

Inclusive student-centred pedagogies

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1.1 Transformative teaching approach

Inclusive student-centred pedagogy is a teaching approach that aims to create a welcoming, equitable, and engaging environment in which every student has the chance to participate meaningfully and reach their full potential. Student-centred pedagogies are transformative teaching approaches which emphasise active student engagement, individual autonomy, and tailored learning experiences (Mat & Jamaludin, 2024). By emphasising inclusivity, this pedagogy acknowledges and values the diversity of students' backgrounds, abilities, interests, and experiences. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, it prioritises adaptability and responsiveness to the unique needs of each learner, making education accessible and relevant to all.

This approach revolves around active student engagement, viewing students not as passive recipients of information but as active participants in their own learning process. Faculty using this teaching method often adapt their instruction to align with students' personal interests, prior knowledge, and learning patterns, whether visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, or a blend of modalities. Recognizing that students bring a range of experiences and skills, inclusive pedagogy encourages collaboration, peer learning, and open communication to help students build on their strengths and support each other.

To support diverse learning needs, inclusive and student-centred teaching often incorporates differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and formative assessment, allowing faculty to monitor and respond to individual progress continually. Moreover, this approach promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-reflection, empowering students to take ownership of their learning journey.

Ultimately, inclusive student-centred pedagogy contributes to a more just and compassionate learning environment, where every student feels valued, respected, and supported. By fostering a sense of belonging and emphasising each student's potential, this approach equips learners with the confidence and skills to thrive both academically and personally, laying a strong foundation for continuous learning and active participation in society.

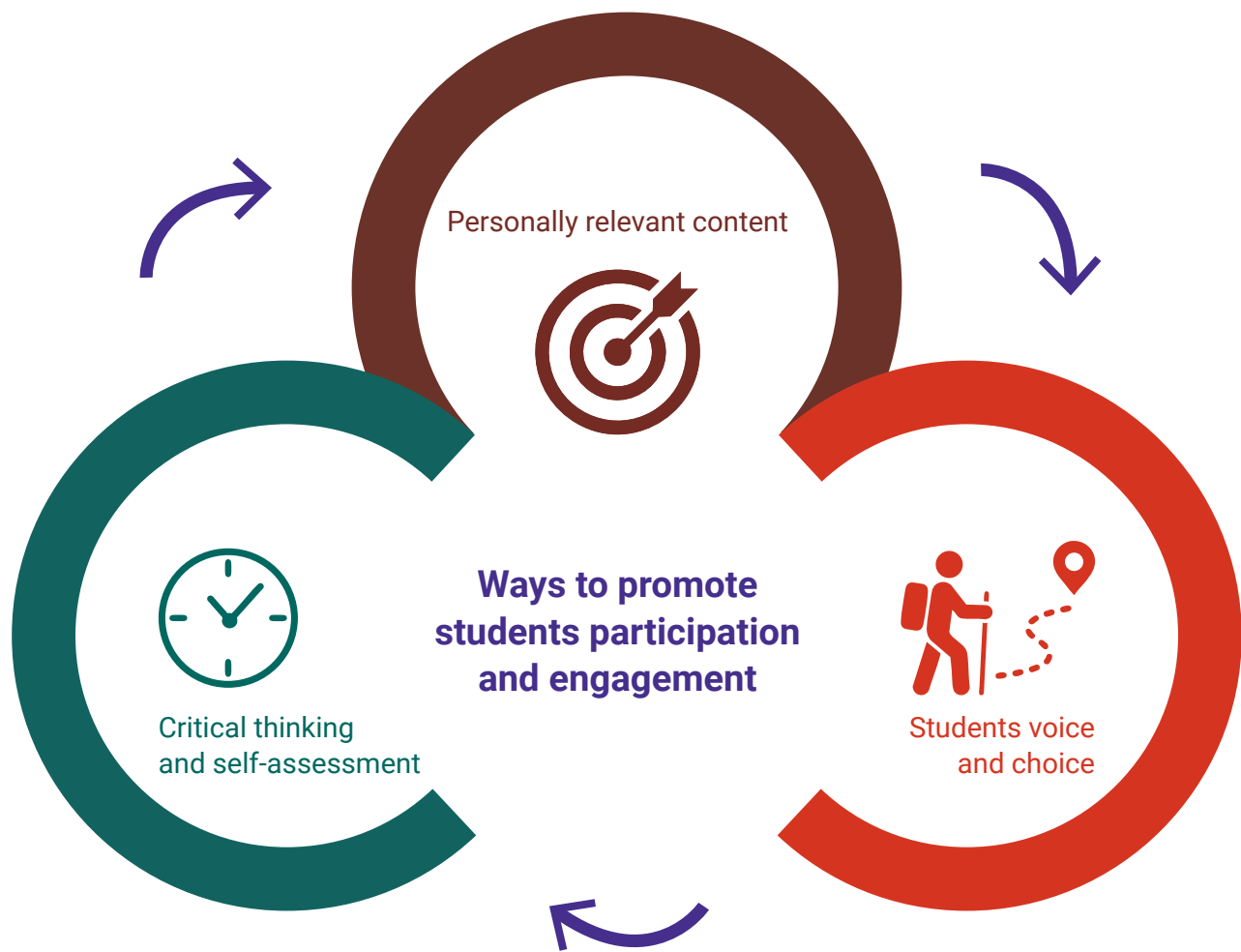


Figure 1.1 Ways to promote students' participation and engagement

1.1.1 Student involvement and participation

To implement an inclusive student-centred teaching approach, it is essential to ensure that students actively participate in the learning process and engage in personal meaningful learning experiences (cf. Sun & Xu, 2024). Three key aspects should be emphasized to enhance student participation and engagement (see Figure 1.1).

Empowering students to voice their opinions about the learning process, suggest ideas, and make decisions that shape their academic experience, supports a sense of ownership and engagement essential for advanced learning. When university students are invited to propose research topics aligned with their interests, choose from a range of assessment methods, or participate in the co-creation of course materials, they become active partners in their education. For instance, allowing students to influence the selection of course readings or project formats encourages them to connect more deeply with the material. Moreover, gathering student feedback on teaching approaches or curriculum adjustments signals a commitment to an adaptive, student-centred learning environment. This involvement not only enhances motivation but also prepares students for the professional autonomy and collaborative decision-making that will be vital in their future careers.

Students are encouraged to actively engage in self-reflection, which involves a thoughtful evaluation of their learning patterns and an assessment of their progress over time. This process of self-reflection is vital in helping students gain insights into how they learn best and the effectiveness of their study habits. By critically analysing

their approaches to learning, students can determine which strategies are working well for them and which may need adjustment. Through structured self-assessment practices, such as reflective journals, peer evaluations, or progress checklists, students are empowered to identify both their strengths and areas for improvement. For example, a student might realize that collaborative group work enhances their understanding of a subject, while solitary study may yield other results. This awareness fosters the development of critical thinking skills, as students must analyse and synthesise information about their learning experiences.

Through incorporating principles of inclusion and equity in the curriculum, faculty can build a towards an inclusive education system (cf. OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2017). Enriching the curriculum with examples, activities, and tasks that resonate with students' personal lives, interests, and real-world experiences is a powerful pedagogical strategy. By integrating content that aligns with students' unique perspectives and everyday realities, educators create a more meaningful and engaging learning environment. This approach goes beyond traditional methods by making the material more accessible and relatable, which can significantly enhance student motivation and involvement. By connecting theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios that students encounter in their daily lives, learners can better grasp the relevance of the subject matter. Such connections not only reinforce the material but also encourage critical thinking, as students evaluate and discuss issues that are pertinent to them.

Moreover, incorporating personally relevant content allows students to draw on their own experiences and backgrounds, fostering a richer classroom discussion. For example, in a literature class, students could be encouraged to relate themes from a novel to their own life stories, cultural contexts, or current events. This not only promotes a deeper understanding of the text but also validates students' voices, encouraging them to share and learn from one another.

1.2.1 Safe and supportive environment

Sustainable Development Goal 4 on qualitative education (Target 4.3; United Nations, 2015), is aimed to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university and it emphasises that 'stronger non-discrimination policies are necessary to guarantee equality of opportunities' for low-income students, students with disabilities, refugees and displaced students, and students of ethnic minorities or underrepresented religious communities. 'Enabling access to quality higher education for these and other discriminated groups is central for social justice and social cohesion' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 2). Although higher education institutions promote inclusive student-centred pedagogies, some social obstacles and insufficient awareness among university academia exists which makes the progress of students from underrepresented groups toward graduation and employment more complicated (cf. Geertsema & van der Rijst, 2024). In their study Dignath and colleagues (2022) conclude that 'teachers' belief systems about the inclusion of students with special needs may explain gaps between policy and practice' (p. 2609).

In order to help faculty to develop their agency and competence in ensuring safe and supportive learning environments, they should be supported and provided with knowledge and skills for implementing inclusive student-centred approaches for students including those with different disabilities and from underrepresented communities. Goodall and colleagues (2024) in their study offer implementation of universal design procedures where 'universal design for learning challenges the "one-size-fits-all" approach to education by appreciating learner variability and diversity and making curricula more expansive and flexible' (p. 439).

1.2 Teaching methods and recommendations

In 2017, the Latvian Academic Information Centre conducted a national study on student-Centred teaching approach in universities and colleges in Latvia (Akadēmiskais informācijas centrs, 2017). The results of the survey, completed by representatives from 41 higher education institutions, indicated that there was a need to enhance student involvement in both the learning process and content development. Student-centred education requires not only changes to the curriculum but also the adaptation of the entire learning environment to meet the diverse needs

of students. The study emphasizes that universities and colleges should assess and upgrade the support mechanisms and services available to students with special needs and those from various social, cultural and religious backgrounds. Additionally, it is important to consider whether library resources are easily accessible to all students, including offering round-the-clock access to the library. The study environment plays a key role not only in addressing social dimensions but also in ensuring the effectiveness of the overall pedagogical process.

1.2.1 Differentiated instruction, active learning, and diverse teaching materials

To effectively implement inclusive student-centred pedagogy, we propose to be founding our teaching approaches on differentiated instruction, active learning, and the use of diverse teaching materials.

Differentiated teaching involves adjusting lessons to meet students' individual needs. Faculty tailor content, learning processes, and assessment methods based on each student's readiness, interest, and learning profile (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2003). This approach ensures that students with different skill levels all have an entry point to learn effectively. For instance, advanced students may receive more complex tasks, while those needing extra support are given simpler ones or additional resources (Heacox, 2017). This flexibility allows faculty to foster a more inclusive and balanced learning environment (Hattie, 2009). Our colleagues provided recommendations for working with students with special needs:

Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each student with special needs provides the information needed to develop individual learning plans that matches each student's ability to study, learn and acquire skills and competences in the class and subjects.

Use inclusive or neutral, clear language in communication. It is important for the educator to know what the disabilities of particular students are so that he/she can adapt the learning materials to the needs of the particular students.

Active learning engages students directly, encouraging them to participate in discussions, collaborative group work, projects, and practical exercises (Prince, 2004). This method moves beyond passive listening, as students actively construct their knowledge through interaction and hands-on activities. Active learning promotes deeper understanding, critical thinking, and communication skills (Freeman et al., 2014). For example, students working together on a project learn from each other's insights and are more likely to retain knowledge than through lecture-based instruction alone (Chi & Wylie, 2014). One of our colleagues explained from their teaching experience:

Be patient and tolerant to students and your colleagues. Although as educators we know our field, content of the subject, teaching methodology, but we may have different perceptions of what we see and experience in the class, at the institution, in the team, in our relationships with students.

The use of diverse teaching materials, such as visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic materials, makes learning accessible to students with various learning needs and patterns (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016; Vermunt & Donche, 2017). Learners benefit from a variety of learning materials and activities which stimulate visual, through diagrams, videos, and illustrations, auditory through discussions, music, or podcasts, and kinaesthetically through hands-on activities and physical engagement with the material. By incorporating multiple types of resources, faculty create a learning environment that helps students to develop their learning patterns in various ways (Biwer et al., 2020). Our colleagues gave suggestions from their teaching practice:

Identify the individual needs of students with special needs, for example, there may be students with autistic spectrum disorders in your class, and their behaviour, perceptions, attitudes to studying may be different.

Use digital technologies and tools that, for example, help to visualise learning materials, audio recordings, audiobooks, assistive text production devices etcetera.

Be understanding and as inclusive as possible in the organisation of the study process, in the use of language, in communication with students in order to promote meaningful learning and to create an environment that is safe, that promotes learning rather than aversion to subject content, that helps the student to perceive the learning visually, aurally and kinaesthetically.

1.2.2 Educational models and key principles of inclusive student-centred pedagogy

Inclusion can also be understood as the result of a historical evolution within the educational environments. Educational scholars who focused on students with disabilities in national systems classified educational systems into four main categories: exclusion, segregation, integration, and inclusion (cf. Mezzanotte, 2022; see Figure 1.2). These four categories can be translated into four categories of group interactions and acculturation in educational environments in higher education.

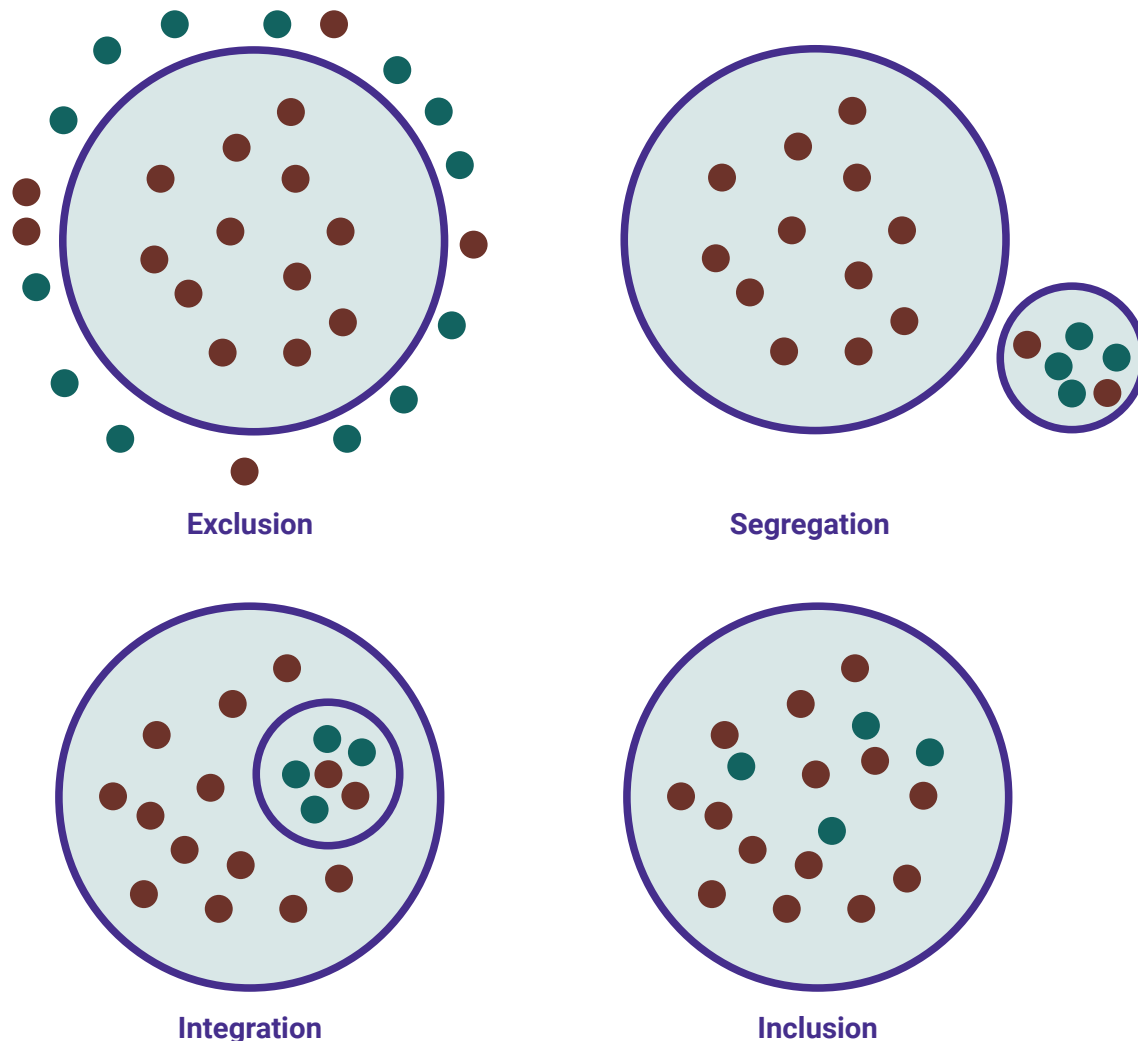


Figure 1.2 Classification of educational systems (adapted from Mezzanotte, 2022)

Exclusion in education happens when students are, explicitly or tacitly, denied access to activities or face barriers like fees, eligibility requirements, or with-in group desirable behaviour. It is not limited to “out-of-school” students but includes various forms, such as restricted entry to honours classes, limited access to internships, or high fees for international mobility. *Segregation* refers to educating diverse groups separately, such as students with disabilities

only able to attend online, division of education by students’ first-in-family university attendance, age-segregation, or mono-gender grouping. *Integration* places all students in mainstream settings, but all students must adapt to the unchanged environment, often without individualized support (UNESCO, 2017). This means that students from underrepresented groups, female students, and student with disabilities do not have the same affordances to grow academically. Integration and inclusion are distinct concepts but are sometimes confused in policy and literature. *Inclusion* is a process that removes barriers to ensure all learners can be present, participate, and succeed. It focuses on adapting the system to meet students’ needs, recognizing that exclusion arises from the system, not the individual (UNICEF, 2014). The key principles of student-centred teaching approaches are depicted in Figure 1.3.

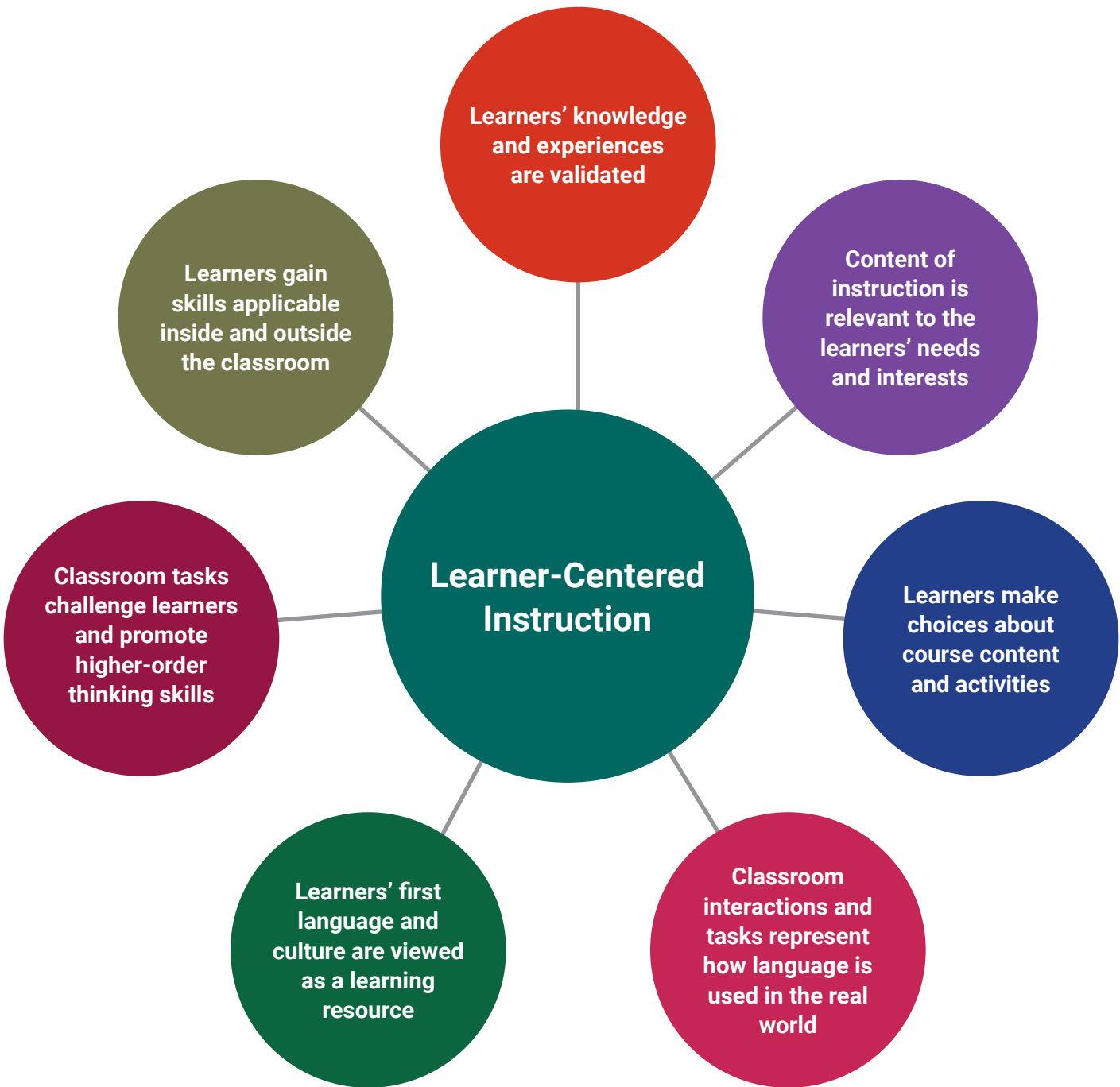


Figure 1.3 Key principles of learner-centred approaches (adapted from Parrish, 2019)

It suggests that students’ knowledge and experiences are validated, which means that their backgrounds and personal experiences are valued in the learning process. The content of instruction is relevant to the students’ needs and interests, indicating that the material is designed to resonate with the students’ needs, interests, and curiosity. students are encouraged to make choices about course content and activities, giving them a say in what they learn and how they engage with it.

The interactions and tasks are designed to reflect how language is used in the real world, ensuring that practices have real-world applications, which is particularly useful for language learning. Additionally, students’ first language and culture are viewed as valuable resources, making their cultural backgrounds assets in the educational process. The tasks are structured to challenge students and promote higher-order thinking skills, pushing students to think critically and solve complex problems. Finally, students gain skills that are applicable both inside and outside the classroom, emphasizing the transferability of what they learn to real-life contexts beyond academic settings. These interconnected principles form a holistic view of student-centred instruction, placing the learner’s experience and needs at the centre of the educational process.

1.3 Conclusions

In order to realise inclusive student-centred pedagogies in our higher education programs it is necessary to educate our faculty and support them in obtaining the relevant competences. Those competencies should focus on how to provide safe and supportive learning environments, effectively use diverse teaching methods, ensure student participation, engagement, and learning, and critically and transparently evaluate the results (see Figure 1.4).

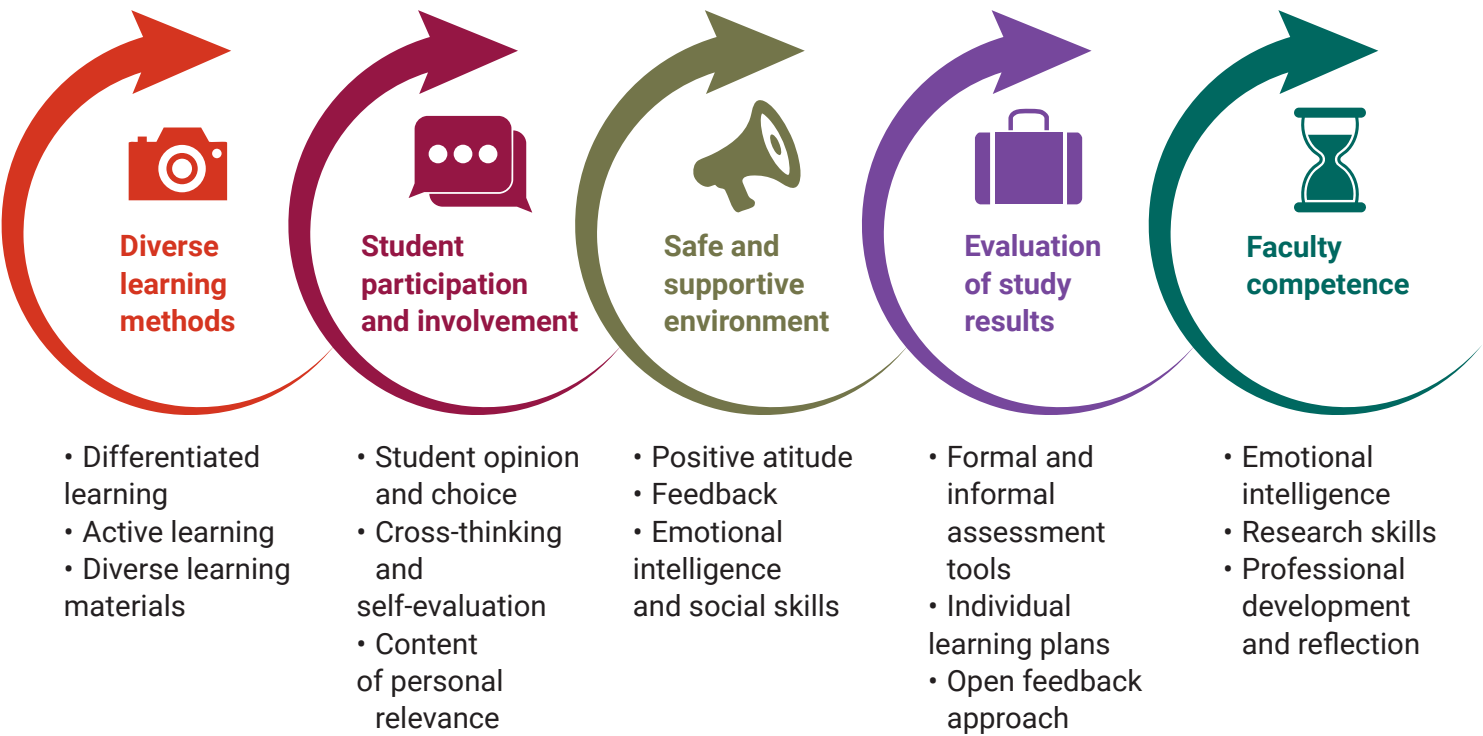


Figure 1.4 Inclusive student-centred pedagogy

The teaching practices used by faculty have an impact on student learning. Since students have diverse needs, interests, and learning patterns, faculty should use a range of approaches and strategies to support students’ learning. Assessment for learning should be designed to enable all students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills,

free from any barriers related to personal characteristics unrelated to the assessment criteria and free from any evaluator bias. Flexibility in addressing diverse student needs is essential for building an “education system that promotes equity and fosters inclusion” (OECD, 2023).

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