus group interviews, students frequently mentioned the significance of classroom experiences in helping them understand what equity entails, how diversity manifests itself, and the value of receiving direct feedback on their teaching or observing more experienced teachers. The mantra of "learning by doing" was mentioned in the focusgroup interviews with both student teachers and programme leaders, highlighting the importance of real-life experience in schools and classrooms for developing a comprehensive understanding of how to teach for diversity and equity.

Because teacher education institutions do not always coordinate intensively with schools and mentor teachers regarding the goals and support for student teachers during placements, the extent to which student teachers are guided in effectively addressing these issues varies. An exception is found in a few select programmes in the sample, which require placements that prioritise inclusion as a central aspect

of student teachers' learning. These placements are deliberately situated in diverse settings, such as reception classes for non-native speakers or support programmes for socio-economically disadvantaged students in urban areas, providing hands-on experiences that highlight both the importance and challenges of inclusive education.

For teacher educators, initiatives for professional development vary a lot and their outcomes are not consistently monitored. Universities, with their academic focus, try to embed equity and diversity into their professional development programmes through theoretical study and inquiry. While the teacher educators conduct research on topics like intersectionality and inequality, student teachers experience that the translation of this research into practical teaching strategies is not always apparent. Elective courses offered within the programme suggest a deep and theoretical engagement with these concepts, yet in reality, teacher educators' practices are not often subjected to critical assessment.

Programme leaders recognise that there is - and perhaps always will be - a small group of teacher educators who are not up to date with equity and diversity practices, or who do not consider it as central to their practice. There is a tendency to delegate responsibility to a specific group of teacher educators (e.g., those taking on diversity-focused courses) rather than seeing it as a whole programme responsibility. Programme leaders identify a marked need for professional development support and more intense collaboration between colleagues (e.g., promoting professional learning communities with a focus on equity and diversity). They also emphasise that such initiatives are instrumental for helping teacher educators to recognise and address their own potential biases towards students when teaching for and about equity and diversity.

Future development: shift from aspiration to action

Reflecting upon these preliminary findings, it is evident that the future development and enhancement of teacher education for equity and diversity will require coordinated action across multiple levels of the Flemish education system. A holistic, long-term, and system-wide approach is essential. We present an initial outline that will be further refined through subsequent activities of the ED-TED project and consultation with relevant stakeholders at local, national and European levels.

First, there is a need for comprehensive policy guidance that creates the foundational conditions, resources and incentives for teacher education institutions to further integrate equity and diversity into their curricula. Additionally, opportunities should be explored to support local initiatives that remain unnecessarily volatile and fragmented within the current landscape, or think about ways to disseminate current initiatives more broadly. By providing structured support and fostering collaboration among institutions, these initiatives can be sustained and scaled, enabling them to have a broader and more lasting impact on the education system.

Programmes should continue their efforts to ensure that the concept of diversity extends beyond socio-economic status and language to include cultural, gender, and other dimensions of diversity relevant to education. Diversity should not be treated as a separate skill or set of competencies, addressed only in isolated courses, elective trajectories, or specific types of placements. Instead, it should be embedded as a core attitude and guiding principle throughout the entire programme, permeating all aspects of teacher education - from curriculum design and pedagogical approaches to assessment practices and placement experiences. This approach will help ensure that future teachers are fully equipped to foster inclusive learning environments in their classrooms.

The integration of research and practice in teacher education, particularly in the areas of equity and diversity, could be further promoted. It is essential to provide teacher educators with opportunities to

engage in relevant research (fundamental research, policy research, and practitioner research), while also ensuring that organizational structures facilitate easy access to research and sharing of relevant expertise.

There are opportunities for more intensive collaboration between teacher education programmes and schools in these areas, especially concerning placement opportunities. Such intensified collaboration can ensure that the expertise present in schools and teacher education programmes connects, complements, and also challenges each other. This will be beneficial to not only student teachers but also teacher educators and teachers in schools.

The professional development for teacher educators in teaching for equity and diversity should be advanced on all levels in the education system. In interviews with programme leaders, they introduced the idea of “teacher educator pioneers”, that is, teacher educators within the team who are not only sensitive to equity and diversity but also take a proactive approach (i.e. “diversity-responsive education”, see above). These pioneers might serve as an important impetus in the development of the larger team. Team dialogue and ongoing professional development is necessary not only for the preparation of student teachers but also for empowering teacher educators to actively confront their own biases.

Lastly, relevant data should be monitored and could provide valuable insights into the provision for both student teachers and teacher educators in the areas of equity and diversity. This would not only shed light on existing initiatives but also on the rationale behind their existence and their impact on how equity and diversity are addressed across the educational landscape. To conclude, these actions should contribute to realising an inclusive learning environment where the integration of equity and diversity are inherently embedded, thereby enabling pupils, students and student teachers to reach their full potential.