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Moving Towards Inclusive History Education? Reflections on Practices, Constraints, and Possibilities

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Abstract

This article reflects on a collaborative project at a Dutch university that examined inclusivity in bachelor-level history education amid a growing body of scholarship on the persistence of Eurocentrism and androcentrism in the field. History education involves sensitive and contested topics such as colonialism, migration, and structural inequalities. In this context and in line with our own experiences, some students and staff expressed concerns about representation, accessibility, and classroom dynamics. In response, this project combined curriculum analysis, student-centred focus groups, and a staff questionnaire, to gain insight into current teaching content and practices, focusing specifically on the representation of the Global South, gender diversity, and inclusive pedagogical practices. Findings echo wider disciplinary patterns, including Euro-American bias and perspectives, and gender imbalances in assigned scholarship. While many staff expressed a commitment to inclusive teaching, the findings suggest that such efforts remain uneven and are shaped by structural constraints. Situating these findings within institutional, disciplinary, and national contexts shows that inclusive history education requires attention to the societal embedding of the programme, the peculiarities of the history profession, as well as educational dynamics. While this project was intended to make our programme more inclusive, it also functioned as a mirror to our own teaching practices, revealing the need for shared understandings and aims, pedagogical support, and coordinated leadership. By foregrounding the challenges encountered during this process, this article contributes to debates on inclusive pedagogy, epistemic justice, and institutional change in higher education, thereby offering insights for educators and policymakers.

Keywords

androcentrism; curriculum; Eurocentrism; higher education; history; inclusive education; pedagogy

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, global movements such as Black Lives Matter contributed to renewed attention to structural inequalities across a range of societal domains, including higher education. Universities, which increasingly bring together students and staff with diverse social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, have become key sites for debates about representation, accessibility, and belonging. A growing body of research suggests that inclusive learning environments are vital to bolstering critical thinking and academic performance (Gurin et al., 2002). Despite increased focus on inclusion in higher education, how it takes shape in practice varies across disciplines, institutions, and national contexts.

In the Netherlands, a formal distinction is made between universities of applied sciences and research universities. Particularly with regard to the latter, the student population is seen as insufficiently reflective of Dutch society at large. Approximately 28.6% of the Dutch population has a migration background, defined as being born abroad or having one or both parents born outside of the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2026). In the major cities, including the one where this research was conducted, this share exceeds more than half of its inhabitants (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2026). While the number of students with a migration background has increased since 2020, their representation at research universities remains disproportionately low (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025a). At the same time, the composition of teaching staff remains largely homogeneous, which contributes to students from minoritised backgrounds feeling less seen and understood, negatively affecting their sense of belonging and academic success (De Jong et al., 2026). Gender representation has shifted more positively. Since the academic year of 2006/2007, women have outnumbered men, accounting for 53.9% of enrolment in university education in the year 2023 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025b). The proportion of women in academic positions has increased from 40% in 2018 to 44% in 2023. However, women remain underrepresented in positions of power, accounting only for 29% of full professors in 2023 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025b). Hence, inequality regarding gender, ethnicity, and migration background tends to persist.

Within the field of history, these patterns resonate with broader critiques of Eurocentrism and androcentrism in higher education. Various scholars have argued that androcentric and Euro-American perspectives continue to function as implicit reference points in teaching and historical scholarship, shaping what is considered foundational knowledge and marginalising alternative historiographical traditions (Devriendt, 2020; Goddeeris et al., 2022). In the Dutch context, this is especially salient given the centrality of colonial histories to its national past and the ways these continue to shape ongoing inequalities.

Across universities globally, students have played an important role in highlighting these dynamics. Student-led initiatives, such as the 2015 SOAS Student Union report, noted that teaching often seemed directed at educating "outsiders" about Asia and Africa, thereby reinforcing structural racism and the "othering" of the non-Western world (Kerkvliet, 2019). Similarly, the "Why Is My Curriculum White?" campaign in the UK has drawn attention to the persistent absence of non-Western and non-male scholarship across disciplines (Housee, 2022; Peters, 2015). In parallel, some students in our programme raised questions about a perceived Eurocentric orientation of the curriculum, both in course surveys and informal discussions.

Despite a growing body of theoretical scholarship and student-led critiques of Eurocentrism in history education (Bhambra, 2014; Peters, 2015), studies on how inclusivity is understood, enacted, and experienced in history programmes remain scarce. It was against this backdrop that we, three scholars from various backgrounds, together with another colleague, initiated Towards Inclusive History Education, a collaborative project conducted under the Hoger Onderwijs Kwaliteitsafspraken (HOKA) in 2023. Rather than aiming to offer a definitive model of inclusive history teaching, the project sought to gain insights into existing teaching content, practices, and experiences. In conversation with the management team of the department, the project focused on representation related to the Global South and gender diversity, while remaining attentive to other dimensions of in- and exclusion.

Through a combination of curriculum review, student focus groups, and a staff questionnaire, the project examined how inclusivity was understood and practised. The findings revealed patterns that align with wider disciplinary debates, including the persistence of Western-centric and androcentric biases, and marked variation in how staff approached inclusion. Student discussions also highlighted concerns beyond curricular content, underscoring the importance of a constructive learning environment. These insights were consolidated in a report circulated within the department and wider faculty in 2024, informing ongoing curricular discussion and strengthening commitments to inclusivity.

Reflecting on the project's process and outcomes, this article considers the opportunities and limitations of collaborative initiatives aimed at developing inclusive forms of education. It understands inclusion as an ongoing process, shaped by differing perspectives, levels of commitment, disciplinary traditions, institutional structures, and educational dynamics. In doing so, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on diversity, institutional change, and epistemic justice in higher education.

2. Theoretical Framework and Background

This project centralised the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and decolonisation, which, as Day et al. (2022) note, "address distinct power structures, but they overlap and intersect—and they converge in ways that make it possible to identify individuals and groups who are more or less advantaged within them" (p. 3). In our project, diversity and inclusion were treated as interrelated yet distinct concepts that guide our approach to teaching and curriculum development. Diversity refers to the representation of different identities, experiences, and perspectives across student body, staff, and curriculum, including dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic background (Ahmed, 2012; Gurin et al., 2002). Inclusion, in turn, emphasises learning environments that actively value difference and enable all students to participate meaningfully in a pluralistic educational experience (Ambrose et al., 2010).

In the context of Dutch history education, we anticipated that framing the project around inclusion and diversity would be more accessible and less politically charged than decolonisation. While decolonisation as a term has gained prominence in anti-racist initiatives, it has also become an "empty" and "trendy" marketing tool (Vince, 2019). Foregrounding inclusion allowed engagement with concepts more familiar to staff and students, while acknowledging the persistence of structural hierarchies related to ongoing inequalities beyond race and ethnicity. These debates around conceptual framing underscore how such choices are influenced by institutional, disciplinary, and political dynamics.

This negotiation should be situated within the historical and epistemic context of the discipline. Dutch universities, like many Western institutions, have positioned themselves as custodians of Western knowledge, drawing on Enlightenment ideals of rationality, freedom, truth, and equality (Day et al., 2022). These concepts are neither neutral nor universal but emerged from historical contexts shaped by colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy (Bhambra, 2014). Historical scholarship has often constructed narratives of Western progress, ranking regions and people along hierarchies of "civilization" (Chakrabarty, 2007). Even where such hierarchies are less explicit, historical narratives are often framed as neutral rather than Eurocentric. This is evident in terminology long used in Dutch historiography and education, such as naming the 17th century "Golden Age," a period marked by wealth built on enslavement and colonial exploitation, or the term "Police Actions" for Dutch military campaigns in Indonesia aimed at violently re-establishing colonial rule (Hanna et al., 2020; Jansen Hendriks, 2012).

Similarly, studies on Dutch history teaching in high schools find that the transatlantic slave trade is frequently presented as a past episode with limited connection to contemporary inequalities. Interviews with teachers and classroom observations point to a tendency to maintain historical distance, obscuring slavery's ongoing afterlives in contemporary systems of power and racism (Grever et al., 2012; Klein, 2017). This pattern resonates with what Gloria Wekker famously described as "white innocence": a self-image of Dutch egalitarianism, meritocracy, and tolerance which subsequently results in the denial and normalisation of everyday racialised exclusions, microaggressions, as well as institutional forms of racism (Essed, 1991; Wekker, 2016). As Vasta (2014) observes, academic debate in the Netherlands risks reinforcing denial, as attempts to name institutional racism are often met with defensiveness or masked by appeals to neutrality. Consequently, Dutch universities may fail to recognise their role in reproducing mechanisms of exclusion.

The historiographical canon is shaped by similar assumptions. In particular, the discipline has long been influenced by a positivist ideal of "scientific objectivity," rooted in Leopold von Ranke's call to present the past "as it actually happened" (Braw, 2007). As history was long understood to be a neutral accumulation of facts, the identity of the researcher was considered irrelevant to the outcome (Evans, 2018; Iggers, 2012). As Dalia Gebrial notes, positivist knowledge appears to "reveal facts...that are worth revealing, in a process removed from power" (Gebrial, 2018, p. 24). The legacies of such framings reinforce the authority of supposedly "neutral" Western scholarship, while marginalising and delegitimising alternative epistemologies (Santos, 2016). In this context, diversifying authors or content is often valued for representativeness, but not necessarily as transformative of historical knowledge itself.

These underlying assumptions influence not only what is taught but also how teachers and students engage with content, thereby actively shaping participation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Ambrose et al., 2010). Classrooms that overlook how knowledge is produced and whose knowledge is privileged may risk reproducing exclusionary dynamics. Inclusive pedagogical approaches, on the other hand, treat differences in students' identity, experience, and perspective as assets (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Gurin et al., 2002). Researchers in education and pedagogy like Ambrose et al. (2010) describe the most effective learning environments as "explicitly centralizing climates," which deliberately incorporate marginalised perspectives into course content and discussions. Munoz (2020) similarly argues that a critical curriculum review reveals unconscious biases and challenges Western-centric frameworks. Moreover, students are better able to connect with the material when it reflects their own diverse experiences and identities (Olsen, 2021; Stephens et al., 2015).

Overall, the discipline of history has been relatively slow to engage with debates on inclusion and diversity, and research on inclusive pedagogies and curriculum diversification remains limited (Godsell, 2021). Formal initiatives to address representation, content, and teaching practices are scarce, leaving persistent inequalities largely unexamined. This background provided an important rationale for our project.

3. Methodology

In recent years, various Dutch universities have invested in strategies and research, often through dedicated budgets and initiatives, aimed at mapping student diversity, identifying structural inequalities, and creating forums for discussion ("How do you make education truly inclusive?," 2020; "The TU Delft Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Grant," 2025; University of Amsterdam, 2024). Yet, research suggests that experiences of inclusion are often ambivalent. Students describe their educational environment as broadly adequate or supportive, but when invited to reflect further, they identify moments where teaching practices, examples, or course materials rely on stereotypes, offensive language, or lack diversity (Baaren, 2021). While this may be unintentional, they nonetheless shape how students experience participation, respect, and belonging within the classroom. Inclusion, therefore, extends beyond representation in the curriculum to the everyday interactions between teachers and students. Selective engagement with social issues or limited inclusion of diverse voices can make students feel unsafe or disconnected.

This project explored if and how these principles are embedded and experienced in the bachelor's curriculum in years 2 and 3, building on a similar, smaller-scale project conducted previously for year 1. The program offers two language tracks, Dutch and English, with many staff members, including ourselves, teaching across multiple courses and both tracks.

We adopted a multi-method approach, consisting of focus groups, an analysis of course materials, and a staff questionnaire. This design enabled the integration of structural and experiential perspectives on inclusivity in university-level history education. In total, two rounds of focus groups were organised with students and recent alumni, involving 11 participants in October 2023 and 11 in May 2024. Focus groups were chosen because of their interactive nature (Gibbs, 2021): The group dynamics were considered as important as individual contributions, and we sought to leave room for students to steer the conversation towards concerns and perspectives not necessarily anticipated by the researchers. To ensure a familiar and comfortable setting, the sessions were held in university classrooms, with beverages and snacks provided to create an informal atmosphere. Students also received a gift voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and contributions.

The curriculum review covered 11 core courses taught in the second and third year of the programme. We assessed each course across two key criteria: (a) the range of perspectives represented, with particular attention to the Global South; (b) gender diversity in both assigned authors and thematic content. These criteria were further examined on four levels: assigned literature and other sources; topics and case studies; assignments and assessments; course information and communication. During the initial round of focus groups, students also raised concerns about accessibility with regard to course material and assessment, particularly for neurodivergent students. Although time and scope limitations prevented us from fully integrating neurodivergence as a separate analytical focus, we made a conscious effort to consider accessibility in teaching formats and the types of learning materials provided. While we recognise the

limitations of such a review (course materials do not fully reflect classroom dynamics, and author demographics cannot be equated with vocalising particular perspectives), the approach still provided us an important lens for reflecting on dominant patterns within our curriculum.

In April 2024, a questionnaire was distributed to all teaching staff to capture perspectives and practices related to inclusive education. It contained closed and open-ended questions on definitions, teaching practices, and perceived obstacles. Twenty staff members with varied teaching roles and levels of seniority responded. Responses were analysed thematically to identify shared concerns and divergent perspectives, as well as structural factors shaping inclusive teaching practice.

The three components of the study, student focus groups, curriculum review, and the staff questionnaire, were analysed in an iterative and triangulated manner. Rather than following a linear research design, the project developed through successive stages of reflection and adjustment. Insights from the initial focus groups informed the curriculum analysis and survey design, while findings from the course analysis and questionnaire were subsequently presented in the second round of focus groups for validation and refinement. Our design allowed for the inclusion of lived experiences of both students and staff as well as structural analysis.

Throughout the project, the perspectives and experiences of the research team also formed an important contextual layer. The initial project team comprised scholars with different training trajectories, cultural backgrounds, gendered experiences, levels of seniority, and employment security. These differences shaped how institutional inclusion, authority, and belonging were experienced, including variations in perceived job security, recognition, and the ability to speak or intervene within academic hierarchies. The boundaries and constraints we encountered in our professional roles informed inevitably why and how we conducted this project. At the same time, we recognise that we are also embedded in, and shaped by, the institutional cultures we seek to analyse.

4. Findings

4.1. A Critical Curriculum Review

Our review of 11 courses in the second- and third-year offered insights into how inclusivity took shape within the formal curriculum as taught in 2023. While several courses demonstrated deliberate efforts to broaden perspectives and diversify readings, Western-centric and androcentric orientations continued to shape course design and materials to varying degrees.

Across the courses reviewed, authors from the Global South accounted for an average of 15% of the assigned readings, with only one positioned as a central theorist. Notably, all were trained and/or employed in Euro-American institutions. This underscores how Euro-American scholarship continues to function as a primary reference point, even in courses that engage with global or transnational themes. Thematic emphases similarly leaned heavily towards European and North American case studies, whereas cases beyond the West were often introduced as comparison or addition. In one course focusing on international relations and business, for example, Western economies were framed as drivers of global change, while other regions appeared primarily in relational or derivative terms as the periphery. This aligns with what

Quijano (2024) has described as the "coloniality of knowledge," wherein Europe defines itself as the locus of progress precisely through differentiation from an imagined "other."

Similar tendencies were found in theoretically oriented courses. In a course dedicated to social-scientific approaches to history, core concepts such as the nation-state and capitalist economy were seen as vital to the foundation of modern society, whereas colonialism and empire remained largely absent. Likewise, students noted in the focus groups that a course on modern history located modernity primarily in Europe and its industrial revolution. As Bhambra (2014) argues, dominant social theories often frame modernity as endogenous to the West, obscuring the influence of colonial encounters or significant developments elsewhere. Making these entanglements explicit would move courses beyond diversity as an "addition" and instead situate European history within a global context.

This observation is relevant given the department's move toward an internationally oriented and multifaceted approach to modern history, with terms such as *international* and *global* featuring prominently in many course titles across the curriculum. Although such framing signals an openness to multiple perspectives, it should also encourage us to move beyond the reliance on Euro-American case studies as implicit reference points, alongside categorical distinctions such as "non-Western," as this may inadvertently reproduce the very binaries that these critical approaches seek to unsettle (Go, 2024).

Gender representation showed similar imbalances. On average, only 26% of assigned authors across the curriculum were women. Although women have historically been underrepresented in academia, this does not justify their marginalisation. Including their work is crucial to redress exclusion and provides diverse role models (Leathwood & Read, 2008). Moreover, while some courses, particularly in cultural and social history, incorporated gender and sexuality as explicit themes or concepts, others treated these perspectives as supplementary rather than integral to historical analysis. Queer scholarship and histories remained mostly absent. This androcentric pattern risks reinforcing the notion that the "default" historian, both in authorship and subject matter, remains male, a dynamic which has a long history of critique in feminist historiography and narrows historical inquiry at large (Scott, 1986). It is worth noting that course communication consistently employed gender-inclusive language, reflecting broader institutional efforts to foster inclusivity, including a language guide. Nonetheless, these findings highlight a gap between discursive shifts and deeper structural transformation in curricular content and epistemic orientation.

Taken together, the curriculum review suggests that efforts to diversify literature and sources are present but unevenly distributed across courses. These patterns reflect the disciplinary tradition, in which the dominance of white, male scholarship as the standard or basis may narrow the horizons of historical research and knowledge, whereas non-Western or non-male perspectives are positioned as exceptions to the norm (Arday & Mirza, 2018). Our findings underscore that diversifying reading lists alone is insufficient. One possible avenue for addressing this lies in approaching histories beyond Europe not only as objects of study, but also as sources of theory, method, and critique (Brewis & Hannan, 2023). Engaging with alternative epistemologies can expand how historical questions are formulated and how evidence and narratives are constructed. Moreover, recent scholarship suggests that encouraging students to reflect on their own institution's history can be particularly fruitful when working with archival research and special collections, as it situates primary sources within the power structures that produced and preserve them (Brewis & Hannan, 2023). A fundamental challenge for history education lies in fostering pedagogical

approaches that encourage reflection on the epistemic hierarchies embedded within the discipline. However, more importantly, the next sections will demonstrate the need for staff to be attentive to group dynamics in this process, particularly when navigating these questions as part of an ongoing, collective learning process.

4.2. Student Experiences of Classroom Inclusivity

To complement the curriculum review, two cycles of focus groups with students were conducted. The first cycle in October 2023 involved 11 BA history students across three sessions, while the second cycle in May 2024 included a mix of returning participants and new students, enabling reflection on draft recommendations. Involving students in discussions about curriculum design builds on calls for student-centred approaches in decolonial and inclusive pedagogy (Arshad et al., 2021). It should be noted that participation in these focus groups was voluntary, which may mean that some students had a prior interest in questions of educational development or diversity and inclusion. Their reflections are not necessarily representative of the entire student body but nonetheless offer important insights into student experiences.

Across the sessions, students frequently emphasised that diversifying curriculum content does not automatically translate into inclusive learning environments; rather, classroom dynamics and pedagogical facilitation play a crucial role in shaping how students encounter and engage with historical knowledge. While first-year courses were experienced as structured around Eurocentric periodisations with limited conceptual engagement, later courses introduced broader themes and perspectives, albeit inconsistently.

Students noted a disconnect between critical classroom discussions and the epistemic foundations of assigned readings. Eurocentrism was frequently named as a concept, yet students felt that critiques were introduced without sufficient explanation or application. As one student described: "It's often the word Eurocentrism...but how much is actually done with it...it's more the term that is given, and then you go back to Europe." This points to symbolic inclusion, where critical concepts are introduced without being meaningfully integrated into historical analysis. At the same time, participants recognised the complexity of this challenge, acknowledging that "it's difficult to do something from Europe in non-Orientalist terms." Such responses echo existing literature, which underlines how Eurocentric epistemic frameworks persist even within curricula that seek to critique them (Ono-George, 2019).

Students further explained that experiences of inclusion varied across courses, coordinators, tutorial teachers, and teaching formats. They described a sense of discontinuity, something some of them named the "whiplash effect": going from one course in which diversity and inclusion were carefully addressed to the next course, in which these topics received limited attention or were even dismissed. This variation created uncertainty about what to expect from the programme, as commitments to inclusion seemed to depend on individual instructors rather than shared pedagogical principles. Students also noted differences within courses, particularly between more "rigid" lecture formats and informal tutorials: "It's very like, this is the content that's prepared....While in the [tutorial] groups, it tended to be a bit more discussion, [like] actually having a conversation."

The opposing teaching practices between course coordinators and tutorial instructors was a recurring topic. Students observed that tutorials were often "very dependent on your tutor," and that tutorial teachers were generally perceived as more approachable in everyday classroom interaction. Some noted that tutorial

instructors occasionally expressed frustration about limited diversity in course frameworks. These observations point to broader structural dynamics within higher education, where early-career and temporary staff deliver much teaching but have limited influence over course content (Begum & Saini, 2019). As a result, engagement with inclusion remained uneven, reinforcing students' sense that departmental hierarchies were reproduced pedagogically. As one student put it, this approach risks sustaining hegemonic perspectives: "Teachers can't really design their own courses…you can only do that if you're a full professor…why is this hierarchy reflected?"

During the focus groups, it became clear that students did not experience classroom safety in uniform ways. One participant noted: "For me, I've always felt safe, but maybe the person with those exceptional beliefs doesn't always feel comfortable sharing, and it's a shame because it's often very funny or an interesting perspective, even though you'll completely disagree." Another student acknowledged that they sometimes limited what they wanted to share, though it was not common ("maybe twice a year"). Some students recalled specific moments in which sensitive topics were not guided effectively, particularly when biased or discriminatory remarks went unchallenged. One participant described an incident involving "an explicitly incredibly racist statement" that the instructor "didn't really…react to." Others stressed that the responsibility for a safe environment becomes especially important when discussions touch on lived identities, and that this was not always considered by teachers, stating an example in which homosexuality was discussed as if there were no gay people present in the classroom. Some of the issues raised point to the unequal emotional burden carried by minoritised students. Some described what has been termed as "codeswitching", where working-class people, women, or people of colour quickly adapt to fit into dominant academic norms (Begum & Saini, 2019).

Some students expressed interest in engaging more deeply with histories beyond Europe but cited a lack of foundational knowledge on those regions. They also advocated for methodological diversification, including oral histories, visual sources, and creative assignments. Importantly, students broadened the meaning of inclusion beyond race or gender alone. One participant reflected: "When I think of diversity…it's not only non-Western or female…there are also different social backgrounds…my parents didn't go to universities…I had no idea about how life at university was." Moreover, they welcomed the idea of more collaborative pedagogies to foster reflexivity for both students and instructors, while broadening theoretical and methodological diversity (Arshad et al., 2021). Their experiences underscore the need for intersectional approaches to teaching that attend simultaneously to their lived realities, which encompass significant differences in race, gender, class, and other axes of marginalisation (Mergner et al., 2026).

Building on this, a few voiced disappointment that neither the curriculum nor staff reflected the multicultural and working-class population of the city where the university was located, noting the importance of visible diversity and representation for engagement and role-modelling (Ahmed, 2012). Overall, however, experiences tended to be positive in relation to the conversations taking place around inclusivity. One student described the classroom environment as generally supportive and applauded the fact that diversity was even considered:

> I think overall I had a really positive experience with my classroom, classmates….I saw nothing but a supportive environment. I wish [inclusivity] was more explicit rather than just implied, because I think at least this department can take pride in it.

Overall, the focus groups suggest that students did not experience the programme as uniformly exclusionary, but rather as marked by inconsistencies in how inclusion was enacted across courses, instructors, and discussion spaces. Their reflections underline that inclusive history education is not only a matter of representation, but also of pedagogy, institutional teaching structures, and the everyday conditions under which classroom dialogue becomes possible.

4.3. Staff Perspectives and Current Teaching Practices

After the first focus groups, it became clear that students perceived considerable variation in how inclusivity was practised and understood. While the original focus of the project was solely on students' perspectives, this finding prompted us to add a staff questionnaire to explore how our colleagues understand and "do inclusivity" in the classroom. This redesign of the original project also helped strengthen staff involvement and, by extension, the likelihood of meaningful and sustainable change. About half of the people teaching in the programme completed the questionnaire. This response indicates a degree of engagement with the topic but may also reflect existing divisions within the department: Those who chose to participate are likely already invested in issues of inclusion and diversity, while others may be less engaged or consider such initiatives as less relevant to their work.

Because of the aforementioned students' input, we first sought to understand how colleagues made sense of inclusion in the context of history education. Two main themes emerged: inclusion as *content* and inclusion as *delivery*. Most respondents equated inclusion with exposing students to diverse voices and perspectives. They mentioned including women, minorities, or scholars from the Global South. For inclusion as delivery, fostering a respectful and safe classroom environment was emphasised. Some combined both aspects, but inclusion was rarely imagined beyond the level of individual teaching practices or courses. Overall, staff definitions echoed what Ahmed (2012) describes as the institutional framing of inclusion through diversity: the presence of multiple identities, experiences, and perspectives. Concepts such as coloniality, racism, patriarchy, or whiteness were rarely used, with respondents using general or more neutral terms like "different backgrounds" or "global connections." This suggests a pragmatic and depoliticised understanding of inclusion rather than structural critique of knowledge or society.

This approach was also reflected in course design. Respondents described efforts to broaden reading lists, incorporate case studies from a wider range of regions, or diversify examples used in teaching. These efforts demonstrate awareness and commitment to increased representation. However, as Ono-George (2019) notes, diversifying content alone does not create an equitable or safe classroom environment, particularly when such efforts take the form of adding to existing materials rather than questioning what history is and how it is taught. A few respondents described more experimental approaches, such as teaching the canon "backwards" (introducing the dominant Western perspective at the end of a course), diversifying assessment formats, or integrating student suggestions into course content and readings.

Tutorial teachers, who were usually not involved in course design, noted particular challenges in enacting inclusive education within existing course structures. As one respondent commented, "I always try to add a critical note to readings or topics that are particularly problematic." Such efforts are important and indicate attempts to renegotiate course content at the level of delivery. However, they also highlight limits in agency when underlying materials remain unchanged. As described earlier, students noticed this disconnect

between assigned materials, lectures, and classroom discussions. Moreover, they expected more engagement with alternative frameworks or methodologies. These responses highlight a tension in responsibility, as tutorial teachers often engage in critical mediation while formal authority over course design rests elsewhere.

Some staff members reported feeling ill-equipped to teach so-called "diverse" modules. One colleague, for example, mentioned feeling uncertain about including LGBTQI+ topics in their course, not because they did not see their value, but because they felt insufficiently knowledgeable or feared "doing it wrong." Many also noted how they lacked dedicated time to fully revise their courses, reflecting commonly cited structural and institutional constraints in studies on higher education (Housee, 2022).

These findings raise questions about how responsibility for inclusive teaching is distributed. When responsibility lies primarily with tutorial teachers rather than course coordinators, existing inequalities in expertise and labour may be reproduced, as those already engaged with inclusion often carry disproportionate emotional and intellectual work (Zurné & Oudenhuijsen, 2024). At the same time, they indicate that senior staff may also require support to develop knowledge and confidence around unfamiliar topics, underscoring the need for an institutional approach that recognises inclusion as a collective responsibility.

In relation to delivery, staff reported drawing attention to marginalised perspectives, encouraging open dialogue, and explicitly addressing bias. A few mentioned incorporating concrete accessibility measures such as content warnings, gender-neutral or inclusive language, and using dyslexia-friendly slides. Others highlighted the importance of being non-judgmental and allowing students to explore topics at their own pace. These examples suggest that, although inclusion is largely understood at the level of *content*, some teachers also "do inclusion" through attentiveness to classroom atmosphere and student wellbeing. Respondents generally described an inclusive classroom as one in which students feel safe, respected, and encouraged to participate. Yet many also expressed uncertainties about how to foster such spaces, particularly when addressing emotionally charged or politically sensitive topics.

A minority of responses expressed scepticism towards diversity and inclusion initiatives, raising concerns that such efforts might "exclude" certain people or perspectives, involve teachers "pushing their values" onto students, or fall outside what they considered the task of educating "good historians." Some colleagues expressed that they felt others dismissed their attempts to implement more inclusive teaching practices. These views and examples illustrate how inclusion initiatives can unsettle historians' expectations of neutrality and objectivity in both the discipline and its teaching, revealing internalised epistemological hierarchies.

In the final part of the survey, colleagues were asked to reflect on areas for improvement and on the resources and support required for more inclusive history education. Most respondents demonstrated a willingness to develop in this area, while also highlighting institutional and cultural barriers as constraints. Some emphasised the department's responsibility to facilitate change by, for example, "making us aware of our own biases." Time was described as the most critical resource for designing inclusive courses, engaging with unfamiliar literature, and critically reflecting on teaching practices. Several respondents argued that inclusive teaching should be recognised within workload models and development hours, underscoring an understanding of inclusion as labour that must be institutionally enabled rather than voluntarily encouraged.

These discussions highlighted a recurring theme of limited conceptual clarity around inclusion and related terms such as diversity or decolonisation. Staff expressed a need for greater consensus on the implications of these concepts for teaching and course design. They called for workshops on inclusive teaching and bias awareness, as well as more opportunities for knowledge exchange on course design. Many acknowledged that inclusion should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed achievement or tick-box exercise. Beyond workload concerns, staff identified a need for broader institutional and cultural transformation. Embedding inclusion through leadership, coordinated discussion, and professional development is essential for moving beyond isolated initiatives towards a more sustainable approach.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This project explored inclusivity in a Dutch bachelor's history programme, examining curriculum content and classroom experiences from the perspectives of students and staff. The findings demonstrate that while generally staff expressed commitment to inclusive teaching, broader structural and epistemic hierarchies continue to shape what and how we teach. Eurocentric and androcentric biases remain, and students reported experiencing uneven pedagogical approaches towards inclusion. Some described a "whiplash effect" as they moved between courses where inclusion was thoughtfully addressed and others where it received little to no attention. Most staff, in turn, expressed goodwill but also uncertainty, limited time, and the absence of institutional guidance. These patterns indicate that responsibility for inclusivity rests on personal initiative rather than collective strategy, complicating structural change.

Based on the findings, we argue that a lack of shared departmental or institutional frameworks amplifies inequalities within staff hierarchies. Junior and temporary lecturers often invested the most in inclusive practices, carrying disproportionate weight without the authority or resources to enforce sustainable change. This responsibility should lie with course coordinators, who in turn often cite institutional constraints, such as a lack of time. Indeed, precarious employment, hierarchical relations, and a performance-driven academic culture often discourage time-consuming innovations and self-critique (Holmwood, 2011). Fostering inclusive history education thus requires leadership, professional development, and structural recognition, rather than relying on ad hoc goodwill. Coordinated efforts, such as annual meetings between course coordinators to review assigned readings for balance, and more frequent co-teaching opportunities, can enhance attentiveness to inclusive teaching as well as encourage curricular coherence.

These findings must be understood within the broader disciplinary and institutional context. History as an academic field in the Netherlands remains relatively homogeneous, often associated with white, Dutch, and male students and staff (Nijland, 2022). This reinforces a perception that "diversity" is external to the discipline rather than integral to its subject matter and methods. Consequently, initiatives toward inclusion are sometimes seen as politically charged or irrelevant to the supposedly "neutral" study of history and historical "facts." In the past few years, we have encountered comments by both students and staff that reflect scepticism towards calls aiming to make higher education more inclusive. Such resistance echoes wider debates in the Netherlands, where diversity and decolonisation continue to be contested (Gurkan & Kurt, 2023). This mirrors wider patterns of "institutional whiteness" (Ahmed, 2012), in which conformity and silence are rewarded, while critical engagement can be perceived as disruptive. This context played a role in our own decision to foreground "inclusion" over "decolonisation." Our choice was pragmatic: "Inclusion" provided a shared entry point for dialogue while still allowing us to question whose perspectives are centred

and whose knowledge is valued. Moreover, it became clear in focus groups with students that for them, decolonisation as sole focus point would be too narrow, as they also highlighted other barriers they encountered, such as accessibility of course material and assessment, specifically related to neurodivergences. Nevertheless, we remain aware of the tensions associated with such terminologies. The findings further reiterate this conceptual ambiguity within higher education. Diversity and inclusion are frequently reduced to questions of demographic representation rather than understood as challenges to epistemic and pedagogical hierarchies (Ono-George, 2019). Among both staff and students, interpretations varied: Some framed inclusion primarily in terms of accessibility or supportive classroom climates, while others linked it to deeper questions of power and disciplinary canon. Without shared definitions, initiatives risk becoming fragmented or remaining surface-level gestures. Moreover, academics are rarely trained in pedagogical theory, leaving many unsure how to address exclusionary classroom dynamics or respond to students' lived experiences of marginalisation.

To move forward, inclusion in history education must be approached as both a structural and epistemic transformation. It requires rethinking what counts as historical knowledge by creating classroom environments where multiple epistemologies are recognised and engaged. This approach does not simply add excluded voices but re-inscribes diverse traditions into the very fabric of historical inquiry (Bhabha, 2012). It also demands long-term institutional commitment, such as coordinated staff development, protected time for curricular improvement, and recognition of the emotional and intellectual labour involved. A sustainable transformation requires redistributing this weight and embedding it within institutional structures rather than relying upon individual commitment. Inclusion must become a collective responsibility: supported by management, reflected in yearly evaluations, and sustained through community-building across hierarchies.

In the Dutch context, however, nationwide budget cuts raise concerns about the future funding of higher education and research, as well as institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Boutayeb, 2025). English-taught programmes are disproportionally affected, framed as efforts to "rebalance" internationalisation, thereby threatening the future of international education in the Netherlands as well as diversity among staff and students. While a new government is being formed at the time of writing, its plans for research and higher education remain uncertain. The effects of these budget cuts are expected to be long-lasting, impacting thereby the conditions under which inclusive education can develop.

In sum, this article illustrated possibilities and limitations of a collaborative project aimed at fostering inclusive history education at a Dutch university. The process opened important conversations among students and staff, made exclusionary patterns visible, and contributed to ongoing reflections within the programme. Since the circulation of the project report in 2024, inclusion has become a more explicit topic in departmental and faculty-level discussions about curriculum renewal, student wellbeing, and educational policy. In the last two years, some colleagues have made explicit efforts to challenge Western-centric perspectives in their courses. Moreover, in the reframing of our bachelor's curriculum year 1, inclusion has been taken more seriously.

At the same time, lasting transformation depends on departmental consensus, leadership, and institutional commitment. Only under such conditions can history education move beyond fragmented initiatives toward more reflexive disciplinary practices. These findings therefore speak to wider debates on epistemic justice and the politics of knowledge production. Ultimately, fostering inclusive history education requires

continued attention not only to representation in content, but also to the deeper institutional and epistemological frameworks at its core: what counts as knowledge, who is allowed to speak, and more importantly, who is heard.

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