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Faculty approaches to diversity in Eastern European education: implications for teaching sensitive topics

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the concept of diversity in education in the context of Eastern Europe and how its meaning might differ from that used in Western-focused literature. The study explores how faculty interpret diversity based on their experience of teaching contexts as being homogenous, situational, or internationalized, for which interviews have been conducted with university educators in Eastern Europe. In a phenomenographic analysis, three different approaches to how faculty engage with diversity in the classroom were identified: (1) exposing students to diversity as an external phenomenon through teaching; (2) focusing on the diversities among students in each classroom and learning how to navigate them; (3) using the diversities present in the classroom to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning. We argue that the meanings and intentions associated with understanding diversity are constitutive of how faculty see their role in facilitating student learning in a diverse classroom, especially of their strategies to address sensitive and controversial topics. Finally, we discuss the implications for teaching practice and academic development, in addition to the relevance of diversity in Eastern European classrooms.
KEYWORDS: Eastern Europe, higher education, diversity, sensitive topics, conceptions of learning

INTRODUCTION

Several researchers proposed the argument that certain commonly-used concepts, such as multiculturalism, diversity, democracy and alike, often reflect the experience of Western Europe and thus are narrowly defined. Indeed, political narratives and

concepts are often transferred or borrowed from the West to Eastern Europe for the sake of imitation (Homes & Krastev 2019). Instead, these concepts should be seen as historically embedded phenomena with meanings that reflect historical, cultural and social contexts, thus strongly linking these concepts with past collective experience (e.g. Berkes 2010; Koesel & Dunajeva 2017). Not only the meaning of these concepts differs but also surveys consistently demonstrate strong regional differences between attitudes towards issues related to multiculturalism, social values and diversity (Pew Research Center 2018).

For instance, within the field of education, Erzsebet Csereklye, a Hungarian expert on social and cultural diversity in education, suggests that Eastern European societies experienced different constructs of social diversity, in which teachers' perception of diversity within classrooms are rooted (Csereklye 2014). More specifically, during socialism, a regime that lasted nearly 50 years, interpretations of social diversity were determined by a class-based approach, while critical discussion of diversity in education was entirely missing (Balint, Gubi, & Mihaly 1980; discussed in Csereklye 2014). Today, this approach dominates pedagogical approaches, and diversity is still defined as connected to economic status rather than other characteristics (Csereklye 2014). Discussion about diversity and multiculturalism in education has not reached post-Socialist countries until the 1990s (Csereklye 2014), making these concepts relatively novel for education.

In this study, we look at classroom diversity, first as it is conceptualized in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and then as it is defined in the field of higher education. We wish to note that by discussing the experience of CEE universities, we do not mean to simplify reality and disregard differences, sometimes very pronounced, among the institutions in the region. Instead, our goal is to demonstrate how certain shared experiences and attitudes, as well as institutional factors, may explain the way university faculty conceptualize and mobilize diversity in their classrooms. We argue that the approach to the diversity of faculty in higher education depends on the societal, cultural, legal and political context in which their institutions operate and the social milieu where faculty socialize as educators.

Since "diversity is in itself a multi-dimensional concept, dependent on the cultural context and level of awareness of difference" (Claeys-Kulik et al. 2019: 23), consequently, in this study, we define diversity as a contextual concept that depends on one's experience. For example, increased migration in one country or a significant number of international students in national higher education institutions (HEIs) may have increased awareness of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. In contrast, diversity may be narrowly seen in other places in terms of gender or disability (Claeys-Kulik et al. 2019). In our study, we develop this argument further and highlight how diversity is defined and operationalized through faculty experiences of their classroom context, shaping their personal teaching theories and, more specifically, their attitudes and strategies to address sensitive and controversial topics.

METHODOLOGY

The authors of this study participated in KA203-C646E630 "SensiClass" Erasmus+ Project, which was a collaborative endeavour between four universities located in Hungary, Estonia, Poland, and the Czech Republic, aimed at developing pedagogical strategies to promote social change towards inclusive societies. In the framework of this project, the authors inquired from faculty in Eastern Europe about the challenges inherent to culturally diverse higher education classrooms. Interviewed faculty did not necessarily participate in the project. Hence, this research was motivated by the ongoing inquiry about teachers' experiences with diversity and sensitive topics in Eastern Europe under 'SensiClass' project.

The study builds on a survey (N=12), and semi-structured interviews (N=9) conducted with faculty members from project partner universities. The anonymized survey was conducted in April and May of 2020 and aimed at collecting faculty insights about the challenges and dilemmas they face or anticipate facing when teaching in diverse classrooms. Then, based on the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted online between May 2020 and August 2021. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to and during the interview. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. We made no voice recording of conversations and instead took detailed verbatim notes that were complemented with interview scripts drafted directly after the interviews. In fact, research demonstrates that 'data quality between audio-recorded transcripts and interview scripts written directly after the interview were comparable in the detail captured,' and ideas may even be better organized in the script rather than transcript (Rutakumwa et al. 2020: 565).

Each interview followed a set of leading questions shaped by researchers to probe further the initial data obtained from the survey, yet participants had opportunities to reflect on what they felt was important and were encouraged to share experiences they themselves deemed relevant to the discussion of diversity in their teaching context. In addition, during the interview, we inquired about the wider teaching context in which university educators work; in specific, teachers were asked to reflect on the social and cultural composition of their society, national political trends, public and media discourses and the implications of these factors on their teaching environment. Interviews were conducted in English. All interviewees were from the Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines. They differed in terms of academic rank and level of teaching experience as well as in terms of institutional contexts in which they engaged with diversity in teaching. Table 1 describes the number and basic details about interviewed faculty.

Title and discipline	Country of Teaching	Institutional Context	Interview code
Religious Studies	Poland	National public university	Interview No. 1
Philosophy	Czech Republic	National public university	Interview No. 2
History	Ukraine, Hungary	National public universities, international private university	Interview No. 3
Medieval Studies	Hungary	International private university	Interview No. 4
Cultural Heritage Studies	Hungary	National public university, international private university	Interview No. 5
Education	Poland, Germany	International study programs at home and abroad	Interview No. 6
Medieval Studies	Hungary	International private university	Interview No. 7
Religious Studies	Estonia	National public university	Interview No. 8
Religious Studies	Estonia, UK	National university abroad, high school at home	Interview No. 9

Table 1. Description of Participants
Source: Own elaboration

To interpret the interview data, we employed phenomenographic analysis to explore how faculty conceptualize diversity based on their understanding of the teaching context and personal teaching histories and how these conceptualizations shape their teaching practice. In line with phenomenographic research tradition, we distinguished between the conceptions of a phenomenon and the approaches to the phenomenon and explored empirically the logical link between them (Prosser & Trigwell 1999; Åkerlind 2007; Marton & Pong 2005). In the context of our study, diversity represented a phenomenon under analysis. In our investigation and the interview coding process accordingly, we distinguished what faculty think diversity means in their classroom from how they approach handling diversity through teaching. Such distinction helped us to arrive at inductive categories for different conceptualizations of diversity and teaching approaches associated with them and to detail faculty self-conceptions of teaching in diverse environments of the CEE region. The coding process relied on comparison as an intellectual tool for identifying relevant categories establishing the boundaries of the categories, summarizing the content of each category, and inferring the relationship between them. The comparison also allowed to increase the validity of the findings as it provided 'a solid basis for generalizing the concepts and the relations between them to the same phenomena external to the sample' (Dorner, Misic, & Rymarenko 2020: 5; Boeije 2002). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis, both researchers completed the coding independently, and the codes were compared in the process to reach an agreement on the meaning and connection of categories.

Inductive categories that we developed via coding of the interview data reveal different levels of awareness about diversity among faculty, where a more inclusive and complex perception of various aspects of this phenomenon points to a more comprehensive understanding of it (see Åkerlind 2004; 2007). In line with previous research, the categories we assigned to the conceptions of teaching in diverse environments reveal variations in faculty focus on teaching towards content versus teaching towards understanding, and variations in focusing on teacher's role and strategies to focusing on students' and their development (see Åkerlind 2004; Ashwin 2006; González 2011). We also see these categories as relational responses to specific teaching situations, yet differently from Åkerlind (2004) and others, we do not imply the relationship of hierarchy among them. Rather we see them as developmental patterns that faculty may pursue in certain teaching contexts.

RESULTS

During our research, we found that diversity was a pertinent concept for all educators, and it is integral in all classrooms and societies across CEE countries. Students' groups may be heterogeneous in many aspects, such as socio-economic background, political views, physical and mental abilities, family backgrounds and others. Some faculty were keenly aware of this, pointing out that it is "challenging to know that everyone is different in some way, and it is difficult to see and explore diversity, as it is sometimes hard to know what diversity looks like" (Interview No. 2). In other instances, vari-

ous forms of diversity were not readily recognized as such and consequently surfaced during class discussion, at times leading to emotional, controversial or even hostile interactions in class.

While we observed hesitation and discomfort from teachers on how to address issues of diversity in class, we also noted an expansive body of literature, demonstrating that diversity in classrooms is an asset. Hence, teachers should be trained to properly deal with and foster diversity (e.g. Andrushchenko & Nesterenko 2015). Some faculty were also aware that student differences—whether in terms of their cultural characteristics, ethnicity or worldviews—are a positive asset nevertheless many struggled with how to handle conflicts arising from various forms of diversity. We took this conundrum as the foundation of our academic curiosity, striving to first assess how diversity is conceptualized by educators themselves and in what way they use these conceptions in their teaching practice.

As a result of phenomenographic analysis, we identified a coding scheme (Table 2) that reflects faculty perceptions about the nature of their teaching context, their conceptions of diversity within this context, and their approaches and strategies to handle diversity in the classroom. The categories presented in the table are the analytical summary of the coding results. The scheme shows that teaching environment, conceptions of diversity, and corresponding teaching strategies are closely interlinked, and we unpack the relationship between these categories in the sections below.

TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

We found that faculty perceive the diversity of their teaching environments primarily through personal histories and experiences of teaching and through their assumptions about the larger social, political, and demographic contexts in which they teach. Based on their perceptions, we identified three types of teaching contexts: 1) homogenous; 2) situational; 3) internationalized (see Table 3). It should be noted that these categories do not merely suggest levels of exposure to diversity in the CEE region, rather they point to the quality of exposures to this phenomenon and how it is experienced by CEE faculty.

Homogeneous teaching environment: Faculty with personal employment histories of working exclusively in CEE counties and teaching at (usually one) national university tend to conceptualize their teaching environments as superficially diverse or homogenous. They recognize lines of differences among students like diverse ideas about the subject matter, variations in social status, different national backgrounds. Yet, those are deemed less significant than diversity related to culture, nationality, religion or ethnicity. Those are perceived as absent from the teaching context. International students do not add to classroom diversity as they come from neighbouring countries and, according to interviewees, do not differ substantially from the students at home. Local representatives from ethnic or religious minorities rarely appear among the student body. Interestingly, the perceived homogeneity was referred to by some faculty as a source of biases, prejudice and even xenophobia due to students' lack of awareness about other social groups that might or might not be present in the society.

They also see perceived homogeneity as contributing to a lack of awareness and skills among teachers and students to meaningfully engage with diverse groups or reflect on them as part of the course content and learning activities.

Situational teaching environment: Faculty who worked within and outside the CEE region and taught in both national and international universities or within different universities in one country conceptualize their teaching contexts as situational that has diversity in various degrees and always subject to a different set of factors. They pick on differences and variations in their student body that are related to institutional distinctions, educational cultures, learning styles, or professional backgrounds, in addition to larger national or cultural characteristics. Sometimes, these can go down to variations in discussion format preferences or students' readiness to engage with certain content types (e.g. based on ethical or religious values). Faculty working in situational contexts recognize that certain aspects of diversity might matter more than others even within the same classroom. Accordingly, they see such teaching contexts as constantly changing and thus requiring a great deal of learning and adjustment from their side as teachers.

Internationalized teaching environment: CEE faculty teaching at international universities or study programs across or within their countries perceive their teaching context as internationalized, where both students and teachers are members of the global academic community. They recognize and accept all forms of diversity as given among their students and streamline differences as contributing to the process of mutual learning. They are also mindful of their own as well as their students' expectations of belonging to an international teaching and learning environment. Some faculty also pointed to the dilemmas associated with students perceiving the global community as 'Western', which also impacts how they as teachers should address and deal with such perceptions. As was evident from the interviews, teaching in such context often exposes faculty to the dilemmas of ethics and justice of knowledge production, sensitivity towards issues of decolonized knowledge, and mindfulness about creating equal opportunities for students to contribute to the academic debate.

FACULTY CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DIVERSITY

Faculty conceptualization of diversity, summarized in Table 4, is directly linked to their perceptions of the teaching context. In other words, these conceptualizations demonstrate various degrees and breadth of awareness about diversity depending on the context through which faculty were exposed to it. In general, we found that faculty were willing and able to see diversity in its visible and hidden forms with varying degrees of nuance and complexity. Those in international teaching environments begin with the assumption that everyone is diverse in one way or another, whereas other teachers thought some student cohorts are diverse while others are not. We also found that teaching experience in varying contexts contributes to broad conceptualizations of diversity by faculty.

1. How do faculty members perceive their teaching environment?	**2. How do faculty members perceive diversity?**	**3. How do faculty members approach teaching in diverse environments?**
1.1. Homogeneous • Differences within institutional or national contexts are seen as arbitrary. • Prejudice against the ‘other'. • Lack of skills to navigate diversity.	2.1. Diversity is seen as largely lacking or invisible.	3.1. Expose students to diversity as an external phenomenon through teaching. • Teachers introduce students to different viewpoints and interpretations. • Teachers use case studies exposing students to diversity dilemmas to put their prior assumptions or mental models in question, expose moral reasoning behind controversial judgements. • Sensitive and controversial topics are a matter of concern and are often discussed individually with students rather than in all class discussions.
1.2. Situational • Teaching context varies across countries, educational systems and institutional cultures. • Teacher-student relationships differ across contexts. • Learning styles differ even within similar contexts.	2.2. Diversity is specific to concrete classroom context.	3.2. Focusing on the diversities among students in a given classroom and learning how to navigate them. • Teachers are mindful of the classroom context when selecting content, activities, and assignments. • Teachers seek to adapt their classroom strategies to work effectively in different contexts. • Sensitive and controversial topics are approached with caution but have their place in classroom discussions.
1.3. Internationalized • Teachers and students are part of a global learning community. • Being mindful about the ethical dilemmas associated with internationalization.	2.3. Diversity is a given feature of any classroom	3.3. Using the diversities present in the classroom to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning. • Engaging students in critical reflection about their own assumptions and identities. • Supporting learning through difference. • Establishing an environment for safe communication. • Supporting learning through lived experiences. • Sensitive topics are invited in the classroom backed by teacher's experience in handling controversial discussions.

Table 2. Coding Scheme
Source: Own elaboration

	Differences within institutional or national contexts are seen as arbitrary		**Lack of skills to navigate diversity**
Homogeneous	"diversity means Erasmus students, or a few foreigners. A lot of diversity comes from [neighboring countries]. These students adapt very well. Diversity that is not so much diverse." (Interviewee 1). "There are differences in terms of [students] political and religious views. The latter is rather ideas about religion, like Islam. Another difference is social context: special needs, village—city tension. Not really multiculturalism." (interviewee 2).	"due to lack of diversity in real life, they [students] are less aware,… plus we have xenophobic sentiment. So this is a tricky paradox. We don't have others but we don't like them. " (Interviewee 1). "many people talk about ending racism of Roma, but in reality they are mean and racist…maybe useful to meet someone from these sensitive groups" (Interviewee 2).	"[Students have] lower level of cultural empathy" (Interviewee 1). "The one big problem in our faculty is that everything is theoretical. There is not much space for practical knowledge, like this.[…] It would sensitize people to these topics." (Interviewee 2)
	Institutional differences	**Educational culture differences**	**Learning style differences**
Situational	"If you teach in a place like [international university], you are confronted with [diversity] challenges, you have to work out a strategy. But if you teach in the [national] higher education system, where you have some elements but not to this extent, then your reactions can be very problematic. It is a matter of being exposed to such situations. "(Interviewee 5).	"The hierarchy does not exist in [country A], but in [country B] very much so. We have more activities in [country A] after we finish classes. There are safe spaces after the finals and they [students] invite us. These are like nonformal meetings. The atmosphere we can talk informally… We are part of their activities. […] In [country B] it's impossible. It's banned to drink with students. I think these must be historical and social reasons. The diversity is bigger in [country A] than in[country B]." (Interviewee 6)	In [national university 1] is very traditional. Students are used to receive lectors. It is hard to have the talk. In [national university 2] it is easier. We actually had some conversations." (Interviewee 3) "You have to put everything in your context anyways. So methods can be used, from the Western European context, but you have to add your own content. What I see is because Eastern Europe is not as "sexy" as Western Europe. Western Europeans often don't understand Eastern European societies, so they simply don't grasp the context" (Interviewee 9)
	Belonging to a global learning community	**Being mindful about the ethical dilemmas associated with internationalization**	
Internationalized	"When you have a very diverse class with bright students—they are part of the global youth—but they come from very diverse backgrounds".	"In Europe the way we create knowledge is very ethnocentric. When I have students from Cameroon, Ethiopia… they try to find articles and science in their own language! They translate and show us how many new theories and knowledge they also produce. It is our problem in Europe. We forget about indigenous methodologies, and we do not have enough connections… I mean ethical research and didactics. [Hence] I decided to focus on ethical symmetry: I found a solution to give equal opportunity to students to share their own voices." (Interviewee 6) "It is very hard to help students who have expectations to write like "Western people" and manage their expectations while there is an opposite trend in the world, recognizing "different Englishes." (Interviewee 4)	

Table 3. Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Environment
Source: Own elaboration

Faculty members who think of their teaching environments as homogeneous conceptualize diversity as lacking or as an exceptional phenomenon. They conceive diversity as a collection of concrete characteristics (ethnical, religious, cultural, etc.) that are identifiable within the student body. Diversity thus can be present in the classroom only when there are students with those identifiable characteristics; otherwise, it is seen as a phenomenon to which students should be introduced by the teacher. The focus, therefore, is made on improving students' awareness about diversity by increasing their knowledge of various cultures, religions, thinking perspectives, etc., through course content and learning activities.

Faculty teaching in situational contexts also sees diversity as a combination of identifiers such as ethnicity, social status or culture as well as less visible characteristics such as professional backgrounds or institutional learning cultures. Their understanding of diversity is also broader and more nuanced, and they attribute it to all students in various degrees and combinations. Interestingly, one of the interviewees suggested that diversity refers primarily to employing various teaching methods depending on the composition and the learning needs of the audience. Diversity is, therefore, a contextual feature of each classroom with both advantages and constraints. Adjustments on the side of the teacher should reinforce the former and overcome the latter to create successful learning experiences.

Finally, faculty working exclusively in an international context see diversity as an unavoidable feature of any classroom. Their conceptualization of diversity includes all the above-mentioned characteristics and contextual features, such as nationality, religion, gender and others. Yet, they are also mindful of students' individual learning abilities, authentic experiences, expectations, and feelings. Diversity for them is, therefore, not a collection of identifiers or contextual variations but an underlying normative foundation of the teaching and learning community. The focus is then on working through this foundation to tailor to all students' individual learning and developmental patterns.

TEACHING APPROACHES AND SENSITIVE TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM

During our inquiries, teachers shared stories of students with emotional outbursts, anger or outrage when discussing certain topics during class. Nearly all felt unprepared to address neither the affected students nor the entire class properly. We noticed that in almost all instances, issues associated with diversity have brought up professional challenges for teachers, unsure how to respond or deal with arising situations. One of the interviewed teachers from Poland, for example, complained that a student claimed that African was uncivilized while there was an African student in the classroom. A teacher from Estonia shared that in the context of learning about the Holocaust, a student expressed antisemitic views. Two teachers faced a situation when at least one student in class vocally opposed gay rights. In all cases, teachers shared their inability to adequately respond and treat the situation in class.

Diversity as (non)identifiable characteristic	"Diversity… usually you refer to different ethnicities, nationalities and religions. But you can go into broader definition: social, economic diversification within population. I think diversity also means radically different political orientation. But maybe it is useful to stick with the first definition" (Interviewee 1) "…not only a visible diversity, invisible diversity is very important: social background etc. It is difficult to see and explore diversity because there is much homogeneity, hard to know how diversity would look like" (Interviewee 2)
Diversity as contextual feature	"Diversity means for me students who are involved in [certain]courses and programs, they are coming from different backgrounds: different countries, religions, genders, cultures, different educational background, which also involves behavior and expectations in classrooms. Many other things are defining their identity(Interviewee 5) "I use this word in this way: you have diversity in opinions; you have diversity in meanings – how people are interpreting different phenomena; diversity comes from different contexts - " (Interviewee 8)
Diversity as normative and normal	"Multiple diversity is normal!" (Interviewee 6) "For me diversity is pretty diverse. I come from different kinds of settings. I think the essence of diversity is that it's multifarious. [...] Socio-economic status, educational background is also very important and often overlooked, age, ability – all those are important. I am exposed to a lot of linguistic diversity. In that position it's the usual difference between students, how they express themselves and how they feel, how it makes them succeed " (Interviewee 7)

Table 4. Faculty Conceptions of Diversity
Source: Own elaboration

Considering faculty perceptions about their teaching context and their understanding of diversity, we identified three different approaches to teaching: (1) exposing students to diversity as an external phenomenon through teaching; (2) focusing on the diversities among students in each classroom and learning how to navigate them; (3) using the diversities present in the classroom to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning. Each approach contains distinct sets of strategies as to how diversity is handled and how sensitive and controversial topics are addressed that are summarized in Table 5.

Exposing students to diversity as an external phenomenon through teaching. We found that faculty members who see their teaching environment as homogenous nevertheless perceive diversity to be an asset in the learning process. Some of them highlighted the importance of engaging students via multiple perspectives in mastering their subject matter; others consider diversity helpful in addressing and overcoming social biases and prejudice embedded in CEE society, still others believed discussing diversity to be essential for acquiring non-academic skills such as intercultural communication. However, as these faculty see diversity to be external to their classroom, they take it as their primary role and task as teachers to expose students to this phenomenon. In this regard, faculty see themselves as holders of essential knowledge and understanding about the diverse 'others' that they need to teach to their students.

Students, on the other hand, are perceived as those whose knowledge and prior mental models related to diversity need to be challenged and transformed through teaching. Accordingly, the classroom strategies of faculty members reflect this self-conception of teaching. It is up to the teacher to bring students' attention to different viewpoints and perspectives, introduce the case studies to work on diversity dilemmas and invite students' moral reasoning with regard to diversity in addition to an evidence-based judgment. The goal of these activities and explanations is usually to inject into students' understandings and frameworks of diversity that teachers deem appropriate and just.

At the same time, these faculty are cautious about provoking controversial debates and prefer to avoid discussions on sensitive topics in the classroom. If such discussions emerge, they are handled on an individual basis and often outside of the classroom. Among the reasons reported by faculty to justify such an approach are fears to provoke conflict in the classroom or step into the discussion they won't be able to handle effectively, as well as lack of skills to facilitate controversial discussions with the learning value to the students.

Focusing on the diversities among students in each classroom and learning how to navigate them. Faculty exposed to various teaching contexts tend to prioritize a more audience-focused and reflective approach to teaching. They use their knowledge of the national, institutional or educational contexts to learn about their students as well as are open to question their prior assumptions about students as they teach.

Conceptions of Teaching	**Examples of teaching strategies**		
Expose students to diversity as an external phenomenon through teaching.	***Teachers introduce students to different viewpoints and interpretations***	***Teachers use case studies exposing to diversity dilemmas to practice relevant skills, expose moral reasoning behind controversial judgements judgement***	***Sensitive and controversial topics are discussed individually***
"Teaching multiculturalism by dry run – teaching how to swim without water, ... And we have an essentialist knowledge about cultures. " (Interviewee 1)	"Maybe it's not the perfect thing. I try to point: different interpretations and different understandings.... I show different ways and reasons." (Interviewee 1.) "I tell them it is normal and common to be afraid of foreigners, but it is different to be xenophobic. Afraid and hate are different." (Interviewee 2)	"the most important is good and bad examples, from other schools, from abroad. So that way we can see in practice how it works.... Students collect case studies about sensitive topic. During one seminar we discuss these, and we try to systematically analyze" (Interviewee 2) " They discuss in groups. This is a way for me to explain to the students, regardless of what it is about – abortion, LGBT, etc. - when you can accept rational argument, when linked to moral argument, then judgments become difficult." (Interviewee 1)	"it's easy when you have a discussion with one student only. ... I don't engage in huge explanations. I am afraid if I engage farther, I would provoke stronger comments... I want to avoid that, I don't want to provoke and don't want confrontation. " (Interviewee 1)
Focusing on the diversities among students in a given classroom and learning how to navigate them in a particular context.	***Teachers are mindful of the context when selecting content, activities and assessment.***	***Same strategies are adapted to different contexts.***	***Sensitive and controversial topics are approached with caution but have their place in classroom discussions to an extent***
"when you get in a situation when you expect something in terms of knowledge or skills in a classroom, then you have to offer a balanced opinion on that, it has to be commented. But never in a way that would blame the student. Not like "you should have learnt it ages ago" or "how could you have got here without knowing this?" [It is] I who can be mistaken in my evaluation and expectations [of the students]." (Interviewee 5).	"One brilliant paper I had in mind to give them for discussion was about sexual toys. It was a cultural economics paper that demonstrated well how the idea of body and sex change. I was thinking if I should do it in the Catholic University and I decided not to". (Interviewee 3). "the first thought is the variety of methods I use in teaching. My toolbox, method-wise, is what I mean. Giving students different assignments, so if one student is not good with memorizing, they might be better at doing other tasks." (Interviewee 9) "Another big challenge is the reaction of students to certain things. Like evaluation: if I tell a student that their seminar work is pretty good, this means for some that they will be happy for a few days, the prof said it's pretty good. But somebody else will take it as failure, "pretty good' may mean rubbish. The background from where you are coming from and expectations are very different." (Interview 5)	"At one point, we asked all the students about their own research project from that point of view. One student said he feels there is no relevance at all. ... So we asked the student to elaborate on his opinion. We then engaged in a conversation. Soon it was clear that for example some elements were relevant for the research and then gender was a factor. Multistep, indirect discussion of the issue – this was the strategy. I think this strategy would work at [University] as well. The diversity is not so expressed there, but at the same time it does not mean you don't have strong preconceptions and attitudes toward people, or conclusions based on assumptions, very problematic assumptions. I have a few cases of political attitudes... and then it became a sensitive issue. This strategy would be equally fruitful." (Interviewee 5)	"It takes us back to the balance: how to create an atmosphere in which students can freely express themselves and there is a line, and when students cross it, they are confronted. You may feel that a fellow student does not argue rightly, but it should not be connected with race, religion etc. That's the line." (Interviewee 5) I think we all have quite specific topics [that is sensible]. I know a lot from papers, but I don't know how to handle ethical issues. I think what we do is often talk among colleagues our experience. We share our stories" (Interviewee 3).

Using the diversities present in the classroom to facilitate inclusive teaching and learning.	***Engaging students in critical reflection about their own assumptions and identities.***	***Establishing am environment for safe and shared communication.***	***Sensitive topics are invited in the classroom backed by teacher's experience in handling such discussions***
"I don't like to stand there to as a single authority figure. I like having students engage in dialogue. They come because they are fundamentally interested in the topic. It is a more interactive classroom." (Interviewee 4)	" I have to bring it in a delicate way. I am not challenging their views but want them to think critically. I do it through discussions. I say I read their essays and I see they take some things for granted. I ask them questions about the origin of Christianity…I ask them about the relationship between colonial power tactics and religion. I ask questions and make them think. " (Interviewee 4) "I think the awareness helps a lot. I can see that there is a difficulty when no such awareness exists… that working in a university we are teaching about how to communicate and be a researcher… when there is a better awareness, Self-reflection I think are also very good." (Interviewee 7)	"At the beginning we always establish rules and norms for our own classes and how we communicate. We also discuss how we communicate via email too. At the beginning we lay down all this foundation. Students know the strategies we use to communicate and the majority can decide." (Interviewee 6)	" I just let the discomfort be, I didn't call out anyone. I did signal that I liked the provocativeness of the topic and explained why it was interesting. I call out polemical ideas, but I had to learn how to do it…For example, I never thought about the implications about colonialism. And now because of these students – I am so grateful – I can recognize how settle and complex this issue is. Now I can pick out the problems better." (Interviewee 4)
	Supporting learning through difference	***Learning from lived experiences***	
	"I am really happy to say that I have fantastic students. They are from different countries and they are connected with different social, cultural and political situations. … With such a huge, diverse group they do not fight and disagree, but they try to find a solution to understand… they are 20 students and have a fantastic opportunity to understand differences." (Interviewee 6)	"the traditional way of teaching is very problematic in extremely diverse classrooms. Therefore, often the way to do it is to use case studies. It is also good for students because they can bring in their own cases." (Interviewee 5) "when we have the seminar, they have their own experiences and thoughts. They like to share their experiences. they agree or disagree with theories. I also learn a lot." (Interviewee 6)	

Table 5. Self-Conceptions of Teaching and Teaching Strategies in Diverse Classroom
Source: Own elaboration

While being attentive to the audience, faculty members still decide on how diversity will be employed in teaching. For example, they are making decisions on which content materials, activities and assignments are the most appropriate for their class. In this regard, they would try not to select content materials that can be deemed too controversial, or they would choose case studies they think are more relevant to the background of their students. Likewise, they tend to adapt their teaching methods and strategies to work effectively in different contexts and with different groups of learners. Rather than teaching students about diversity, these faculty invite students to engage with it in the class through activities such as group discussions, debates, structured case analysis, role plays, and authentic research tasks. The goal of these activities would be for students to reconcile differences by engaging with the perspectives of their peers.

Controversial topics and sensitive discussions have their place in the classroom, yet only when teachers are confident that they fit the study context and that students would be able to handle such discussions smoothly. Otherwise, sensitive or controversial topics are taken with hesitation, and the need to have specific skills for handling such debates is cited as a necessary pre-condition.

Using diversity in the classroom to facilitate inclusive learning and critical self-reflection. Faculty teaching in international universities and programs capitalize on diverse compositions of students as a mutual learning opportunity and of their classroom as a shared learning space for students and teachers alike. Students are invited to understand rather than confront differences by engaging with the authentic experiences and backgrounds of their peers. In this regard, special attention is given to establishing shared terms of engagement and communication in the classroom, as well as ethical considerations about shared knowledge production. Teaching strategies identified under this approach challenge students to critically reflect on their own assumptions and identities and use their own lived experiences or contextual knowledge to challenge the existing academic scholarship and to contribute to it. Sensitive or controversial topics are consciously invited in the classroom as a helpful learning tool to approach diverse, complex and emotional aspects of social phenomena under study. Yet, faculty are mindful of developing facilitation skills for such discussions by constantly reflecting on their own and their colleagues' classroom experiences.

Overall, the three identified approaches to teaching might be seen as distinct stages of development that faculty go through as their exposure to diversity and its various aspects increases or if they confront multiple challenges related to diversity. Our findings are then relevant for universities that are experiencing increasing internationalization of their student bodies, whether as a result of intensified exchange programs or opening up their universities to international students.

DISCUSSION

Korhonen and Weil (2015) have argued regarding the internationalization in higher education that it has a significant impact on teachers' self-conceptions and that it

pushes them to re-evaluate their practice and their roles in the classroom depending on how they confront new realities and challenges. Our findings suggest that diversity context impacts teachers' self-conceptions and practices in a similar way, pushing them to adapt and tailor their practices to their specific teaching environment. Furthermore, our analysis points out that faculty conceptualizations and beliefs about diversity are predominantly shaped by their professional and personal teaching experiences rather than the CEE societies' wider national, social, or political characteristics. Namely, personal exposures to diversity via classroom compositions, subject matter, or institutional cultures are more important than social, political, or country-specific characteristics in shaping faculty perceptions and strategies in relation to diversity.

We found it helpful to distinguish between the 'what' and the 'how' aspects of the diversity phenomenon, which allowed us to clarify the relationship between conceptions of diversity and responsive teaching approaches. We found that faculty strategies to handle diversity are strongly linked to their understanding of diversity itself. In this regard, diversity is understood as either an external or internal phenomenon and the nature of diversity is differently situated. Faculty might conceptualize it merely as presence or absence of certain characteristics in the student body (e.g. national, cultural, socio-economic), as a feature of concrete classroom context that shifts depending on the topic or content discussed, or as an inherent condition of any teaching environment in today's internationalized and interconnected higher education context. This implies different degrees of awareness about diversity and its defining aspects among faculty along the scale of complexity, from the collection of identifiable and stable characteristics to the complex web of shifting identities, relationships, and context. This finding is consistent with the notion of degrees of complexity or 'breadth of awareness' about the phenomenon based on individual exposures to different aspects of it (Åkerlind 2007: 26). In addition, we found that faculty awareness about diversity was also subject to personal or community reflections about teaching context and strategies. Namely, those who tend to reflect critically about their teaching experiences regardless of the context formed more nuanced conceptualizations of diversity, as opposed to those who were less prone to reflective practice. This adds further evidence to the argument that different kinds of reflective practice (self-reflection, semi-formal faculty conversations) contribute positively to faculty development (Roche & Marsh 2002; Dorner & Belic 2021).

Varying understandings of diversity inform faculty conceptions of teaching in diverse environments or what Fox (1983) defined as 'personal theories of teaching'. The three approaches to teaching identified in our analysis each specify a distinct role of a teacher and his/her learning expectations for the students. It should be noted that these approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather represent certain developmental patterns for faculty in different contexts. The level of exposure to more diverse environments and diversity-related challenges may encourage faculty to be more reflective and to take more student-focused approaches, as opposed to those teaching in a homogeneous context. Similarly, faculty willingness and confidence to engage in sensitive and controversial discussions increase with their exposure to more diverse contexts as they are expected to employ those skills more often. We also find

consistency with the argument that personal theories of teaching essentially shape faculty attitudes to students and their learning (Fox 1983; Kreber 2010). In our case, self-conceptions of teaching in diverse environments strongly impacted how faculty employed teaching strategies across contexts and perceived student learning, especially in relation to teaching sensitive and controversial topics.

Finally, it is also important to recognize that teaching about diversity or simply handling issues related to diversity within classrooms must be embedded in the political realities of the region. Clark Kerr's observation from 1990 remains true today: there is tension between the "internationalization of learning" on the one hand and "intensification of the interests of independent nation states in the conscious use of these institutions for their own selected purposes" (Kerr 1990: 5). Soon after regime change, scholars posed the question of what the future of Eastern European higher education is, whether traditions rooted in communism will prevail or liberal, Western ideas will dominate, partly due to internationalization of higher education (e.g. Berg & Vlăsceanu 1991). We see a similar tension today, especially with the recent political changes in many Eastern European countries. Some political leaders, most notoriously in Poland and Hungary, have explicitly turned away from liberal values, which is mirrored in their education system, promoting a certain type of educational content, a "proper" national history and appropriate values (e.g. Kürti 2020). Some observers noted that in these countries, "school curricula … have been trending more toward patriotism and religion, with less emphasis on diversity" (Scherle & Heinrich 2017). As we demonstrated in this article, these tensions manifest today, too. Consequently, teachers' roles in handling sensitive topics and controversies in class have become even more imperative for creating a democratic and safe learning environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study was motivated by the shared experience of teachers from the CEE region, who expressed their need for help to handle various situations in classrooms that resulted from differing views, controversial statements and growing intolerance they noticed in their classrooms. We embarked on the study with the initial goal of demonstrating that diversity is a relevant and integral feature of the CEE classrooms, yet the way it is conceptualized, mobilized and treated in classrooms may differ. Through our analysis, we established various categories to group faculty's experiences with teaching, perception of diversity and approach to teaching. We highlighted the importance of a teaching environment that explains how diversity is defined and consequently navigated inside classrooms. Our research also suggests that regardless of the level of experience and teaching context, mastering facilitation skills is an essential pre-condition for being able to handle controversial topics effectively.

We acknowledge the small scale of our analysis, which makes it difficult to imply straightforward generalization of findings. Yet, we anticipate that our initial inquiry will encourage further research into the CEE context and faculty experiences related to it. The relationship between teachers' perception of context and their teaching approaches has an important implication for faculty support and academic develop-

ment initiatives in CEE context. At present, faculty professionalization in addressing diversity seems to be linked to their personal exposure to the phenomenon in different teaching contexts. To support faculty in developing towards more comprehensive approaches and strategies for engaging with diversity, opportunities should be made available for them to reflect professionally about their teaching context and challenges associated with it, to gain additional awareness about aspects and features of diversity, and to earn and practice skills necessary to engage it effectively in teaching.

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