

EXPLORING THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF MULTICULTURALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of democratic education principles within a multicultural framework and identify mechanisms for balancing cultural recognition with preventing discrimination and inequality in higher education.

Methods. The study gathered responses to 11 questions using a survey distributed via the QuestionPro tool from 334 students. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha for reliability, Spearman rank correlation, and the Mann-Whitney U test for group comparisons. The survey focused on four categories: cur-

riculum and teaching competence, institutional attitudes and inclusiveness, student knowledge and perspectives, and student participation in governance.

Results. The findings reveal that while students generally perceive institutional attitudes and inclusiveness positively, there are significant gaps in curriculum integration and opportunities for participation in governance. Multicultural education was moderately rated for fostering inclusivity and addressing diversity. Challenges include limited representation of minority groups and insufficient preparation of educators to handle multicultural dynamics.

Conclusions. The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to implement curricular reforms that embed multicultural and democratic education themes. Improved governance structures and faculty development programs are crucial for fostering inclusivity, democratic engagement, and cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: multiculturalism, democratic education, diversity, inclusivity, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The growing diversity in higher education student populations presents challenges and opportunities for fostering inclusive and cohesive campus environments. As national demographics shift to include increasing numbers of racial and ethnic minority groups, institutions worldwide face the dual task of addressing inequities while leveraging diversity as a strength (Dey, 2008). Diversity is a transformative force in higher education, promoting an understanding of cultural, racial, and ethnic differences. It plays a vital role in cultivating an educational environment that encourages critical examination of societal inequities and equips individuals with the tools to address them (Aguirre & Martínez, 2002). Incorporating diversity into pedagogy disrupts structural inequalities, advances inclusivity, and enhances equity. Furthermore, exposure to diverse perspectives enriches students' educational experiences by fostering critical thinking, cross-cultural understanding, and intellectual growth (Antonio et al., 2012; Chen, 2017). Higher education institutions play a vital role in cultivating democratic values and equipping students to become active, engaged citizens in a diverse society. Through multicultural education, higher education institutions can promote intercultural understanding, enhance critical thinking skills, and inspire civic participation, contributing to a more inclusive and socially cohesive community.

Thus, multicultural education is closely tied to the principles of democratic education, which values inclusivity, critical thinking, and active participation in society (Safita & Suryana, 2022; Trueba, 1992). However, the reality is that higher education institutions often struggle to integrate multicultural values and practices into their institutions entirely (Woitrin, 1998). Democratic education, with its core principles of equality, inclusion, and participatory decision-making, is well-posi-

tioned to address the complex issues of diversity and social cohesion. Multicultural education, which affirms cultural pluralism and promotes the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds, can be a critical component in realising the goals of democratic education (Aydın, 2013).

Latvia's integration into the European Union and growing cooperation with other countries has increased ethnic diversity. Latvia is a multicultural state, characterised by its ethnic diversity, with Latvians, Russians, and other ethnic groups such as Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Poles forming its population. As of January 2024, data from the Central Statistical Bureau indicates that 63% of Latvia's population identifies as Latvian. Ethnic Russians comprise 23% of the population, while 11% comprise various nationalities, including Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, and Roma. Among the Russian population, 67% hold Latvian citizenship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Latvia, 2024). A portion of this population attends various educational institutions, including general comprehensive schools, contributing to a multicultural environment. Over half (54.2%) of Latvia's youth know their cultural identity and its differences based on the research data from 2015. Moreover, 52.6% of young people report no prejudice against individuals of different religions or races, indicating that factors like skin colour or religion do not hinder their willingness to cooperate (Andersone & Helmane, 2018).

Nevertheless, much of the debate in Latvian education about multiculturalism has revolved around language and bilingualism, with growing attention now directed towards integrating and accommodating minority students in mainstream schools and higher education institutions. Official recognition and implementation of multicultural and intercultural education standards have been slow and have only recently gained traction. Remnants of the Soviet-era education system and a strong focus on national minority rights have hindered progress in adopting modern approaches to multicultural education. Limited exposure to ethnic and cultural diversity within Latvia's traditional minority groups has also slowed advancements. There has been insufficient preparation of teachers, schools, and parents to handle increasing diversity, highlighting a need for systemic adaptations (Kehris & Landes, 2008).

No prior research has surveyed students at the University of Latvia (UL), Turība University (TU), and Latvian College of Culture (LCC), which is a part of Latvian Academy of Culture (LAC), on their perceptions of a multicultural and democratic university. This study addresses this gap by exploring students' views on inclusion, diversity, democratic education, multiculturalism, and experiences with discrimination during their academic journey. By examining their perceptions, experiences, and self-evaluations, the research aims to enhance inclusivity and democratic processes in higher education. The research question is: How do students perceive, experience, and self-evaluate democratic education within the context of multiculturalism in higher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW: MULTICULTURALISM AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

In the past decade, much research has focused on multiculturalism and its role in advancing higher education, democracy, and social justice. Recent research (Spiteri, 2017; Rata, 2015) underscores the transformative potential of multiculturalism in higher education by advocating for a strengths-based, student-centred approach that leverages diverse cultural narratives to enhance teaching and learning experiences. Similarly, another research (Canen & Peters, 2005; Chetty, 2017; Zajda, 2023) highlight the global importance of multicultural education in fostering democracy, equality, and social justice, emphasising the centrality of cultural diversity in creating equitable educational settings and its practical challenges. Indra Odina and Anna Stavicka's (2017) study on multilingual and multicultural learning in Latvian higher education highlights the challenges of balancing language, culture, and educational practices. They stress valuing linguistic diversity as a communication tool and cultural identity marker. Their recommendations include addressing curriculum disparities, fostering dialogue among stakeholders, and implementing reforms such as language policies, faculty development, and reflective teaching practices to tackle issues like academic integrity, freedom of expression, and identity politics. Another research explored university students' understanding and attitudes toward exercising their educational rights, emphasising the role of democratic principles in higher education (Akçay & Akçay Üzümlü, 2016). Similar research done in Latvia, "Exploring Students' Perceptions of a Multicultural and Democratic University and Its Core Values" (Roskoša & Kocote, 2023), aimed to investigate students' perceptions of a multicultural and democratic university and its values by surveying 105 students at Riga Technical University (RTU). Most students recognised democratic values as being present at their university. However, a significant number of students remain uncertain or even disagree with this perception. Students' perspectives on multiculturalism and democracy within the university environment tend to be sensitive and sometimes controversial. This highlights the critical need for universities to consider these viewpoints and actively work to strengthen democratic processes on campus. Additionally, research done in Latvia about exploring the competence relationships among university students states that universities become environment for the implementation of solidarity and cooperation (Rubene et.al., 2024). This highlights the critical need for universities to consider these viewpoints and actively work to strengthen democratic processes on campus.

The scholarly attention underscores the growing recognition of multicultural education as a critical field of inquiry, reflecting its increasing relevance in addressing the complexities of diversity and inclusion in educational settings worldwide. Multicultural and democratic education is not merely a niche topic but a burgeoning area of research with significant implications for global policy and practice in education.

Multicultural education is rooted in democratic values and beliefs, affirming cultural pluralism within diverse societies (Aydın, 2013). Its goal is to prepare students to live

productively in a pluralistic, democratic society by promoting shared rights, obligations, and collaborative future-building. At its core are democratic ideals of equality, justice, and inclusive participation, which require active practice rather than mere enforcement (Spridzāne, 2024; Trueba, 1992). Multicultural education is a reform process grounded in ethics, human rights, and social justice. It considers students' cultural backgrounds as strengths while critically evaluating policies and practices through a lens of equity and power (Grant & Sleeter, 2011). This approach challenges educators to question systemic inequities and promote inclusivity and fairness in their teaching practices. However, multicultural education faces significant challenges as it intersects with political, social, cultural, moral, and religious complexities (Dhillon & Halstead, 2003). Untangling these interconnected aspects is critical for developing effective strategies that foster inclusivity, respect for diversity, and equitable learning outcomes, aligning with societal fairness and cohesion goals. Democratic education, as a complementary approach, fosters critical thinking, ensures equal access to quality education, and equips students to engage effectively in a diverse society.

The intersection of multiculturalism and democratic education is not a recent phenomenon. Around World War I, John Dewey acknowledged the tension between national unity and cultural diversity in democratic societies. He emphasised the need for democratic education to address these challenges, advocating for critical thinking, collaboration, and active participation in a diverse society. Dewey's philosophy remains highly relevant to contemporary efforts to integrate multiculturalism into education, highlighting the enduring connection between education and democracy (Waks, 2007). Multicultural education is essential to democratic education because it fosters tolerance, respect, and harmony among many cultures. It is essential for fostering a democracy in higher education where students learn to live harmoniously and contribute to the nation's goals of freedom, independence, economic advancements, technology, and defence (Robertson, 2009). As such, democratic education is well-positioned to address the challenges of multiculturalism in higher education by promoting cultural inclusivity, challenging biases, and developing the skills and dispositions necessary for practical cross-cultural engagement.

In a democracy, individuals must apply critical thinking in both classroom and real-world contexts, as this ability is essential for sustaining democratic practices. When viewed as a way of life rather than just a skill, critical thinking equips citizens with the mindset necessary for active participation in democracy. In Latvia, critical thinking has been intentionally integrated into the education system since 1998 as a key instrument for democratising society and bridging the gap between democratic objectives and the lingering Soviet ideological heritage. By fostering critical thinking, educational reforms empower students and educators to address complex issues and align classroom practices with societal reforms, contributing to developing a democratic society (Pinto & Portelli, 2009; Rubene, 2009).

A growing body of research suggests that interactions with diverse peers in the classroom and on campus positively impact students' cognitive, social, and democratic outcomes (Antonio et al., 2012; Gurin et al., 2004; Ndura & Dogbevia, 2013). These benefits include increased openness to diversity, enhanced critical thinking skills, and greater engagement in civic life. Multicultural practices, as a vital component of democratic education, create respect, tolerance, and harmony among diverse communities, emphasising social harmony as a unifying force. Integrating multicultural and democratic education can have significant implications for student learning, campus climate, and the development of globally minded citizens (Lee et al., 2023). It serves as a crucial instrument to implement a democracy where all students are educated to coexist peacefully and pursue national goals of independence, freedom, and economic, technological, and military development (Abduh et al., 2023). Nevertheless, implementing multicultural education within a democratic framework remains complex.

Despite the potential benefits of diversity, higher education institutions often struggle to fully integrate multicultural values and practices into their institutional culture and curriculum. One of the primary obstacles is the persistent prevalence of monocultural curricula and teaching approaches that fail to adequately represent the student body's diversity (Ramsey, 2011). This can result in a lack of cultural relevance and representation, leading to feelings of marginalisation among students from underrepresented groups. Another obstacle highlights that democratic institutions face challenges when cultural groups hold conflicting views on justice, as relying solely on universal principles is often insufficient. Instead, democratic deliberation and open dialogue are essential for navigating differences and fostering mutual understanding. In universities, as microcosms of democratic societies, these challenges arise in academic honesty (varying cultural norms on collaboration and citation), freedom of expression (balancing free speech with inclusivity), and the tension between individual and group identities. Addressing these issues requires more than celebrating diversity; it involves equipping students with the skills for meaningful intercultural dialogue. By fostering these conversations, universities can promote a more inclusive and equitable campus environment based on shared principles of justice and fairness (Gutmann, 1993). By addressing these challenges, higher education institutions can move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and create a culture that truly reflects the principles of inclusion and equity. This approach not only strengthens democratic education but also prepares students to engage meaningfully in diverse and interconnected global societies.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Student perspectives and opinions are vital for democratic and multicultural education as they enhance cross-cultural understanding, critical thinking, and prob-

lem-solving skills, fostering active participation in a diverse society. Research suggests that students with opportunities to interact with diverse peers in the classroom and on campus report greater motivation to participate in a complex, heterogeneous society (Gurin et al., 2004). However, the congeniality between democracy and diversity is not self-evident, and universities must navigate challenging tensions arising from differing cultural norms, identities, and worldviews. For instance, studies on democratic education emphasise the significance of participatory structures where all individuals, including students, have a substantive role in decision-making processes, thereby promoting equality and shared responsibility (Fielding & Moss, 2010). Similarly, research on cross-cultural group work highlights that recognising and addressing diverse student perspectives can help mitigate social tensions and improve collaboration in academic settings (Leask & Carroll, 2011). In research done in 2007, just over one-third of college respondents strongly agreed that their institution actively fosters awareness of social, political, and economic issues at both the U.S. and global levels (Kanter & Schneider, 2013). These findings underscore integrating student insights to establish equitable and responsive educational practices.

Education plays a crucial role in fostering an understanding and practice of democracy. For education to effectively serve this purpose, higher education institutions must provide a democratic climate. As a result, exploring students' perceptions of the democratic environment and their sense of belonging to the community is an important area of study. Another study, titled "The Impact of Multicultural Education on Students' Attitudes in Business Higher Education Institutions" (Karacsony et al., 2022), found that students perceive their higher education studies as a strong foundation for personal growth and believe that learning in a multicultural environment can enhance their professional skills and abilities. Additionally, the research "Investigating Students' Perception of a Multicultural and Democratic University and Its Values" (Alguacil de Nicolás et al., 2017) examined students' perceptions of their university's commitment to multiculturalism and democracy, highlighting institutional values. It also compares student and teacher views on university participation and representation, offering suggestions to enhance student involvement, which is currently limited. Findings reveal notable differences in areas such as communication, participation as a quality dimension, the university's role in promoting participation, motivation, satisfaction, representative training, and the university's external image. Another research on students' perceptions, "Exploring Students' Perceptions about Intercultural Communication Education" (Allen, 2021), showed that learning about perceptions and transitions enhanced their understanding of personal experiences and broader intercultural issues.

These studies demonstrate that understanding students' perceptions and attitudes is essential for fostering democratic and multicultural education. The extensive research highlights that actively integrating student perspectives contributes to creating inclusive, equitable, and responsive educational environments, underscoring its critical role in preparing students for participation in a diverse and interconnected world.

METHODOLOGY

The research aimed to analyse and characterise the perception and attitudes towards multiculturalism and democratic education among UL, TU, and LCC students. These higher education institutions cater to a diverse student body and offer many opportunities. As the country's leading multidisciplinary university with the highest student enrolment, the UL significantly contributes to Latvia's education system and economic development (UL, 2025). TU, the largest private university in the Baltics, integrates theoretical knowledge with practical skills, inspiring students to engage in national and international entrepreneurial activities (Turība University, 2025). Similarly, LCC, known for its rich traditions and extensive experience, delivers modern cultural education aligned with labour market demands, attracting a varied student population (Latvian College of Culture, 2025). These institutions provide a broad spectrum of educational opportunities that meet diverse academic and professional needs.

Data was analysed using SPSS Statistics v.29 and Microsoft Excel. Questions were made in 4 categories: curriculum and teaching competence, institutional attitudes and inclusiveness, student knowledge and perspectives, student participation and governance based on the literature studies. "Curriculum and teaching competence" are crucial in integrating democratic and multicultural values into educational programmes (Janakiraman et al., 2019). They serve as the primary medium for fostering inclusivity, critical thinking, and an understanding of diversity among students (Hamdan & Coloma, 2022; Hernandez, 2022). "Institutional attitudes and inclusiveness" focus on the institutional environment, evaluating policies, practices, and cultural attitudes to determine how supportive universities are of diverse student populations (Nkala & Ncube, 2020). It examines whether institutions create an atmosphere that values democratic participation and embraces multicultural diversity (Banks, 1995; Johnston, 2019). "Student knowledge and perspectives" assesses students' understanding and perspectives on democracy and multiculturalism, highlighting how well these concepts are internalised through their academic and social experiences. It emphasises the connection between theoretical learning and practical application, evaluating students' readiness to participate as informed citizens in diverse, democratic societies (Brazill, 2020; Anugrah et al., 2024). "Student Participation and Governance" examines the role of student participation in university governance, focusing on opportunities for leadership, voicing opinions, and influencing institutional policies (Planas et al., 2011). It evaluates how effectively universities empower students to engage in democratic practices and decision-making processes (Haque & Sultana, 2022; Palma et al., 2023).

In total, 334 students, with 82% identifying as female, 16% as male, and 2% preferring not to disclose or identifying as other, participated in the survey in October and November 2024 at UL, TU, and LCC: 76 students at the first level of higher

professional education, 206 at the bachelor's study level, 30 at the master's study level, and 21 at the doctoral study level. Of these participants, 74% were from state higher education institutions, while 26% were from private institutions.

For collecting primary data, an original 11-question questionnaire was developed based on the literature analysis, of which ten questions were multiple choice questions, and the final question used a 5-point Likert scale to capture participants' attitudes. The response format was a five-point Likert scale – “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “agree”, and “strongly agree”. The data used for this study was collected using the QuestionPro survey tool. The research was analysed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha to assess reliability, Spearman rank correlation to evaluate relationships between variables, and the Mann-Whitney U test was applied to determine reliability, relationships, and group differences.

Network analysis used the graphical lasso procedure to determine a network with edges defined by partial correlation coefficients (Medne et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2012). This research employed robust statistical and analytical methods to examine students' perceptions of democracy and multiculturalism. Advanced techniques, including network analysis, provided insights into relationships between variables and group differences. These methodologies offer a deeper understanding of students' engagement with democratic and multicultural values.

RESULTS

The analysis of survey responses provides a nuanced understanding of students' perceptions of multiculturalism and democracy within higher education institutions in Latvia. Overall, students demonstrated moderate awareness and engagement with these principles.

Democratic education fosters a better understanding of societal diversity (74.32% agreement). While institutional attitudes and inclusiveness received relatively higher ratings in the context of democracy, curriculum integration and student participation in governance were identified as areas requiring significant improvement. Only 36.68% of respondents reported that courses often include topics on human rights and democracy, while 30.65% stated that such topics are not addressed. A significant portion, 32.66%, expressed uncertainty, suggesting that these efforts may lack visibility or consistency across institutions. Furthermore, the data shows that 38.39% of respondents somewhat agree that they have sufficient knowledge about democratic and multicultural education, while only 7.74% fully agree. Conversely, 25.30% somewhat disagree, and 6.55% entirely disagree, with 22.02% expressing no opinion. These findings highlight a need

for universities to enhance efforts to improve students’ understanding of these critical topics.

Most respondents (68.28%) believe their university provides opportunities for students to participate in decision-making, which aligns with democratic education principles. Most respondents (44.78%) agreed that democratic principles such as open dialogue and equal opportunities are practised during lectures, yet 23.88% had no opinion. Courses are effective in promoting cultural diversity understanding (40% agreement).

Similarly, on multiculturalism, students rated curriculum and teaching competence positively, but institutional attitudes and inclusiveness emerged as the weakest component. Awareness of institutional policies promoting diversity and inclusion is moderate, with 26.87% agreeing they are informed and 37.01% remaining neutral. Cultural and ethnic minority representation in academic processes is seen as insufficient by 49.85% of respondents, indicating a significant diversity gap. Support for expressing opinions on social or political issues is moderate, with 44.48% feeling supported. These findings suggest a disparity between the ideals of multicultural and democratic education and their practical implementation in higher education settings.

The Cronbach’s alpha test was carried out to determine the internal consistency of the Likert scale. Scales internal consistency is good ($\alpha = 0,616$, 18 items). Students’ perception assessments of components of democracy are dispersed (see Table 1).

Table 1
Students’ Perception of Democracy

Democracy components	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Curriculum and Teaching Competence	3,04	3,00	0,51	-0,85	1,67
Student Knowledge and Perspectives	3,68	4,00	1,01	-0,52	-0,19
Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness	3,97	4,00	0,87	-0,77	0,76
Student Participation and Governance	2,48	2,5	0,44	-0,11	0,12

Source. Own research.

Institutional attitudes and inclusiveness (M = 3,97, Mdn = 4, SD = 0,87) component students have assessed higher than other democracy components. Student knowledge and perspectives (M =3,69, Mdn = 4, SD = 1,01) in the context of democracy have been evaluated similarly. Student knowledge and perspectives component assessments have the most significant standard deviation, which indicates that student perceptions are more dispersed. This suggests that,

in general, students' knowledge and universities' attitudes towards democracy should be considered as good. Additionally, experiencing discrimination experiences in higher education was noted by 11 34%, but a significant portion (46.57%) strongly disagreed with experiencing discrimination, suggesting a generally positive environment. Additionally, the data reveals a considerable lack of awareness among students regarding whether their university actively addresses discrimination issues. Almost half of the respondents (47.77%) indicated uncertainty, suggesting insufficient communication or visibility of such efforts. Additionally, 35.01% of respondents reported that their university does not engage in these discussions, while only 17.22% acknowledged active efforts to address discrimination. However, both curriculum and teaching competence ($M = 3,04$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 0,51$) and student participation and governance ($M = 2,48$, $Mdn = 2,5$, $SD = 0,44$) in the context of democracy students have been assessed lower, indicating that lecturers' competence regarding democracy should be improved.

35.82% of respondents agree that student participation in university decision-making should be promoted due to moderate motivation. However, most respondents (68.28%) believe their university provides opportunities for students to participate in decision-making, which aligns with democratic education principles.

Results suggest that students understand democracy and are competent, and the universities' attitude towards democracy is good. However, implementing the curriculum and student participation in governance are insufficient. Furthermore, a Spearman rank correlation test was carried out to determine whether components of students' perceptions of democracy are connected (see Table 2).

Table 2

Spearman Rank Correlation between Components of Students' Assessments of Democracy

Democracy components	Curriculum and Teaching Competence	Student Knowledge and Perspectives	Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness	Student Participation and Governance
Curriculum and Teaching Competence	1,000	0,393**	0,206**	0,291**
Student Knowledge and Perspectives		1,000	0,244**	0,195**
Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness			1,000	0,123*

Source. Own research.

Results indicate that there is a statistically significant correlation between all democracy components. However, only one has a statistically significant moderate correlation from six component pairs. Curriculum and teaching competence, student knowledge, and perspectives ($r = 0,393$) are most connected with other democratic components. In general, it can be concluded that democracy components are connected, but the connection is not very strong.

Students' assessments of multiculturalism components are similar (see Table 3).

Table 3

Students' Perception of Multiculturalism

	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Curriculum and Teaching Competence	3,17	3,25	0,56	-0,22	0,46
Student Knowledge and Perspectives	3,16	3,00	1,09	-0,25	-0,89
Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness	2,71	2,67	0,48	0,38	0,40
Student Participation and Governance	3,10	3,00	1,06	-0,14	-0,49

Source. Own research.

Curriculum and teaching competence ($M = 3,17$, $Mdn = 3,25$, $SD = 0,56$), student knowledge and perspectives ($M = 3,16$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1,09$), student participation and governance ($M = 3,10$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1,06$) in the context of multiculturalism are all assessed similarly and slightly above scales average. Many respondents (46.73%) were neutral on whether faculty are well-prepared to address multicultural issues, suggesting a need for professional development. However, curriculum and teaching competence assessments are much less dispersed than the other two components, indicating that students are more unanimous. Lower students have assessed institutional attitudes and inclusiveness ($M = 2,71$, $Mdn = 2,67$, $SD = 0,48$) components in the context of multiculturalism. Results indicate that lecturers and students are more prepared for multiculturalism challenges than universities at the institutional level.

The data reveals varying levels of inclusion of multiculturalism topics in university courses, with a significant proportion of students uncertain about its presence. While 14.14% of respondents reported that these topics are frequently included, a larger group (31.11%) indicated that they are rarely addressed. Notably, 17.48% of students stated that such issues are never included, and 37.28% expressed uncertainty.

Spearman rank correlation test was carried out to determine whether multiculturalism components are connected (see Table 4).

Table 4

Spearman Ranks the Correlation between Components of Students' Assessments of Multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism components	Curriculum and Teaching Competence	Student Knowledge and Perspectives	Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness	Student Participation and Governance
Curriculum and Teaching Competence	1,000	0,314**	0,043	0,415**
Student Knowledge and Perspectives		1,000	-0,069	0,199**
Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness			1,000	0,108*

Source. Own research.

Of six multiculturalism component pairs, four have statistically significant correlations. However, the correlation is moderate between curriculum and teaching competence and student knowledge and perspectives components ($r = 0,314$) and between curriculum and teaching competence and student participation and governance components ($r = 0,415$). Therefore, curriculum and teaching are key to promoting students' knowledge about multiculturalism and active participation in university decision-making.

Analysis of multiculturalism and democracy allows us to conclude that students have self-assessed their perception of multiculturalism ($M = 3,00$, $SD = 0,43$) and democracy ($M = 2,97$, $SD = 0,37$) very similarly (see Table 5).

Table 5

Students' Perception of Democracy and Multiculturalism

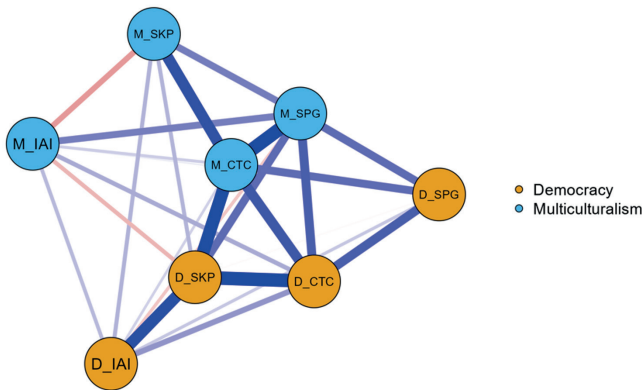
	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Democracy	2,97	3,00	0,37	-0,71	1,32
Multiculturalism	3,00	3,00	0,43	0,13	0,93

Source. Own research.

The mean values for multiculturalism and democracy are above the scale average and should be considered reasonable. However, the slight variation in standard deviations indicates a somewhat higher consensus among students regarding multiculturalism than democracy. Additionally, the negative skewness for democracy suggests that more students rated it positively, while the relatively neutral skewness for multiculturalism reflects a more balanced distribution of responses.

Network analysis examined the relationships between multiculturalism and democracy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Democracy and Multiculturalism Network Graph

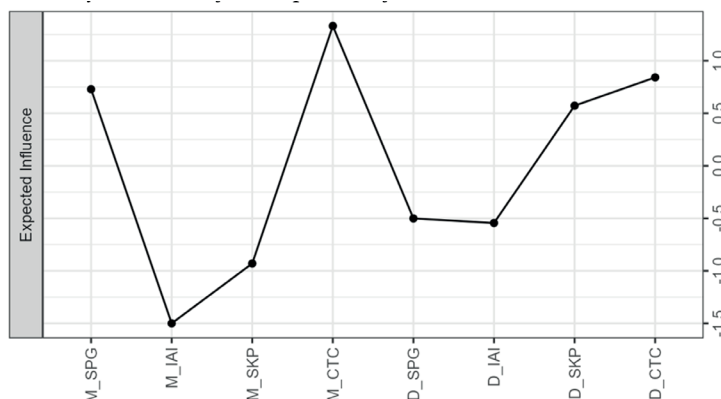


Note. Democracy: D_CTC—Curriculum and Teaching Competence; D_SKP—Student Knowledge and Perspectives; D_IAI—Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness; D_SPG—Student Participation and Governance. Multiculturalism: M_CTC—Curriculum and Teaching Competence; M_SKP—Student Knowledge and Perspectives; M_IAI—Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness; M_SPG—Student Participation and Governance.

Source. Own research.

The graph reveals significant partial correlations, with all eight nodes forming robust connections and all 28 possible links established, resulting in a sparsity value of 0.000. This demonstrates that the components of democracy and multiculturalism are highly interconnected. Two key nodes stand out due to their strong links with other elements. The first is curriculum and teaching competence within multiculturalism, which connects to student knowledge and perspectives, student participation and governance in democracy and multiculturalism, and institutional attitudes and inclusiveness. It indicates that including democracy and multiculturalism themes in the curriculum positively affects students’ knowledge and active participation. The second key node, student knowledge and perspectives in multiculturalism, connects to curriculum and teaching competence, institutional attitudes and inclusiveness in multiculturalism, and curriculum and teaching competence in democracy. These findings highlight the pivotal role of curriculum and student knowledge in linking democracy and multiculturalism, underscoring the importance of integrating these themes to promote student engagement and inclusiveness.

An expected influence graph (see Figure 2) was created to determine which component most affects multiculturalism and democracy.

Figure 2*Centrality Measures of the Expected Influence*

Note. Democracy: D_CTC—Curriculum and Teaching Competence; D_SKP—Student Knowledge and Perspectives; D_IAI—Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness; D_SPG—Student Participation and Governance. Multiculturalism: M_CTC—Curriculum and Teaching Competence; M_SKP—Student Knowledge and Perspectives; M_IAI—Institutional Attitudes and Inclusiveness; M_SPG—Student Participation and Governance.

Source. Own research.

Results indicate that student participation, governance, curriculum, and teaching competence in multiculturalism, as well as student knowledge and perspectives and curriculum and teaching competence in the context of democracy, will most affect multiculturalism and democracy. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of these components and their central role in fostering inclusive and democratic educational environments. Addressing gaps in these areas can lead to more effective integration of multicultural and democratic values in higher education.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights notable strengths in students' perceptions of democratic education, particularly regarding institutional attitudes and inclusiveness. Institutional attitudes received the highest rating (Mean = 3.97), suggesting that universities are perceived as fostering environments supportive of democratic values. This finding aligns with literature emphasising the role of institutions in promoting democratic principles at a policy level (Gutmann, 1993). However, gaps remain in curriculum integration and student participation in governance. While most respondents (68.28%) acknowledged opportunities for participation in decision-making, the low rating for student governance (Mean = 2.48) indicates that these opportunities may not be sufficiently meaningful or accessible.

Addressing this requires institutions to embed participatory structures more effectively into their governance frameworks, fostering shared responsibility and active engagement (Fielding & Moss, 2010).

The study reveals challenges in fostering multicultural inclusivity, with inclusiveness in multiculturalism receiving a lower rating (Mean = 2.71). This reflects ongoing difficulties in addressing cultural diversity and creating equitable educational environments. Students also reported inconsistent inclusion of multiculturalism topics in university curricula. While 14.14% noted frequent inclusion, 31.11% reported that these topics are rarely addressed, and 37.28% were uncertain. These findings suggest that multicultural principles are not consistently integrated across courses, leading to a lack of visibility and impact. Institutions must prioritise curricular reforms to ensure multicultural themes are embedded across disciplines, promoting cross-cultural understanding and fostering inclusivity.

The data reveals students' significant lack of awareness regarding institutional efforts to combat discrimination. Nearly half (47.77%) of respondents expressed uncertainty, while 35.01% believed their university does not address these issues. Only 17.22% recognised active anti-discrimination initiatives. These findings highlight the need for universities to improve communication strategies and increase the visibility of their efforts. Proactive measures, such as awareness campaigns and clear anti-discrimination policies, can help bridge this gap and foster a more equitable campus environment.

Curriculum and teaching competence emerged as pivotal in bridging democracy and multiculturalism. The network analysis highlights its centrality, showing strong connections to student knowledge, governance, and inclusiveness. The curriculum was moderately rated for promoting multicultural understanding (Mean = 3.17) and democratic principles (Mean = 3.04), reflecting its potential to foster cross-cultural and democratic engagement. However, persistent monocultural approaches limit these efforts, underscoring the need for reforms integrating diverse perspectives into teaching practices (Ramsey, 2011).

Nearly half of the respondents (49.85%) reported insufficient representation of cultural and ethnic minorities in academic processes, indicating a significant diversity gap. This aligns with global challenges in achieving equitable representation (Banks, 2014). Addressing this requires intentional diversity-focused hiring practices and policies that prioritise marginalised voices. Ensuring representation at all institutional levels fosters inclusivity and ensures that all students feel valued.

These findings hold important implications for education policy and institutional practices. Policymakers should consider introducing standardised guidelines for inclusivity in governance, curriculum design, and representation. Institutions must actively build systems that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion as core principles. For students, integrating democracy and multiculturalism themes into education can enhance critical thinking, collaborative skills, and readiness to navigate diverse societies. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving educators, administrators, and policymakers.

This study has several limitations. The sample of 300 students from three Latvian higher education institutions may not fully represent the broader student population. Addition-

ally, the reliance on quantitative methods limits the depth of insights into students' lived experiences. Future research should include qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, and incorporate perspectives from faculty and administrators for a more holistic understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates students' perceptions of multiculturalism and democracy in higher education, offering critical insights into their interplay and impact. While students demonstrate an understanding of and engagement with these principles, significant gaps in curriculum design, institutional inclusivity, and participatory governance underscore areas requiring focused attention.

To advance multicultural and democratic education in Latvia, universities should prioritise curricular reforms by embedding themes of democracy and multiculturalism into core curricula to foster cross-cultural understanding and enhance students' knowledge. Faculty development is equally essential, with targeted training to equip educators with the skills to integrate these principles effectively into their teaching. Additionally, universities must establish mechanisms to promote inclusive governance, enabling greater student participation in decision-making processes and embodying democratic values in practice. Strengthening institutional policies and practices to address systemic barriers to cultural diversity is critical for fostering inclusivity. Furthermore, there is a need for strengthening student involvement. While democratic participation is relatively high, there is room to improve student engagement mechanisms in decision-making processes.

By addressing these areas, higher education institutions can play a pivotal role in cultivating democratic citizenship and fostering a cohesive, inclusive society. Future research should explore how students' perceptions of multiculturalism and democracy evolve, providing insights into the long-term effectiveness of educational practices. Further studies could also examine the impact of intersecting identities, such as gender and socioeconomic status, on students' experiences, offering valuable perspectives for shaping policies and practices in higher education.

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