Does cultural diversity matter?

Effects of higher education diversity communication on students' responses

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of the European Economic Area and global development has led to a growing heterogeneous student population in higher education. In this context, universities have become institutions operating in a global market, which similar to corporations, strive to attract a diverse student body to future-proof their system. One of the actions that universities take in that sense is to adopt a diversity strategy, such as the ones elaborated by Ely and Thomas, which tells stakeholders why the institutions want to diversify. Still, diverse students hold different perspectives regarding the role of diversity in education, which can lead to different student responses. Building on findings in the corporate environment, where diversity communication has been extensively researched, four concepts that measure how people respond to diversity communication have been deemed relevant to the university context, namely perceived sense of belonging, attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, and skepticism. The Netherlands is one of the countries that accommodates numerous international-oriented universities that host both Dutch and international students. However, insufficient studies have reviewed the extent to which being a Dutch or international student moderates the effect of Ely and Thomas diversity strategies on student perceptions.

To understand these relationships, a between-subject design online experiment survey was developed. To test hypotheses, four experimental conditions were designed, namely three conditions that each contained one of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives, and one control condition. The study sample consisted of 197 responses, where participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. One way and two-way ANOVA analyses were conducted to test hypotheses. The study confirms that the diversity strategies Dutch higher education institutions adopt on their website influence student perceptions. In particular, the results suggest that the discrimination and fairness, respectively the integration and learning perspectives positively influence the perceived sense of belonging and perceived P-O fit of students. Moreover, no moderation effect of students being part of a Dutch or international group was found for the relationship between Ely and Thomas diversity approaches and student perceptions. The following study contributes to the limited amount of research on the topic of diversity communication in higher education and it highlights the need for further research to improve the management of culturally diverse students.

KEYWORDS: *Diversity communication, Ely and Thomas, higher education, perceived sense of belonging, perceived university attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, perceived skepticism.*

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1. Introduction

Increasingly more people are moving abroad to continue their higher education studies. In Europe, this phenomenon is facilitated by the expansion of the European Economic Area, which has established a series of policies that promote the spread of a culture of diversity across Europe through the development of mobility projects such as Erasmus+ and Erasmus Mundus for staff and students (Buenestado-Fernandez et al., 2019; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; European Commission, 2021). This change in circumstances leads to a growing heterogeneous student population that considerably differs from previous generations in terms of social integration and admission pathways (Gaisch et al., 2019). For instance, The Netherlands is one of the European countries that hosts both Dutch, cultural majority group, and international students. In this context, the management of cultural diversity becomes a prominent topic among higher education institutions. The Netherlands has acknowledged that to develop a future-proof education system there is a need to diversify. Thus, for several years, it has implemented a performance-driven funding formula for its research- and professional-oriented higher education institutions, which assesses elements related to diversity, internationalization, and representation of minority groups (Jongbloed et al., 2017). What is more, in September 2020, the Dutch Ministry of Education developed an action plan to create a diverse and inclusive higher education environment for students and academics alike (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), 2020). Within this framework, the diversity perspective promoted by universities becomes relevant because nowadays universities are an industry operating in a global market. Hence, similar to corporations, higher education institutions are driven by an economic rhetoric and compete with one another to attract a diverse talent of students and employees (Kromydas, 2017). Being able as a university to engage through diversity communication and attract a multicultural student body is considered an asset because it is a means to enhance creativity, a stimulus for innovation and productivity, which enables the development of a sense of flexibility in the face of uncertain future progress (Jongbloed et al., 2017).

In this global market context, the success of diversity communication resides in the perspective an organization conveys (Jansen et al., 2016). Diversity perspectives are philosophies that shape common perceptions of policies, practices, and procedures, and hence influence how people perceive the meaning of cultural differences and whether they feel respected and valued in that environment (Bader et al., 2018). Widiputera et al. (2017) argue that adopting a diversity perspective affects every aspect of higher education, from student learning and research priorities to management and finance. This is because diversity communication is a resource for stakeholders to interact with institution-level diversity strategies. In that sense, 'Diversity and Inclusion' web pages represent a primary source for potential students to interact with diversity approaches of

Dutch universities and are often carefully crafted to develop a specific image of an institution, to attract certain types of students that match the university values (Borkovic et al., 2020, Vos et al., 2016). However, currently, there is a debate among scholars and policymakers about the effect of diversity communication on higher education students and what is required to improve communication to meet a wide range of cultural preferences. This lack of consensus is partly generated by the insufficient empirical evidence, theoretical approaches and methodologies focused on higher education and the effect diversity communication has on student perceptions (Widiputera et al., 2017). So far, the effectiveness of diversity communication has been studied in an organizational context with respect to four interrelated concepts that are perceived sense of belonging (Rabl et al., 2020), organizational attractiveness (Madera et al., 2016), perceived person-organization fit (hereafter referred to as perceived P-O fit) (Ng & Burke, 2007) and skepticism towards diversity approaches (Wilton et al., 2020).

The concept of diversity perspectives is well-researched in corporate contexts within European and American borders (Podsiadlowski et al.,2013) in combination with several diversity responses. However, scholars examined these relationships from a corporate perspective, where employees are the most important stakeholders (Podsiadlowski et al.,2013). To add to existing knowledge, the following study aims to apply the model in a Dutch higher education context, where students are the most valuable stakeholder. Moreover, previous research has qualitatively (Vos et al., 2016) and quantitatively (Wilton et al., 2020) examined the effect of diversity perspectives on employee perceptions in terms of racial and gender groups. Still, Podsiadlowski et al. (2013) note that in managing diverse teams, the cultural background of the actors involved, in other words whether they are Dutch or internationals, is an important trait in assessing and understanding perceptions towards diversity. In that regard, Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2019) highlight that, most frequently, the few studies about the effect of diversity communication on student outcomes focus either on domestic or international students, but rarely on both. Consequently, the present study aims to quantitatively examine and compare, by means of an experimental method, if the effect of diversity approaches on student perceptions may be different for Dutch and international students. Moreover, since universities create the framework for human development (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Vos et al., 2016), understanding possible differences between the diversity values held by Dutch and international students is crucial for adopting the right diversity strategies that provide the context to more accurately reflect the diversifying population of the Netherlands and it caters the basis for advancement in representation and management of different groups in the Dutch society, in the work market. Therefore, the following research question was formulated:

To what extent do diversity perspectives in higher education influence student perceptions of diversity communication and how is this different for Dutch and international students?

To answer the research question, chapter 2 of the following paper details from an academic perspective on the Ely & Thomas diversity perspectives, the relation between these diversity perspectives and student outcomes, and the moderating role of student cultural background differences on the relationship between diversity perspectives and student outcomes. Alongside the theories elaborated on in the theoretical framework chapter, several hypotheses are presented. Next, chapter 3 describes the methodological choices, including the online experiment method, stimulus material, sampling, and measures used. Chapter 4 reports per student outcome the results of this study. Finally, chapter 5 provides an answer to the research question and presents the main conclusions of the study as well as outlines research implications and further research suggestions.

2. Theoretical framework

In the context of the present study, it was established that higher education institutions in the Netherlands are currently under pressure to communicate to a culturally diverse student body. What is more, in accordance with the Dutch higher education action plan, universities need to identify diversity strategies that do not face resistance (Stevens et al., 2008) from either Dutch or international students. To facilitate the understanding of the diversity communication topic, the following chapter elaborates on the reasoning behind choosing to apply the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives in the context of Dutch higher education, the relationship between these diversity strategies and student perspective variables, as well as the cultural background of students as a moderator of this relationship. Since insufficient research has been carried out on the topic of Ely and Thomas diversity approaches in the context of higher education, hypotheses about student perceptions and moderation relationships will be based on previous empirical research about diversity communication in corporations.

2.1. Diversity perspectives

The concept of diversity perspectives is well-researched in corporate contexts within European and American borders (Podsiadlowski et al, 2013). In this framework, numerous researchers (Ali & French, 2019; Jansen et al., 2016) have examined and theorized about various sets of perspectives that organizations can adopt concerning diversity, to help businesses effectively cope with the pressure of communicating to culturally diverse stakeholders. For instance, Ali and French (2019) distinguish between a liberal approach towards diversity, where the organizations aim to remove collective barriers and provide a fair and equitable system for individual talent, and a radical approach, which is based on the idea that organizations need to intervene and support disadvantaged groups in society. Similarly, Jansen et al. (2016) note that two of the most commonly described diversity strategies in the literature are colorblind and multiculturalism. Organizations that adopt a colorblind approach emphasize the importance of treating people equally and the value of individual personal qualifications over personal cultural differences, whereas organizations that follow a multiculturalism strategy see differences in values of cultural groups as an opportunity to enhance organizational decision making. These sets of diversity perspectives generally have in common that they either acknowledge or ignore individual cultural differences, adopt a proactive or reactive approach in tackling diversity, and regard cultural differences either as an opportunity or threat. Also, Ely and Thomas (2001) further propose three diversity perspectives, which unlike the approaches suggested by Ali and French (2019) and Jansen et al. (2016), focus only on the positive effects the adoption of a diversity stance brings to a culturally diverse organization. In other words,

whereas the diversity stances elaborated by Jansen et al. (2016) detail how organizations want diversity, the Ely and Thomas (2001) diversity strategies focus on why organizations want to be diverse.

The first diversity perspective identified by Ely and Thomas (2001) is discrimination and fairness. Organizations that employ this perspective have as a rationale diversifying from a moral point of view (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020), where people with different cultural backgrounds bring different viewpoints, which enables the organization to ensure equality and avoidance of discriminatory practices (Bjørkelo et al., 2020; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). The goal of organizations that use this perspective is assimilation (Ali & French, 2019), where the premise is that members of minority groups deserve a fair chance, meaning proportionate representation of all cultural groups in society (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020). Though similar to the colorblind approach (Jansen et al., 2016), organizations using a discrimination and fairness perspective acknowledge that cultural differences exist and address the need for specific support for minority groups, to reduce social inequalities and discrimination (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). According to this perspective, diversity does not have a strong connection to the work process (Bader et al., 2018; Bjørkelo et al., 2020; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013) still, all stakeholders in the organization deserve equal treatment regardless of their cultural background (Bader et al., 2018). Nonetheless, this approach to diversity is primarily linked to surface-level dimensions of diversity since arguing that people deserve equal chances in an organization is linked to demographic background categories (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020).

The second diversity perspective that Ely and Thomas (2001) theorize about is access and legitimacy. This perspective is built around the idea that there is a strong link between diversity and adding value to the organization (Bader et al., 2018; van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020). Organizations that embrace this perspective see diversity as a business strategy (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013) that is economically valuable to the organization (Bader et al., 2018). The rationale for diversifying is to gain access to and ensure legitimacy among groups in society (Bjørkelo et al., 2020) by internally reflecting the external environment of the organization (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). Similar to the discrimination and fairness strategy, this approach is linked to the demographic characteristics of individuals because it posits that groups in an organization can mirror societal characteristics (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020). An organization that operates under this perspective recognizes that the market and consumers are culturally diverse, and that greater diversity helps to ensure that the market is better served (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020). As a result, the emphasis is on selecting members from specific target groups for positions in which they can make full use of their cultural background (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020).

Similar to the access and legitimacy perspective, the third perspective described by Ely and Thomas, (2001) integration and learning, sees value in diversity (Bader et al., 2018). According to this perspective, functional differences, connected or not to surface level dimensions, provide a basis for learning and integration (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020). Consequently, corporations that adopt this strategy place diversity at the core of their organization (Bader et al., 2018) and regard it as a resource that the institution can employ to add value and give rise to internal learning processes (van der Zee & Boogaard, 2020). This perspective suggests that everyone in the organization can benefit from a diverse environment, and that change stems from the mutual adaptation of cultural minority and majority group members alike (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013). Since the rationale for diversifying is to enhance and integrate cultural differences into core and mainstream work processes (Bjørkelo et al., 2020), in the integration and learning perspective cultural identities are a resource for learning and transformation. The strategy moves beyond distinguishing between different cultural groups and rather acknowledges the unique and specific expertise of each individual and their valuable contribution that stems from them pertaining to a distinctive cultural group (Podsiadlowski et al., 2013).

Diversity approaches have been primarily analyzed among corporations concerning employee perspectives (Ali & French, 2019; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Jansen et al., 2016). Still, insufficient attention is given to the application of diversity perspectives in the higher education sector, where students are the most important stakeholder (Mampaey et al., 2020). Moreover, Ely and Thomas (2001) posit that in an organization, people can hold different perspectives about diversity, and hence, this framework shifts the focus of diversity literature from minority rights and equal employment (Ali & French, 2019; Jansen et al., 2016) to finding value in diversity and ensuring the inclusion of culturally diverse individuals in organizations (Bader et al., 2018). Similar to the framework developed by Ely and Thomas, higher education institutions in the Netherlands acknowledge the value of diversity for universities, however, they struggle to develop communication attuned to the culturally diverse student population, to provide the context for human development (Vos et al., 2016). Consequently, for the current study, the framework developed by Ely and Thomas is applicable.

Diversity perspectives are primarily communicated via the corporate website of organizations (Podsiadlowski et al.,2013; Wilton et al., 2020). In that regard, with increased globalization, Jonsen et al. (2019) indicate that diversity has become a central element that numerous organizations feature on their website. This is because the content of a corporate website represents the first touchpoint between an individual and the company, and hence it plays an important role in forming perceptions regarding the culture of the organization in the minds of those that interact with the website (Jonsen et al., 2019). Like corporations, higher education institutions, which provide the

context for human development, have built, in recent years, a website section dedicated to summarizing their view on diversity and inclusion (Starck et al., 2021). Although research on diversity communication via university websites is scarce, corporate studies have underpinned that the decision to include diversity cues might come because such messages influence the way individuals process website information (Jonsen et al., 2019). In other words, higher education institutions can attract certain types of students by crafting their diversity messages to meet the diversity views of those individuals.

2.2. Diversity perspectives and student perceptions

The diversity perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas have been primarily applied among corporate organizations to influence employee perceptions as to increase organizational productivity (Jansen et al., 2016). Still, with diversity gaining momentum at a global level and given the increasingly diverse student populations, similar to corporations, higher education institutions are gradually adopting a diversity stance in their communication to stakeholders, in particular students, for the purpose of meeting a societal and economic rhetoric. More recently, scholars (Buenestado-Fernandez et al., 2019; Gaisch et al.2019) have established that the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives are applicable to higher education and have indicated that the underlying issue with diversity communication in universities is that an important number of institutions are not aware of the differing effect such strategies can have on student perceptions. For instance, Vos et al. (2016) examined via interviews how the adoption of an Ely and Thomas diversity perspective may influence the dynamics of educational teams. More specifically, the authors highlighted that in recruiting academic staff, universities put the emphasis on diversity being a means to achieve social justice and where staff diversity enables higher education institutions to equip students with the knowledge required in the labor market. Still, Vos et al. (2019) conclude their paper questioning, due to the lack of empirical evidence, the extent to which the adoption of a diversity perspective may be effective in doing justice and meeting student expectations. This is because, unlike in corporate organizations, in the context of higher education it still has to be determined which diversity perspectives may lead students to feel connected and more likely to apply to a university. Likewise, there is a lack of empirical evidence among higher education institutions that contribute to understanding which of the Ely and Thomas diversity relate to the day-to-day values of current student cohorts, as well as which diversity stance might trigger student skepticism for internationally oriented institutions.

2.2.1. Perceived sense of belonging

Sense of belonging is one of the variables used in corporate literature to describe individual responses to diversity communication. In universities, the concept can be defined as the feeling of being accepted, valued, and included, which students experience about a higher education institution (Duran et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2020; Masika & Jones, 2019). Universities aim for students to develop a sense of belonging towards their organization, consequently they adopt a diversity stance. For instance, the integration and learning perspective developed by Ely and Thomas (2001) advocates for the integration of differences into the functioning of groups and organizations, while the discrimination and fairness stance promotes the allocation of equal opportunities for people with different cultural backgrounds (Shore et al., 2010) to allow everyone to feel that they are a member of an organization. Nevertheless, in higher education, as in corporations, the sense of belonging of students is shaped by the broader campus climate as well as by verbal and non-verbal messages conveyed by the institution (Jackson et al., 2020). In that regard, several researchers note that enabling students to develop a sense of belonging to a higher education institution is a critical factor that determines student retention (Masika & Jones, 2015; Museus et al., 2017; O'Keeffe, 2013). Freeman et al. (2007) add that the perceived feeling of belonging to a university determines academic motivation and success in that environment. O'Keeffe (2013) also underlines that creating a sense of belonging among students requires universities to develop positive student relations through the creation of a caring and supportive academic environment as well as the encouragement of diversity and differences. This is because contemporary cohorts of university students are culturally different and the way they experience and respond to campuses are varied (Duran et al., 2020). Consequently, as a university, it is of utmost importance to understand which diversity perspectives students resonate with.

Still, sense of belonging as a response to diversity communication has been empirically studied within a business framework, where it was found that people feel a greater degree of belongingness, even when they perceive themselves as being different, in organizations that foster a value in diversity perspective, where personal cultural differences are welcomed and appreciated (Hofhuis et al., 2016). Similarly, engaging with and talking about diversity can also affect the sense of belonging to an organization. Following the social identity argument, organizations that adopt a diversity perspective that puts emphasis on equality of opportunities based on individual accomplishments and focuses less on the importance of individual cultural differences, were found to undermine sense of belonging (Celeste et al., 2019; Duran et al., 2020). Still, the three perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas (2001) focus on the positive impact diversity has on the environment of an organization. For example, higher education institutions that apply a discrimination and fairness perspective aim to provide equal opportunities precisely because they

consider that hosting both Dutch and international students will provide the means to create an equal and non-discriminatory academic culture. Consequently, building on previous studies, it can be expected, in the context of Dutch higher education institutions, that each one of the three Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives will have a positive effect on the perceived sense of belonging students experience about diversity communication.

H1A: The discrimination and fairness perspective adopted by universities has a positive influence on perceived sense of belonging.

H1B: The access and legitimacy perspective adopted by universities has a positive influence on perceived sense of belonging.

H1C: The integration and learning perspective adopted by universities has a positive influence on perceived sense of belonging.

2.2.2. Attractiveness

Comparable results of the effect of diversity perspectives were found for two additional concepts that are attractiveness and perceived P-O fit. The variables are relevant for higher education student retention and are often examined in the corporate context as drivers of policy development (Madera et al., 2016; Ng & Burke, 2007). These concepts are often analyzed together by organizational literature, which is why a decision was made to include both constructs in the present study. Higher education institutions are similar to corporations. Consequently, following organizational scholars (Gomes & Goncalves Neves, 2010; Highhouse et al., 2003; Madera et al., 2016) for the context of this paper, attractiveness is defined as the extent to which a student has a general positive attitude towards a university and views it as desirable and wants to be part of it. The concept of attractiveness is important in communicating and achieving diversity in higher education because individuals have the inherent desire to expand and enhance their social identities and they are likely to be attracted to organizations that allow them to achieve this (Banks et al, 2015). Organizational studies acknowledge that adopting a diversity perspective influences attraction (Gutiérrez & Saint Clair, 2018; Ihme et al., 2016). That is, adopting a diversity perspective, which finds value in cultural diversity, such as the Ely and Thomas strategies, generates higher perceptions of organizational attractiveness (Olsen et al.,2015). Similarly, Baum et al. (2016) found that corporations that use a value in diversity approach signal to applicants the desire of the company to attain diverse groups. This in turn leads individuals who see the message to be more attracted to the organization that values rather than disregards diversity because they perceive the institution as acting positive and being socially responsible. However, these findings were found among business organizations, while in the case of higher education institutions there is uncertainty generated by the lack of empirical evidence regarding the effect of such approaches on the

university attractiveness of students (Ihme et al., 2016). Based on findings in the corporate environment, three hypotheses were developed for the Dutch university context.

H2A: The discrimination and fairness perspective adopted by Dutch universities has a positive influence on the perceived university attractiveness of students.

H2B: The access and legitimacy perspective adopted by Dutch universities has a positive influence on the perceived university attractiveness of students.

H2C: The integration and learning perspective adopted by Dutch universities has a positive influence on the perceived university attractiveness of students.

2.2.3. Perceived P-O fit

Nevertheless, the attractiveness concept has a passive nature (Highhouse et al., 2003). That is individuals, in this case students, can find an organization, such as a university, attractive but not feel that they fit with what the organization stands for (Stevens et al., 2008) and take any actions towards the institution (Highhouse et al., 2003). As a result, it is deemed relevant to also examine the concept of perceived P-O fit. Similar to employees of a corporation, students aim to be part of a university whose values are congruent with their values and personality, which Kristoff (1996) and Ng & Burke (2007) define as perceived P-O fit. Perceived P-O fit is a concept that applies to the general organizational culture (Horverak et al., 2011) and it is derived from the idea that different types of people can be attracted to different organizations. Perceived P-O fit emphasizes the importance of developing a corporate identity through the institutionalization of consistent diversity perspectives that reflect the culture of the organization. The concept is relevant for the current study because higher education institutions aim to adopt diversity perspectives that meet the values and personality of both local and international students. However, organizational studies underline that those institutions which fail to achieve perceived P-O fit, lead individuals to self-select out of the application process (Yen et al., 2011; Madera et al., 2016). In corporate (Madera et al.,2016; Ng & Burke, 2007) and university (Ihme et al.,2016) contexts, scholars note that individuals perceive a better fit with institutions that adopt one of the diversity perspectives developed by Ely and Thomas. This is because they regard the emphasis on diversity as anticipation of organization-based respect and pride (Ihme et al., 2016). Following this line of reasoning, three hypotheses were elaborated.

H3A: The discrimination and fairness perspective adopted by universities has a positive influence on students' perceived P-O fit.

H3B: The access and legitimacy perspective adopted by universities has a positive influence on students' perceived P-O fit.

H3C: The integration and learning perspective adopted by universities has a positive influence on students' perceived P-O fit.

2.2.3. Skepticism

The last concept considered for this study is skepticism towards diversity communication. Within the university framework, the concept measures the extent to which students perceive a higher education institution to communicate its diversity stance falsely or incorrectly in relation to its internal practices (Wilton et al., 2020). The variable has been insufficiently studied in the higher education context. Within the business framework Mckay and Avery (2005) mention that the concept is closely related to perceived P-O fit. Elving (2012) highlights about corporate social responsibility (CSR) that skepticism arises when people perceive an organization to use CSR communication only to improve its image rather than actively engage in communication to benefit society as a whole. In particular, Bjørkelo et al. (2020) found that diversity perspectives can lead to skepticism both from people within and outside an organization. In that sense, Leibbrandt and List (2018) contend that skepticism towards diversity communication occurs because tokenism concerns are activated, since the presence of diversity perspectives may indicate that specific cultural groups in society need help to succeed, due to their possible lack of competence and expertise. Based on findings in the corporate literature, it can be expected that the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives will have a negative influence on the skepticism that students might experience because of communication. In other words, universities adopting a diversity stance will lead students to be less skeptical of that institution. This is because the three strategies communicate why diversity is useful both to higher education institutions and society, namely, to provide equal opportunities and reduce discrimination in the academic environment, to represent different cultural groups in society as well as to contribute to the integration of cultural differences in academia. To test this relationship, three hypotheses were elaborated.

H4A: The discrimination and fairness perspective adopted by universities has a negative influence on student skepticism.

H4B: The access and legitimacy perspective adopted by universities has a negative influence on student skepticism.

H4C: The integration and learning perspective adopted by universities has a negative influence on student skepticism.

2.3. Moderating role of cultural background differences

Researchers have established that diversity approaches influence individual perceptions towards an institution. What is more, scholars have theorized that diversity strategies will have a

different effect depending on the cultural background of individuals (Buenestado-Fernandez et al., 2019). For the purpose of this study, which is to identify if there are differences in how Dutch and international students react to diversity communication of universities, hypotheses were developed by drawing on past organizational findings that are summarized in the following sections.

2.3.1. Perceived sense of belonging

People inherently want to experience a sense of belonging with a group of people that make up an organization (Shore et al., 2010). Empirical findings on diversity theories suggest that individuals who are culturally similar to their workgroup report a higher sense of belonging (Jansen et al., 2014; Das et al., 2021). Still, with corporations being increasingly diverse, cultural similarity may not always promote a sense of belonging (Shore et al., 2010) among both local and international group members (Das et al., 2021). For instance, Kirby and Kaiser (2021) underline that ethnic minorities have chronic concerns in developing a sense of belonging to organizations that adopt diversity perspectives, but which historically have employed White, cultural majority group members.

Moreover, numerous organizational scholars have examined the effect of communication strategies that value or disregard the importance of diversity on sense of belonging. Celeste et al. (2019) and Plaut et al. (2018) found that, following the social identity valuation theory, corporations that adopt a colorblind strategy undermine the sense of belonging of ethnic members. This is because, under the colorblind perspective, diversity is described in abstract terms, with ego-protective features that enable members of groups associated with perpetrating inequality to build and maintain an egalitarian self-image (Plaut et al., 2018). In contrast, minority group members feel a higher sense of belonging in organizations employing a multiculturalism perspective (Villotti et al., 2019), because here diversity is concretely described and perspective taking as well as inclusiveness reside and are promoted from within the core of the organization (Plaut et al., 2018). Nevertheless, multicultural communication leads to a higher sense of belonging for ethnic and international members of an organization because this strategy sees value in cultural differences, and from this stance, it accepts outgroups among majority members (Verkuyten, 2005). The reverse pattern can be observed for majority group members who are integrated in an organization communicating a multicultural perspective (Stevens et al., 2008). That is, cultural majorities feel a higher sense of belonging to institutions that adopt a colorblind perspective because they perceive that a multicultural strategy applies only to ethnics and internationals (Plaut et al., 2018) and thus, such an initiative threatens their social identity (Stevens et al., 2008).

Nonetheless, researchers have insufficiently addressed the effect Ely and Thomas (2001) diversity perspectives have on sense of belonging for international and cultural majority group

members. For instance, in a corporate context, Rabl et al. (2020) argued that the adoption of an integration and learning perspective has a positive influence on the sense of belonging of both internationals and cultural majority groups in German and American corporations because diverse backgrounds were accepted and valued by the company. In contrast, access and legitimacy efforts were perceived by international employees in Germany and United States as instrumental, whereas Germans and Americans, the cultural majority group, identified the discrimination and fairness perspective to threaten their position in the organization.

Curtin et al. (2013) indicate that developing a sense of belonging in the academic community is particularly difficult for international students in international-oriented schools and universities. Duran et al. (2020) argued that this is because it is likely that colleges and universities are inherently privileging in their communication culturally dominant groups in the country where the institutions are based. Celeste et al. (2016) established that similar to employees in organizations, ethnic minority high school students experienced a lower sense of belonging compared to local, majority students, in schools where a colorblind perspective was employed. This finding is congruent with the social identity valuation theory according to which using a colorblind strategy has a negative effect on the sense of belonging of minorities in culturally diverse teams because it emphasizes the existence of one organizational culture of which each individual is part of. Still, the findings of Celeste et al. (2016) were limited in assessing the effect of a diversity perspective that ignores cultural differences and focuses on individualism, a colorblind approach, and a perspective that values the background of each person, a multicultural approach. However, the current study focuses on the diversity perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas which have yet to be applied in the context of higher education. However, unlike the approaches described by Jansen et al. (2016), the Ely and Thomas diversity strategies focus only on the positive impact of diversity for corporations and the people working in such an environment. Subsequently, based on the findings of Rabl et al. (2020) in the corporate context and considering the purpose of this study, for Dutch higher education institutions that adopt a diversity stance in their communication to students, it can be expected that the integration and learning will have a positive influence on the sense of belonging both for Dutch and international students. Likewise, it can be hypothesized that the discrimination and fairness will have a stronger positive impact on sense of belonging for international rather than Dutch students. In contrast, applying the study of Rabl et al. (2020) it is expected that the access and legitimacy approach will drive a stronger sense of belonging for Dutch rather than for international students. Based on this line of reasoning, hypotheses 5A to 5C were formulated.

H5A: The positive effects of the discrimination and fairness perspective on sense of belonging are stronger for international than for Dutch students.

H5B: The positive effects of the access and legitimacy perspective on sense of belonging are stronger for Dutch than for international students.

H5C: The positive effects of the integration and learning perspective on sense of belonging are strong for both international and Dutch students.

2.3.2. Attractiveness

For higher education institutions to diversify and appropriately communicate to students, it is relevant to understand which strategies appeal to both the local and international groups they want to communicate to (Evertz & Süß, 2017). However, both in corporate (Baum et al., 2016; Gutiérrez & Saint Clair, 2018) and higher education contexts (Ihme et al., 2016), scholars highlight that there is insufficient research concerning which diversity perspectives are likely to attract local and international people. Academics have primarily studied the concept of organizational attractiveness among international and local job seekers. In that regard, Baum et al. (2016) argue that ethnicity and nationality are the most salient demographic characteristics for minority, international groups, whereas ethnic and cultural identity are less important for majority members because they belong to the preponderant population in an organization. Still, such characteristics are important when studying the effect of diversity perspectives on attractiveness because according to the social identity theory, individuals tend to act in conjunction with their most salient identity (Baum et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2004). In line with this, researchers found that people with a migration background are more attracted than locals to companies that adopt a diversity perspective (Baum et al., 2016; Evertz & Sub, 2017; Ng & Burke, 2007; Yang & Konrad, 2011). Ng and Burke (2007) concluded that female and cultural minority MBA job seekers were more attracted to corporations that adopted diversity perspectives that had a vision on providing equal opportunities and diversity inclusiveness. That is because international people aim to be employed in foreign organizations that provide them with advancement possibilities and where their efforts are acknowledged. This pattern has been also identified by Madera et al. (2016), who revealed in their study that cultural minority hotel managers were more attracted than cultural majority members to apply for hotel companies that affirmed in their diversity communication statements related to fairness and unbiased working environment. Stevens et al. (2008) contribute to the discussion by examining the effect of the multicultural diversity perspective. The authors contend that organizations using a multicultural ideology are particularly attractive to internationals because this approach recognizes and emphasizes the benefits of having people with different cultural backgrounds as well as it retains and acknowledges individual group identities. In contrast, Plaut et al. (2011) and Williams and Bauer (1994) found that cultural majority groups were less attracted to organizations that espoused a multicultural approach and not colorblindness in communicating

diversity. This is because they perceived being excluded from those companies that communicated the intention to include and understand different groups in society.

There are a limited number of scholars that have studied whether there are differences in how international and local students are attracted to a higher education institution based on the diversity perspective the university espouses. In that sense, Bjørkelo et al. (2020) examined the effect of diversity perspective on ethnic minority higher education Norwegian police students and underlined in their study that whereas the access and legitimacy perspective was the most employed diversity strategy, ethnic minorities were more attracted and perceived as an ideal the adoption of an integration and learning diversity perspective in university practices.

In line with findings in the corporate environment, it is expected that Dutch students will be less attracted than international students to universities that adopt a discrimination and fairness, respectively an access and legitimacy perspective since they perceive these approaches to threaten their position as majority groups in the institution and perceive the two strategies as being specifically developed to accommodate international students. In contrast, it can be hypothesized that international students will be more attracted to the two diversity perspectives because they are based on the premise that the university aims to reduce discrimination and increase the understanding of international students. Lastly, the integration and learning approach is expected to attract both international and Dutch students given that the approach does not distinguish between the two groups but rather aims to integrate and learn from people with a wide array of experiences and perspectives.

H6A: The positive effects of the discrimination and fairness perspective on university attractiveness are stronger for international than for Dutch students.

H6B: The positive effects of the access and legitimacy perspective on university attractiveness are stronger for international than for Dutch students.

H6C: The positive effects of the integration and learning perspective on university attractiveness are strong for both international and Dutch students.

2.3.3. Perceived P-O fit

Similar to the attractiveness concept, according to the social identity theory, individuals develop perceptions of fit based on their identities (Ng & Burke, 2005). With increasingly diverse groups, Banks et al. (2015) highlight that in a corporate context it is vital to understand which diversity approaches both cultural majority and minority groups perceive as fitting their values and personalities. Still, an individual will reach perceived P-O fit when the goals of the organization, in this case diversity perspectives, will be congruent and comprise instrumental goals that meet those of the individual (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006).

Schmader and Sedikides (2017) argued that racial minorities have a lower perceived P-O fit in majority White organizations because they experience a lack of congruence between their goals and the culture of the organization. In that sense, Kirby and Kaiser (2021) contend that following the dominant social psychological narrative, there is a positive effect of a multiculturalism diversity perspective on perceived P-O fit for internationals because multiculturalism imparts important psychological benefits to this group compared to colorblindness. For instance, Velez and Moradi (2012) explored in their study the effect of organizational communication that is supportive of diversity among minority group members. The authors established that there was a positive effect on the perceived P-O fit of minorities in companies that built supportive climates for individuals with different cultural backgrounds. A similar pattern was identified by Ng & Burke (2007) concerning cultural minority MBA job seekers. The scholars concluded that organizations adopting diversity perspectives that valued individual differences led to higher perceived P-O fit for minorities. In other words, minorities perceived that they would better integrate and enjoy a positive treatment in an environment that acknowledged their cultural values and personality. On the contrary, in organizations that used a colorblind approach, Kirby et al. (2020) found that majority groups perceived to fit seamlessly, whereas cultural minorities experienced identity management pressure that led them to experience lower levels of perceived fit.

Still, in the context of higher education little is known about the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on perceived P-O fit for international and Dutch students. Based on previous studies, it can be hypothesized that the integration and learning perspective will have a positive effect on the perceived P-O fit for both Dutch and international students. The underlying reason is that universities adopting this perspective emphasize that combining the cultural identities of Dutch and international students is a resource for learning and change in education. Moreover, it is expected that discrimination and fairness, as well as access and legitimacy, will have a more positive influence on perceived P-O fit of international students rather than Dutch students. This outcome is expected since communication under these perspectives differentiates between the two groups, and hence develops a sense of pressure for Dutch students, as the cultural majority group, to accommodate and assimilate the cultural differences of foreign students.

H7A: The positive effects of the discrimination and fairness perspective on perceived P-O fit are stronger for international than for Dutch students.

H7B: The positive effects of the access and legitimacy perspective on perceived P-O fit are stronger for international than for Dutch students.

H7C: The positive effects of the integration and learning perspective on perceived P-O fit are strong for both international and Dutch students.

2.3.4. Skepticism

Several researchers note that diversity strategies can have different effects on perceived organizational skepticism depending on whether individuals in a company pertain to a cultural majority or minority group. Onyeador et al. (2021) argued that in a culturally diverse organization, majority members are less skeptical towards diversity communication than minority members because they tend to assess the inclusion of diversity in corporate communication as making a company fair. Stevens et al. (2008) determined in their study that in diverse groups based in the United States, a colorblind approach to diversity inspired trust for local, cultural majority members, while among internationals this perspective increased skepticism. This is because a colorblind perspective is traditionally associated with appealing to non-minorities, whereas minorities perceive this strategy to disregard their values and personality. In contrast, internationals were more likely to trust multicultural diversity communication since they perceive it as being more inclusive of their individual background.

Wilton et al. (2020) focused on American corporations and minority perspectives and found that ethnic minority job applicants were positive about companies that expressed pro-diversity practices because they felt similar to employees in the organization. More specifically, in their study, Wilton et al. (2020) revealed that ethnics were less skeptical towards organizations that put emphasis on the value of diversity for work processes and employed diversity statements focused on the inclusiveness of group differences. At the same time, ethnic minorities were more skeptical towards the adoption of a diversity perspective according to which organizations aimed to hire underrepresented groups in society. The authors concluded that this is because cultural minority applicants are afraid of being tokenized, in other words, that an organization displays a diversity commitment to attract ethnics and internationals for the sole purpose of developing a favorable societal image, of fairness, and inclusion.

Skepticism as an outcome variable has yet to be empirically examined in the context of higher education and in relation to the Ely & Thomas diversity perspectives. Still, based on the findings outlined in organizational studies it can be expected that discrimination and fairness, respectively access and legitimacy perspectives will have a more negative influence on Dutch, the cultural majority group, than on international students, which represent the cultural minority group in higher education institutions in the Netherlands. Also, it can be hypothesized that Dutch universities employing an integration and learning perspective will have a negative influence on both Dutch and international perceived skepticism of students towards diversity communication. This is because discrimination and fairness, as well as access and legitimacy, posit that, international students in higher education institutions in the Netherlands are a group that needs to be protected, whereas the integration and learning approach moves beyond distinguishing

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between the two groups and instead puts emphasis on the valuable contribution that cultural differences can bring to education and the university climate.

H8A: The negative effects of the discrimination and fairness perspective on skepticism are stronger for Dutch than for international students.

H8B: The negative effects of the access and legitimacy perspective on skepticism are stronger for Dutch than for international students.

H8C: The negative effects of the integration and learning perspective on skepticism are strong for both Dutch and international students.

The research question and hypotheses developed for this study are summarized in the model below:
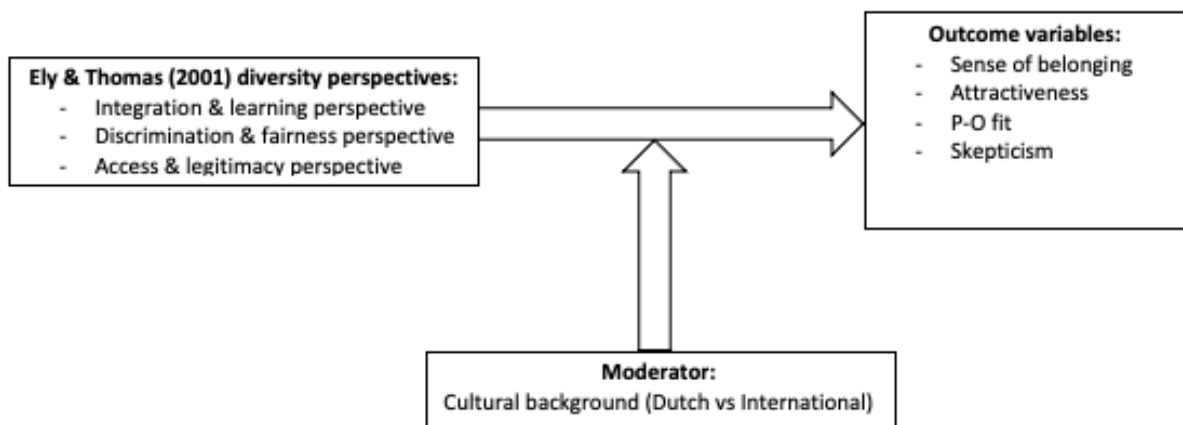
Figure 2.1 Conceptual model

3. Methodology

3.1. Research method and design

To answer the research question and test the developed hypotheses, a four-group post-test experimental design was used. The choice of an experimental method was justified because the research aimed to explain causality by testing a series of hypotheses (Babbie, 2011; Neuman, 2014). In that sense, based on previous research, hypotheses were developed concerning the moderating role of student pertaining to a Dutch or international cultural group in the effect of an independent variable, Ely & Thomas diversity perspectives communication in higher education, on several dependent variables, namely, sense of belonging, university attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, and skepticism. Nonetheless, the research question examined a causal relation, between an independent variable and four dependent variables. Moreover, the diversity perspectives were an experimental stimulus, therefore participants were exposed to only one treatment and outcomes were compared (Neuman, 2014). There were three groups that each received a stimulus, in this case, one of the diversity perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas. Likewise, to detect any effect of the experiment, a control group that was not exposed to the stimulus was used (Babbie, 2011). Furthermore, a choice was made to conduct an online experiment because it was deemed both time and cost-efficient and it allowed the researcher to reach a broad range of Dutch and international students that met the sampling criteria for the research.

3.2. Procedure

The study aimed to gather an international sample therefore the survey experiment was set up in the English language. Moreover, the survey was built into the Qualtrics survey software and anonymously distributed via a QR code and a survey link. The duration of the survey was between 7 and 10 minutes, and each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four treatments. Randomization of the conditions was programmed in the Qualtrics software. The survey consisted of five parts. First, respondents were asked for consent before being able to proceed with the survey. Second, the participants were randomly assigned to only one of the four conditions of the study. The third section of the survey asked respondents to answer a series of questions that measured the four dependent variables under study. Finally, the last two sections required participants to answer a series of demographic and two manipulation check questions.

To ensure the recognizability of the diversity statements and to test the quality of the survey questions, a pilot test was undertaken with a sample of 21 Dutch and international students enrolled in higher education institutions in The Netherlands. The survey was distributed among fellow Erasmus University Media Studies students and student acquittances enrolled at other Dutch

universities of the researcher, via an anonymous Qualtrics survey link. Approximately five respondents were randomly assigned using the Qualtrics feature to one of the four conditions of the study. After completing the survey, respondents were asked to provide feedback to the researcher regarding the process of filling out the survey, including layout, clarity, and understanding of questions, as well as missing information the participants deemed important to answer the survey questions. Based on the feedback received a series of changes were made to the survey experiment. First, the image that constituted the experimental condition was resized to be more smartphone-friendly since the researcher aimed to collect responses from students, who are inclined to use a smartphone rather than a desktop screen to fill out the survey experiment. Second, the instructions to fill out the survey based on the condition participants were assigned to was improved from asking participants to answer the survey questions based on the 'statement' they saw to 'picture of the university website'. Third, changes were made to the experimental conditions that will be detailed upon in the 'Stimulus material' section of the present chapter. The final version of the experiment design after pilot testing can be found in Appendix A.

3.3. Sample

The unit of analysis for the present study consisted of people, more specifically students. This choice was justified because the research aimed to examine the relationship between diversity communication in higher education and several student responses to university communication, as well as the moderating role of students pertaining either to a Dutch or international cultural group on this relationship. Students were defined as people who (1) are enrolled in a university program (WO and HBO) and (2) who are born in or outside the Netherlands. For this study, Dutch students represented the cultural majority group and were defined as people born in The Netherlands. Likewise, international students represented the minority group and were defined as people who are born outside the Netherlands, otherwise known as first-generation immigrants.

Data was collected over a period of six weeks, between 31 March and 10 May 2021. A combination of probability and non-probability sampling was used (Babbie, 2011). Systematic sampling, a type of probability sampling, was used at the beginning of the data collection phase. In that sense, the researcher approached every fifth person around the university library of Erasmus University Rotterdam with a note that contained a QR which led participants to the survey built in Qualtrics (see Appendix C for the note accompanying the QR code). A total of 12 responses were collected using this sampling method. Consequently, in addition to systematic sampling, data was also collected using a combination of snowball and purposive sampling. In that regard, on one hand, the researcher distributed a Qualtrics link to the survey experiment via her Facebook and LinkedIn network using the same note that accompanied the QR code, asking respondents to share

the survey with other people who might fit the study sample. On the other hand, the researcher also used purposive sampling, distributing the Qualtrics survey link to Facebook and WhatsApp groups of students such as Tilburg University, International students in the Netherlands, Romanian students in the Netherlands, etc. A total of 227 responses were collected using the two non-probability sampling methods.

239 respondents fully completed the survey experiment through the Qualtrics software. During the data cleaning process, out of the 239 responses recorded, 4 respondents filled out the same answer for all the survey questions and 2 respondents filled out 'other' for their level of education and were hence removed from the dataset because they did not meet the criteria to be part of the sample. Moreover, 36 respondents failed the manipulation checks and were excluded from further analysis. Consequently, the final sample for this study consisted of 197 responses. In the final sample 29 respondents were male (14.7%), 166 were female (84.3%), and 2 filled out the category 'other' (1%). The average age of the participants was 22.83 (SD=2.13), where the youngest respondent was 18 years old and the eldest was 29 years old.

Furthermore, given the international nature of the approached groups, the sample obtained included respondents from a total of 30 countries. In that sense, the biggest proportions of the respondents were born in The Netherlands (48.7%), Romania (12.7%), Germany (5.1%), Belgium (4.6%), and The United Kingdom (4.1%). Consequently, in the final sample out of the 197 respondents, 97 students were Dutch and 100 internationals. Moreover, when asked about their current level of education, 96 respondents were following a master's degree (48.7%), 87 a bachelor's degree (44.2%), 11 a Premaster (5.6%), and 3 a PhD (1.5%).

3.4. Stimulus material

The study used an experiment method, consequently, stimulus material was developed that will be discussed in the following section. The survey manipulation contained a diversity statement presented in the form of a screenshot that resembled the section of a university website page (see Appendix B for the stimulus material). The independent variable diversity perspective was translated into four conditions: (1) diversity statement with a discrimination and fairness perspective, (2) diversity statement with an access and legitimacy perspective, (3) diversity statement with an integration and learning perspective, (4) and control condition without a diversity statement. The text for the different conditions was developed by the researcher based on the academic literature that reviewed the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives (Bjørkelo et al., 2020; Podsiadlowski et al., 2013), while the layout of the screenshot was rooted in the web design used by higher education institutions in the Netherlands for the 'Diversity and Inclusion' website section. Nevertheless, the conditions did not include any specific information, such as the name of

the university, and reflected the diversity statement that higher education institutions in the Netherlands often include in the 'Diversity and Inclusion' page of their website. This choice was made to safeguard respondents from giving biased responses because it allowed the researcher to alter the different diversity statements as to not disclose any specific information about the university that employed the different perspectives.

All the conditions had the same layout and contained two sentences. The conditions that included an Ely and Thomas diversity statement had the same length of 28 words. Likewise, the control condition had 26 words. Furthermore, the conditions which included a diversity statement had the same first sentence, specifically 'As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture', whereas the control condition had a first sentence that did not mention diversity, which is 'As a university we focus on an excellent academic culture'. The second sentence represented the manipulation, and it was hence adjusted for each condition to reflect either one of the diversity perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas or for the control condition a sentence without a diversity stance. In addition, to facilitate the retention of the diversity statement that respondents encountered, a decision was made to add the manipulation in italics, in other words, the second sentence, and put a series of words that defined the core of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives in bold. For instance, in the integration and learning condition, the second sentence stated that '*We believe diversity helps us create a more **innovative** academic environment and increases **learning and integration**'* whereas the discrimination and fairness condition was phrased as '*We believe diversity helps us create more **equal opportunities** in the academic environment and reduces **discrimination**'*.

Upon receiving feedback during the pilot test and because 3 out of 4 respondents failed to distinguish the access and legitimacy perspective from the other conditions, the corresponding manipulation had to be adjusted ('We believe diversity helps us create a more representative academic environment and increases access and legitimacy'). Since the caption 'access and legitimacy' was deemed to be too vague for the survey respondents to grasp the meaning of the statement but also to make the condition stronger and recognizable, the words were replaced by 'understand different cultural groups'. Consequently, the access and legitimacy condition was adjusted to: '*We believe diversity helps us **understand different cultural groups** in society and makes us more **representative**'*. Similarly, during the pilot test, 3 out of 6 respondents encountered difficulty in distinguishing if the control condition included or not a diversity statement. As a result, because words such as 'open' and 'good' could be interpreted by respondents as signaling diversity, a decision was made to adjust the text of the condition (find the final version of experimental conditions under Appendix B). After making the adjustments, the survey experiment was once again tested with four student friends of the researcher, resulting in no additional changes.

Following data collection, the respondents included in the final sample were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in the following proportions:

1). Discrimination and fairness condition (50 respondents; 25 Dutch and 25 Internationals)

2). Access and legitimacy condition (50 respondents; 26 Dutch and 24 Internationals)

3). Integration and learning condition (49 respondents; 23 Dutch and 26 Internationals)

4). Control condition (48 respondents; 23 Dutch and 25 Internationals)

Finally, to increase internal validity and verify if the four conditions of the experiment had the intended effect (Neuman, 2014), two manipulation check questions were developed and added at the end of the survey experiment. First, a close-ended question asked participants to indicate whether diversity was communicated in the statement they were presented with at the beginning of the survey (see Appendix A). Second, to further validate the experimental manipulations, respondents were asked via a close-ended question to recall which statement they were exposed to at the beginning of the survey. The answer categories for the second check, constitute the second statement which included or not one of the diversity perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas. To avoid the confusion of participants, a decision was made to include only the second statement, because the first statement was the same for all conditions which included one of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives or slightly adjusted for the control condition. In the final sample, out of the total 197 survey experiment respondents, 6 students failed only the first manipulation check, 19 failed solely the second manipulation check, and 11 failed both manipulations.

3.5. Measurements

In addition to the stimulus material, the subsequent section details on the items and scales used to measure the four dependent variables under study in the following order: perceived sense of belonging, university attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, and university skepticism. In addition, demographic information was collected. The scales used to measure the four outcome variables were drawn from corporate communication literature since the four concepts have been insufficiently addressed in the context of university diversity communication.

The first outcome variable measured in the survey was perceived sense of belonging. A 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree from Jansen et al. (2016) was adapted to the context of the current study. The scale consisted of five items (Cronbach's α = .86) which are 'I feel that I could belong to this university', 'This university would care about me', 'This university would appreciate me', 'This university would treat me as an insider', and 'I could feel part of this university'.

University attractiveness was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree. The scale which consisted of seven items was adapted from the study of

Madera et al. (2016) that measured employee organizational attractiveness. The scale had good reliability (Cronbach's α = .88) and was adjusted to measure the perceived university attractiveness of students. The scale included two reverse-scored items that are 'Studying at this university is not appealing to me' and 'I would not exert a great deal of effort to study at this university'. Moreover, positively formulated items include 'For me, this university would be a good university to study at" and "I am interested in learning more about this university" (for the complete scale see Appendix A).

To measure the concept of perceived P-O fit a six-item scale was developed based on the scales of Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001) and Saks and Ashforth (1997). Since the concept of perceived P-O fit measures the fit between both values and personality, a decision was made to use items from both scales because the Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001) scale items were more focused on measuring perceived fit with values, whereas Saks and Ashforth (1997) also included items that measured personality fit. Items drawn from Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001) initially measured P-O fit for people within an organization, however, for the current study the items were adapted to measure perceived P-O fit since students examined a statement from a fictional university at which they were not yet enrolled. Items such as 'I think I can maintain my personal values at this university' or 'My personal values fit this university', 'The values of this university reflect my own values' and "I would fit well at this university' were based on the scale used in the study of Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001), whereas 'My personality fits this university' and 'The personality of this university reflects my own personality' were adapted based on Saks and Ashforth (1997). All six items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree. Since the items were drawn from two scales, they were entered into a factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00), *KMO* = .85, χ^2 (*N*= 197, 15) = 806.519, *p* <.001, which showed that all the items belonged to one factor. The resultant model explained 68.9% of the variance in perceived P-O fit. Factor loadings of individual items onto the factor are presented in Table 1. The items had good reliability (Cronbach's α =.91) therefore the perceived P-O fit variable was computed.

Table 3.1. Factor and reliability analysis for perceived P-O fit scale (N=197)

Items	Perceived P-O fit
My personal values fit this university	.86
I think I can maintain my personal values at this university	.85
The values of this university reflect my own values	.85
My personality fits this university	.85

The personality of this university reflects my own personality.	.79
I would fit well at this university.	.77
R^2	.41
Cronbach's α	.91

The variable university skepticism was measured using the scale developed by Wilton et al. (2020). The original scale consisted of four items that were adapted to fit the current study. The items included in the current study were: (1) 'this university is not sincere about its diversity messages to students', (2) 'this university overstates its actual commitment to diversity', (3)'this university acts like it's better about diversity than it really is', and (4) 'cultural minority students are promised more resources and support than is actually provided by the university'. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements based on the website picture they saw at the beginning of the survey on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree. In addition, a 'Not applicable' response answer category was added to the scale because respondents in the control group were not exposed to a diversity statement. Reliability analysis revealed a Cronbach's α = .79, consequently, the four items were computed into a new variable.

In addition to the main concepts that were measured in the study, a series of demographic questions were included in the survey. In that sense, open-ended questions were used to gather information regarding the age and country of birth of the respondents. Moreover, predetermined categories were used to establish the gender and level of education of the experiment participants.

4. Results

After concluding the data collection phase, the data registered through the survey software Qualtrics was exported to SPSS 27 for analysis. To test hypotheses, a detailed process of data cleaning was undertaken. In that sense, default columns, such as survey 'start date' or 'user language', were deleted from the dataset because they did not contain information that could contribute to test the study hypotheses. Moreover, several variables, such as age, the birth country of respondents, were adjusted to appear uniform by checking for spelling mistakes, missing values, capital letters for country names, etc. In addition, to facilitate the analysis, the age variable was recoded as a numeric instead of a string variable.

To generate the variables that could be used for hypotheses testing, for each scale item included in the study a normality test was generated, which revealed that all data was normally distributed. Two reversed items that measured the attractiveness concept were recoded into two new variables, and normality tests were also generated. Furthermore, since the items used to measure the dependent variables in the study were drawn from previous studies and because all data was normally distributed, the scales were tested for reliability. All the scales tested had a Cronbach Alpha value higher than .70. As a result, new variables were computed using the MEAN command for items that made up the scales that measured sense of belonging, university attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, and skepticism. These new variables were then used to test the hypotheses formulated in the theoretical framework chapter. Moreover, to further enable hypotheses testing, two additional variables were created, namely cultural background and diversity perspectives. The variable cultural background showed the researcher whether respondents pertained to a Dutch or international group, whereas the diversity perspectives variable indicated to which of the four conditions respondents were exposed to. Specifically, to develop the 'cultural background' variable, the question about the country of birth of survey participants was used to determine whether respondents pertained to the Dutch or international group. In that sense, students that indicated being born in the Netherlands were coded as Dutch, whereas students who indicated being born in a country outside the Kingdom of the Netherlands were coded as internationals. Similarly, using default generated columns by Qualtrics that indicated to which condition survey participants were randomly assigned, the variable 'diversity perspectives' was created. After concluding this phase, hypotheses were tested using ANOVA and moderation with ANOVA analyses.

4.1. Diversity perspectives and student perceptions

4.1.1. Diversity perspectives and perceived sense of belonging

Based on empirical findings, hypotheses H1A to H1C suggested that Dutch universities that use one of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspective would have a positive influence on the sense of belonging of students to the institution. In that sense, after conducting a one-way ANOVA analysis, the model was found to be significant, $F(3, 193) = 4.03$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The differences in mean scores between the four groups was quite small ($\eta^2 = .06$). Students presented with the discrimination and fairness ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 0.66$) or with the integration and learning perspective ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 0.84$) reported higher sense of belonging than students in the access and legitimacy ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.86$) or control group ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.94$). Tukey post-hoc test revealed that students in the integration and learning (Mdifference = 0.49, $p = .021$), respectively in the discrimination and fairness group (Mdifference = 0.51, $p = .013$) reported higher sense of belonging than those in the control group. Nonetheless, no significant differences were found in sense of belonging for students in the access and legitimacy group when compared to the control group (Mdifference = 0.40, $p = .077$). Consequently, hypotheses H1A and H1C were accepted, whereas H1B was rejected.

4.1.2. Diversity perspectives and attractiveness

Hypotheses H2A to H2C stated that students would be more attracted to a Dutch higher education institution that employs one of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives than to a university that does not communicate a diversity stance. After conducting a one-way ANOVA analysis the model was found to not be significant $F(3, 193) = 2.08$, $p = .104$, $\eta^2 = .03$. In other words, there were no statistically significant differences in university attractiveness between students in the discrimination and fairness ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 0.68$), integration and learning ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 0.91$), access and legitimacy ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.92$), and control group ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.10$). As a result, hypotheses H2A to H2C had to be rejected.

4.1.3. Diversity perspectives and perceived P-O fit

Hypotheses H3A to H3C suggested that Dutch higher education institutions that communicate one of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives would have a positive influence on perceived P-O fit of students. In that sense, after conducting a one-way ANOVA analysis, the model was found to be significant, $F(3, 193) = 7.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. The model reached statistical significance, where the effect size indicated a medium effect ($\eta^2 = .10$). Students presented with the discrimination and fairness ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 0.77$) or with the integration and learning perspective

(M = 5.34, SD = 0.87) reported higher perceived P-O fit than students in the access and legitimacy (M = 5.05, SD = 0.89) or control group (M = 4.64, SD = 1.10). Tukey post-hoc test revealed that students in the integration and learning (Mdifference = 0.69, p = .001), respectively in the discrimination and fairness group (Mdifference = 0.76, p <.001) reported higher perceived P-O fit than those in the control group. Nonetheless, no significant differences were found in perceived P-O fit for students in the access and legitimacy group when compared to the control group (Mdifference = 0.40, p = .132). Consequently, hypotheses H3A and H3C were accepted, whereas H3B was rejected.

4.1.4. Diversity perspectives and skepticism

Hypotheses H4A to H4C stated that the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives included in the diversity communication of Dutch higher education institutions would have a negative effect on student skepticism towards universities. After conducting a one-way ANOVA analysis the model was found to not be significant F(3, 186) = .87, p = .456, η^2 = .01. In other words, there were no statistically significant differences in skepticism towards a university diversity statement between students in the discrimination and fairness (M = 3.67, SD = 0.80), integration and learning (M = 3.94, SD = 1.07), access and legitimacy (M = 3.94, SD = 1.07), and control group (M = 3.76, SD = 1.02). As a result, hypotheses H4A to H4C were rejected.

4.2. Moderating role of cultural background differences

4.2.1. Perceived sense of belonging

Hypotheses 5A-5C predicted that pertaining to the Dutch, cultural majority, or international, minority group, moderates the sense of belonging of higher education students based on the exposure to university statements that contain one of the Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives. In that sense, it was hypothesized that the positive effects of the discrimination and fairness perspective on sense of belonging would be stronger for international students than Dutch students (H5A), while the positive influence of the access and legitimacy perspective on sense of belonging would be stronger for Dutch than for international students (H5B). Similarly, it was expected that the integration and learning perspective would have a positive influence on sense of belonging both for Dutch and international students (H5C). To test the hypotheses, a two-way ANOVA analysis was conducted with sense of belonging as dependent variable and diversity perspectives, respectively cultural background, as fixed factors (see Graph 4.1). The effect of diversity perspectives was found to be significant, F(3, 189) = 3.88, p = .010, η^2 = .06. In a post-hoc multiple comparison test, it was found that students presented with a discrimination and fairness (Mdifference = 0.51, p = .014) or with an integration and learning perspective (Mdifference = 0.49, p

= .021) reported higher sense of belonging than those in the control group. There was no significant difference in sense of belonging for those students who were in the access and legitimacy group (Mdifference = 0.40, p = .079) when compared to the control group. Moreover, the cultural background of participants, meaning whether they were Dutch or international students, was not found to have a significant effect on perceived sense of belonging $F(1, 189) = 1.11$, $p = .293$, η^2 = .01. Also, no statistically significant interaction was found between the diversity perspectives and the cultural background of students on sense of belonging $F(3, 189) = 0.38$, $p = .764$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Consequently, hypotheses H5A-H5C were rejected.
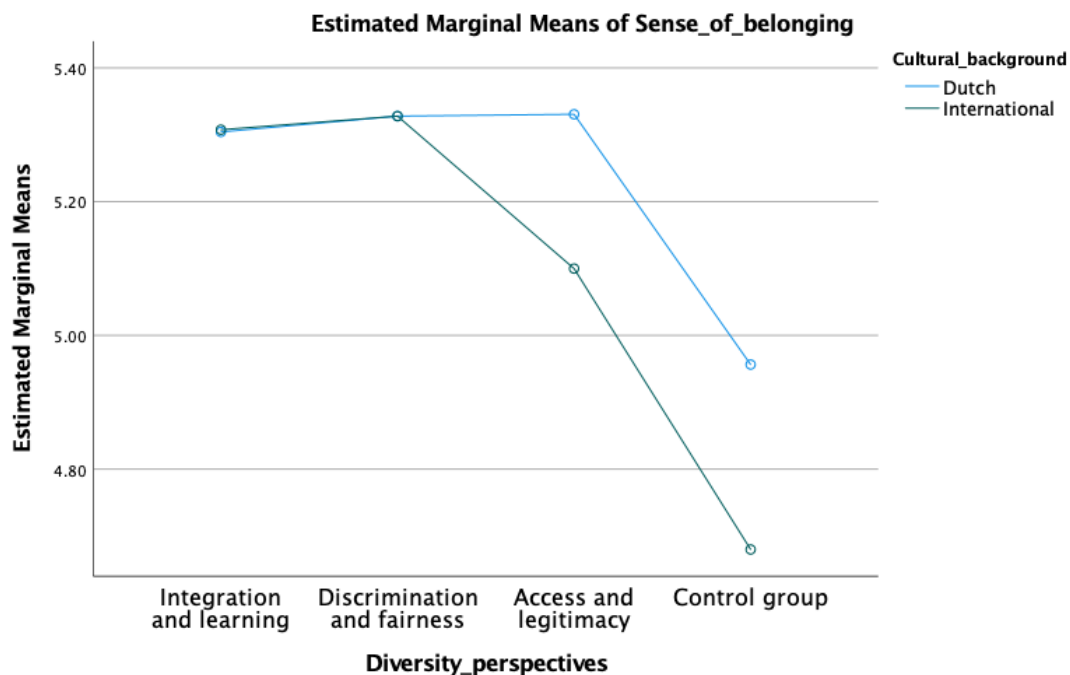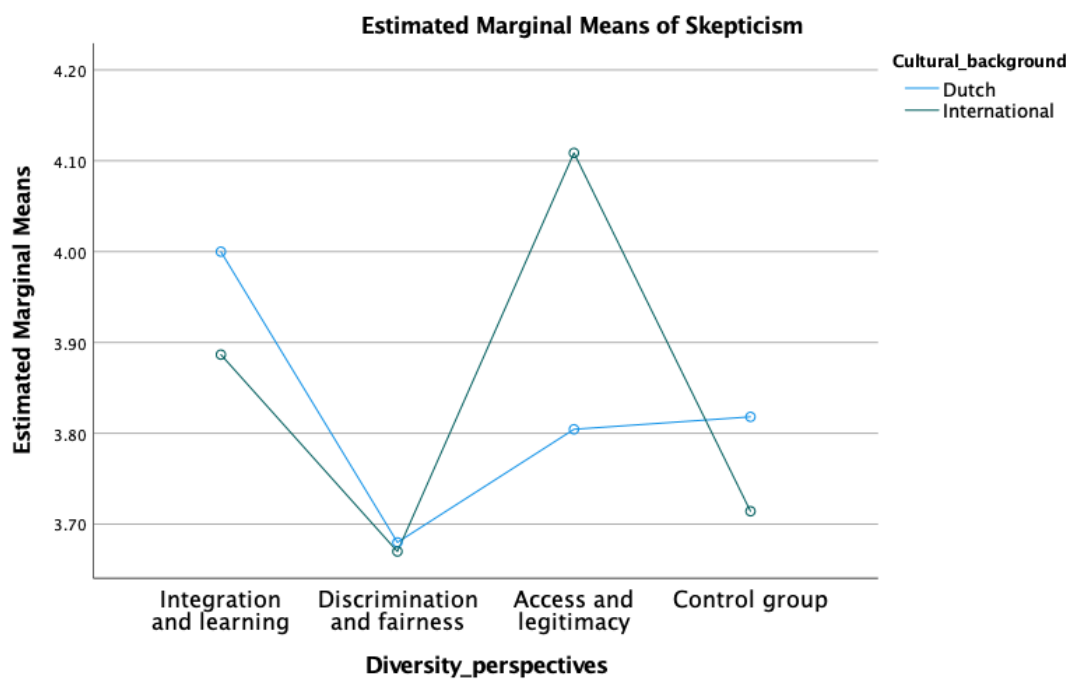

Graph 4.1 Moderation of cultural background on diversity perspectives influence on sense of belonging

Graph 4.1 presents the results of the moderation analysis. Although there appear to be differences between Dutch and international students in the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on sense of belonging, these were not large enough to be statistically significant.

4.2.2. Attractiveness

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that pertaining to a Dutch or international cultural group would moderate the effect of Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives on attractiveness towards a higher education institution. In that regard, it was expected that the influence of the discrimination and fairness (H6A), respectively access and legitimacy perspective (H6B) on university attractiveness would be more positive for international than for Dutch students. Likewise, it was hypothesized that there would be positive effects of the integration and learning perspective on university attractiveness for both Dutch and international students (H6C). A two-way ANOVA

analysis revealed that the effect of diversity perspectives on perceived university attractiveness is not significant, $F(3, 189) = 1.95$, $p = .122$, $\eta^2 = .03$. In addition, the cultural background of students did not have an effect on university attractiveness, $F(1, 189) = 1.06$, $p = .303$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Moreover, no statistically significant interaction effect was found between the diversity perspectives and the cultural background of students on attractiveness, $F(3, 189) = 0.81$, $p = .485$, $\eta^2 = .01$ (see Graph 4.2). Therefore, hypotheses H6A-H6C were rejected.
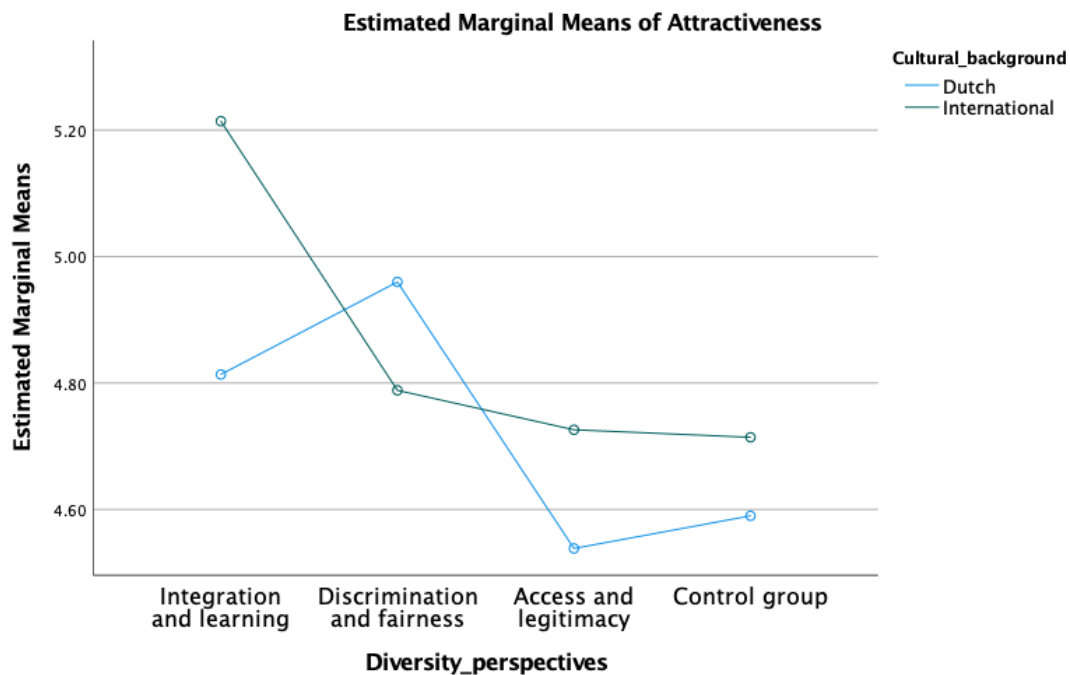
Graph 4.2 Moderation of cultural background on diversity perspectives influence on attractiveness

Graph 4.2 presents the results of the moderation analysis. Although there appear to be differences between Dutch and international students in the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on attractiveness, these were not large enough to be statistically significant.

4.2.3. Perceived P-O fit

Similarly, it was expected that pertaining to a Dutch or international cultural group would moderate the effect of Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives on the perceived P-O fit of students. In that sense, it was hypothesized that the discrimination and fairness (H7A), respectively the access and legitimacy perspective (H7B), would have a more positive effect on the perceived P-O fit of international rather than Dutch students. In addition, it was suggested that the integration and learning perspective would have a positive effect on the perceived P-O fit of Dutch and international students alike (H7C). A two-way ANOVA analysis was used to test the hypotheses (see Graph 4.3). The effect of diversity perspectives was found to be significant, $F(3, 189) = 6.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$. In a post-hoc multiple comparison test, it was found that students presented with an

integration and learning perspective (Mdifference = 0.69, p = .002) or with a discrimination and fairness (Mdifference = 0.76, p <.001) reported higher perceived P-O fit than those in the control group. Nevertheless, there was no statistically significant difference in perceived P-O fit for those students who were in the access and legitimacy group (Mdifference = 0.40, p = .138) when compared to the control group. Moreover, the cultural background of participants, meaning whether they were Dutch or international students, was not found to have a significant effect on perceived P-O fit $F(1, 189)$ = .01, p = .905, η^2 = .00. Also, no statistically significant interaction was found between the diversity perspectives and the cultural background of students on perceived P-O fit, $F(3, 189)$ = 0.25, p = .860, η^2 = .00. As a result, hypotheses H7A-H7C were rejected.
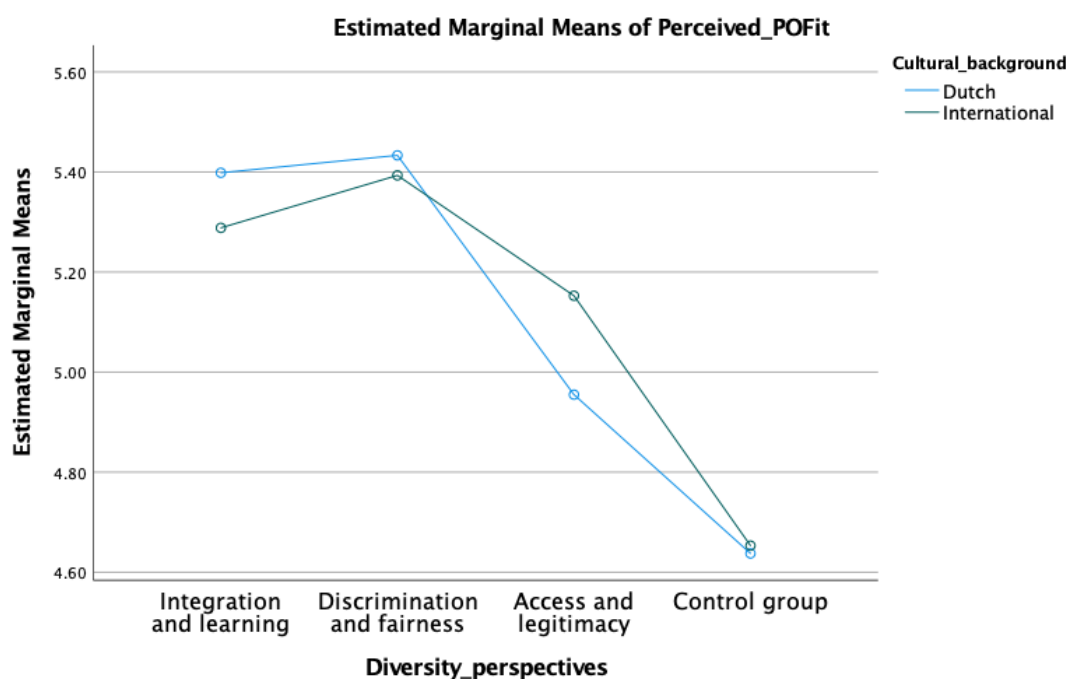
Graph 4.3 Moderation of cultural background on diversity perspectives influence on perceived P-O fit

Graph 4.3 presents the results of the moderation analysis. Although there appear to be differences between Dutch and international students in the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on perceived P-O fit, these were not large enough to be statistically significant.

4.2.4. Skepticism

Lastly, it was suggested that the cultural background of students would moderate the relationship between Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives and student skepticism towards diversity communication of Dutch universities. In that regard, it was theorized that the discrimination and fairness (H8A), respectively the access and legitimacy perspective (H8B) would have stronger negative effects for Dutch rather than for international students. Likewise, it was expected that the integration and learning perspective would have a negative effect on skepticism

towards diversity communication of universities for both Dutch and international students (H8C). A two-way ANOVA analysis was undertaken (see Graph 4.4). The effect of diversity perspectives on perceived skepticism was not significant, $F(3, 182) = 0.90$, $p = .440$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Similarly, the cultural background of students did not have an effect on student skepticism, $F(1, 182) = 0.01$, $p = .896$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Moreover, no statistically significant interaction was found between the diversity perspectives and the cultural background of students on skepticism, $F(3, 182) = 0.45$, $p = .718$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Consequently, hypotheses H8A-H8C were rejected.

Graph 4.4 Moderation of cultural background on diversity perspectives influence on skepticism

Graph 4.4 presents the results of the moderation analysis. Although there appear to be differences between Dutch and international students in the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on skepticism, these were not large enough to be statistically significant.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Larger demographics of students are joining higher education institutions across the globe (Buenestado-Fernandez et al., 2019). In this context, universities have elaborated and adopted diversity statements to engage and attract a student body that accurately reflects a culturally diverse population (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017). In the Netherlands, which fosters a diverse student population, the Dutch government has started placing increased attention on diversity communication, to the extent that they have developed in 2020 a plan to create a diverse and inclusive higher education environment (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), 2020). Adopting a diversity perspective in communication is of utmost importance to the personal development of students and academics, as well as to the advancement of research. This is because diversity perspectives are philosophies that shape common perceptions of policies and practices and thus influence how people perceive the importance of cultural differences and whether they feel respected and valued in the respective environment (Bader et al., 2018). Specifically, Ely and Thomas (2001) have distinguished between three diversity perspectives, namely discrimination and fairness, access and legitimacy, as well as integration and learning. Still, because diversity is a topic that has relatively recently gained the attention of scholars, its importance has only been primarily studied in the context of corporations rather than in higher education. However, since universities provide the context for human development, further research was required to understand what influence the Ely and Thomas diversity approaches communicated by higher education institutions have on student perceptions, and whether there were differences in how Dutch and international students perceived this relationship. Building on corporate research, four concepts were measured and deemed relevant for the context of higher education which are perceived sense of belonging, university attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, and student skepticism. Based on findings in organizational studies, for the present study, it was hypothesized that the adoption of different approaches to diversity communication in universities would lead to distinct student responses depending on whether students pertained to a Dutch or international group. In that sense, the research question addressed by the study was:

To what extent do diversity perspectives in higher education influence student perceptions of diversity communication and how is this different for Dutch and international students?

To answer the study research question and test the elaborated hypotheses, a four-group in-between experiment was designed, and data was collected from a sample of 197 Dutch and international university students. The following section will provide an answer to the main question of the study and a summary of the most relevant findings.

5.1. Summary of findings and theoretical implications

To answer the study research question, based on the sample and results obtained, the cultural background of the students, namely if they were Dutch or international, did not moderate the influence of diversity perspectives in higher education on student responses to diversity communication. In other words, Dutch and international students are not more or less attracted and skeptical towards a higher education institution that adopts one of the three Ely and Thomas strategies. Nevertheless, being Dutch or international does not influence the perception of belonging and fit between personal values and those of a university that employs an Ely and Thomas diversity perspective. However, there are differences in how, in general both Dutch and international students respond to universities that choose to display on their website a diversity commitment that is developed in accordance with one of Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives.

First, following the social identity theory and based on findings in corporate studies, it was hypothesized that students in the sample would feel a higher sense of belonging to universities that employed one of the diversity perspectives elaborated by Ely and Thomas. The results of this study, partially confirm findings in business research (Celeste et al., 2019; Duran et al., 2020) and further bridge the gap in the literature focused on higher education institutions by revealing that, students exposed to diversity statements that contained either an integration and learning or a discrimination and fairness perspective experienced a higher sense of belonging than students who were presented with a statement that did not mention a diversity stance. In contrast, no significant differences were found between students exposed to an access and legitimacy diversity statement when compared to the control group. Even though significant differences in sense of belonging were not found for diversity statements with an access and legitimacy approach, the relationship was still positive. This finding is in accordance with Bjørkelo et al. (2020) and it supports the idea that students prefer universities that employ an integration and learning as opposed to an access and legitimacy approach to diversity, where individual differences coming from the personal background of the student are seen as an opportunity to improve research and the academic environment. What is more, adding to findings in organizational studies by Celeste et al. (2019) and Duran et al. (2020), the current study results establish that a discrimination and fairness perspective leads to higher sense of belonging because, unlike the colorblindness approach, the former promotes the allocation of equal opportunities for students with different cultural backgrounds to make everyone feel part of the university.

Second, the current study contributed to the limited body of empirical literature (Ihme et al., 2016) on the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on the perceived fit between the individual values and personality held by a student and those of higher education institutions as communicated in a diversity statement. The findings revealed that students exposed to an

integration and learning, or a discrimination and fairness perspective, experienced a significantly higher perceived P-O fit than students who were presented with a statement that did not mention diversity. In addition, no significant differences, though results indicated a positive relationship, were found when comparing the perceived P-O fit between students exposed to a university statement that included an access and legitimacy stance and a university that did not include a diversity strategy. Consequently, the findings of the present study reveal that higher education institutions that hold values related to the provision of an academic environment where cultural differences are seen as means for innovation and the development of a fair and equal social environment, most closely reflect the personality and values of students that aim to study at a higher education institution in the Netherlands.

To sum up, although only four of the hypotheses tested in the present study were confirmed, new insights were added that contribute to the discussion regarding the influence of diversity perspectives employed in higher education on student responses to such communication. To the best knowledge of the researcher, the following study was the first to explore, in the context of Dutch higher education, the effect Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives have on the sense of belonging, university attractiveness, perceived P-O fit, and skepticism of university students. The findings of the current study revealed that the choice of a strategy in communicating diversity via the 'Diversity and Inclusion' webpage of a university influences the sense of belonging and perceived P-O fit of university students. More specifically, differences in perceptions were found for students exposed to university statements that included either an integration and learning or a discrimination and fairness perspective. Furthermore, the study advances empirical research by revealing that, in the context of the sample, namely Dutch and international students presented with a diversity statement of a Dutch university, the cultural background of the individuals did not have a significant effect on student perceptions of diversity communication. From this stance, since the topic of diversity communication is understudied, future research is still required to contribute to the understanding of the role of diversity approaches on higher education actors.

5.2. Limitations and future research

Several limitations can be identified concerning the present study. To begin, there is a lack of empirical evidence in the context of university diversity communication, which examines the moderating role of the cultural background of students on the relationship between Ely and Thomas diversity perspectives and four dependent variables chosen for the study. As a result, the model used for developing study hypotheses was based on previous empirical studies in corporate organizations, which limited the development of direct comparisons between the available empirical evidence and study results. Nonetheless, the model was applied to higher education

institutions in The Netherlands. However, to contribute to the lack of empirical evidence regarding diversity communication of universities, future research could apply and further develop the proposed model for international-oriented higher education institutions outside the Netherlands and analyze possible differences among countries.

Moreover, to increase the generalizability of study results the researcher used both probability and non-probability sampling types. Out of the total of 197 valid responses included in the analysis, only 12 were generated using this sampling method. Still, a study with an experimental design aims to attain generalizability of results. However, most of the responses for the present research were gathered using non-probability sampling, which is a method that does not guarantee that the obtained sample is representative of the whole population (Babbie, 2011). Moreover, in the final sample, there were internationals (100) than Dutch (97) respondents. Likewise, in the sample, there were considerably more female (166) than male (29) participants. Consequently, to increase the representativeness of the sample to the population and avoid possible biases, future research using the proposed model should consider ways to improve the response rate using probability sampling, as well as techniques to generate more equal groups in terms of gender and cultural group affiliation.

In addition, for the present study, in applying organizational theories to develop hypotheses, students born in the Netherlands were considered Dutch, whereas first-generation immigrants were regarded as internationals. Consequently, in this context, a decision was made to consider Dutch students as the cultural majority group and international students as minorities. Still, the population of the Netherlands is comprised of a significant number of second-generation immigrant Dutch students, which can also be considered as a cultural minority group. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to compare and understand if significant differences can be found in how students with a non-immigrant Dutch background, second-generation Dutch students, and international students, respond to the use of diversity communication on higher education websites.

Furthermore, given the limited number of resources, the study considered the moderating role only of the cultural background of students, more precisely if there were differences in how Dutch, respectively international students responded to the adoption of one of the Ely and Thomas diversity strategies in university communication. Results of the moderation analyses were found not significant. Therefore, future studies should consider assessing the moderating role of other cultural background aspects of students such as gender and race. Likewise, the lack of statistical significance of the moderation analyses could be attributed to the sample size. Since the research aimed to compare Dutch and international student perceptions, an equal amount of Dutch and international students had to be assigned to each experimental condition, resulting in relatively

small groups to test hypotheses. Consequently, since differences in effects between the Dutch and international student groups were subtle but not significant, scholars that want to further apply the model should consider increasing the sample size, which might allow to test and find significant differences between the two groups of students.

Lastly, one possible reason for which no significant results were found upon undertaking the moderation analysis could be that the four experimental conditions were elaborated by the researcher. Since the available literature on Ely and Thomas diversity communication is rooted in corporate studies rather than higher education, the researcher developed the four conditions based on existing empirical studies and following the layout design used by universities in the Netherlands on their 'Diversity and Inclusion' webpage. As a result, it might be the case that the four experimental conditions were not strong enough to trigger different responses from participants. Nevertheless, a decision was made to use a between subject-design. However, future research should consider using a within-subject design, where respondents can see in turn the four conditions, which may trigger students to be more critical of the experimental conditions and enable the researcher to observe differences in the model. In addition, the present study has focused on diversity communication on university website pages. Still, student perceptions towards university communication can be influenced not only by the diversity perspective espoused on the 'Diversity and Inclusion' page of an institution but also by other means of communication with students such as e-mails and other types of official communication.

5.3. Societal implications

The study aimed to present Dutch higher education institutions with suggestions about which diversity perspectives these institutions could employ to improve the management of diversity communication in the academic environment and positively contribute to the perceptions of Dutch and international students of universities. The social relevance of the current study findings is two-folded.

On one hand, it confirms that the effects of diversity communication are the same for both Dutch and international students. The findings of the current study revealed that Dutch universities that adopt either a discrimination and fairness or integration and learning perspective can drive students, irrespective of their cultural background, to develop a sense of belonging and a perception that their values and personality fit with the respective institution. Likewise, for both Dutch and international students it was not enough for a university to employ a diversity statement on their website to be attracted and develop a favorable perception of the institution. Consequently, it is advised to higher education institutions, which aim to reinforce their commitment to a diversity approach in their academic environment and attract students with a

similar profile to move beyond showcasing a diversity statement on their 'Diversity and Inclusion' webpage. Instead, in addition to this action, Dutch universities should also aim to illustrate by means of past, present, and future initiatives and activities both via online and offline communication why a certain perspective to diversity is important to the institution and society as a whole.

On the other hand, it underlines that according to the sample of this study, higher education institutions in the Netherlands should take into consideration when developing or adapting their online diversity communication to include the values and goals present in the integration and learning, respectively discrimination and fairness perspectives. In other words, for Dutch universities to be successful in their online communication towards students they should employ statements and adjust their actions as for diversity to be a resource for learning and personal as well as academic advancement, where the role of diversity is to ensure fair and equal practices for students, irrespective of their cultural background. In addition, given that approximately half of the students included in the research sample were internationals, the findings of the present could also be relevant for other European higher education institutions that aim to employ a diversity stance that appeals to students.

To conclude, the findings of the current paper suggest that adopting an approach to diversity communication can lead to different student responses. More specifically, the findings reveal that, in general, both Dutch and international students were more drawn and perceived their values and personality to fit better with a higher education institution that adopted either an integration and learning or a discrimination and fairness perspective.

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Appendix A Survey experiment

Dear participant,

Welcome and thank you for taking the time to participate in this study which will help me complete my Master graduation thesis at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Before moving on to the next window, please take the time to read the information below.

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about how students choose their university. The purpose of the study is to better understand how this process works.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks or negative effects associated with participating in this research because your answers will not be used to judge you in any way and the material will be anonymous and only used for the Master graduation thesis.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 10 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

Your participation in the study is voluntary and the information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and stored in a safe space. Please note that you are always free to discontinue your participation at any point.

CONTACT AND QUESTIONS

If there are any questions about this questionnaire, or how the answers will be used, please don't hesitate to contact the researcher, Iuliana Talmaciu (iotalmaciu@gmail.com).

Thank you in advance for filling out this questionnaire!

By clicking the "NEXT" button you indicate that you have read and understood the information provided above and consent to participate in this study.

Please carefully look at the image below that contains a statement from the website of a Dutch university. After that, proceed to answer a series of questions related to it.

Discrimination and fairness condition

As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture. *We believe diversity helps us create more* **equal opportunities** *in the academic environment and reduces* **discrimination**.

Access and legitimacy condition

As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture. *We believe diversity helps us **understand different cultural groups** in society and makes us more **representative**.*

Integration and learning condition

As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture. *We believe diversity helps us create a more **innovative** academic environment and increases **learning and integration**.*

Control condition

As a university we focus on an excellent academic culture. *We believe in developing an excellent **academic environment**, delivering **education and research,** and enabling **scholarly debates**.*

Based on the picture of the university website that you saw earlier, please answer to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel that I could belong to this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university would care about me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university would appreciate me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university would treat me as an insider.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I could feel part of this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Based on the picture of the university website that you saw earlier, please answer to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
For me, this university would be a great institution to study at.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university is attractive to me as a place of study.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am interested in learning more about this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Studying at this university is not appealing to me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would accept a study offer from this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university would be one of my first choices among other higher education institutions.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would not exert a great deal of effort to study at this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Based on the picture of the university website that you saw earlier, please answer to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
My personal values fit this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I think I can maintain my personal values at this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The values of this university reflect my own values.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
My personality fits this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The personality of this university reflects my own personality.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I would fit well at this university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Based on the picture of the university website that you saw earlier, please answer to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Not applicable
This university is not sincere about its diversity messages to students.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university overstates its actual commitment to diversity.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This university acts like it's better about diversity issues than it really is.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Cultural minority students are promised more resources and support than is actually provided by the university.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

The following questions refer to your attitudes.
Your cultural group is defined as your national origin (e.g. Dutch, Spanish, Italian, etc.)
At university, ...

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I don't enjoy studying with people who come from different countries.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
studying in culturally diverse groups can increase my understanding of those who are different from me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I prefer to socialize with people from my own cultural group.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
culturally diverse groups are able to solve complicated problems more easily.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
culturally diverse groups will be more creative.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
in general, I prefer socializing with people like myself.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
culturally diverse groups are likely to be more effective.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
being part of culturally diverse groups stimulates my thinking.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

the experiences of culturally diverse group members are helpful in generating new ideas.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

I prefer studying with people who are very culturally similar to me.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

it is easier to be motivated when studying with people who are like me.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

I find studying with people from different cultural backgrounds very stimulating.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

the experience of studying in culturally diverse groups prepares me to be more effective.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

culturally diverse groups can provide useful feedback on ideas.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

solutions of complex problems require groups with culturally diverse backgrounds.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

I find conversations in culturally diverse groups somewhat uncomfortable.

○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○　　○

Lastly, please answer the questions below related to your demographic information.

What is your age?

_____

What is your gender?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Other

In which country were you born?

_____

In which country was your mother born?

_____

In which country was your father born?

_____

What level of education are you currently following?

○ Bachelor's degree

○ Premaster

○ Master's degree

○ PhD

○ Other

Was diversity communicated in the picture of the university website that you saw earlier?

◯ Yes

◯ No

Which of the following sentences most closely resembles the statement that you saw in the picture at the beginning of the survey?

◯ We believe diversity helps us create a more **innovative** academic environment and increases **learning and integration**.

◯ We believe diversity helps us create more **equal opportunities** in the academic environment and reduces **discrimination**.

◯ We believe diversity helps us **understand different cultural groups** in society and makes us more **representative**.

◯ We believe in developing an excellent **academic environment**, delivering **education and research**, and enabling **scholarly debates**.

Appendix B Stimulus material

University statement with a discrimination and fairness perspective

As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture.

*We believe diversity helps us create more **equal opportunities** in the academic environment and reduces **discrimination**.*

University statement with an access and legitimacy perspective

As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture.

*We believe diversity helps us **understand different cultural groups** in society and makes us more **representative**.*

University statement with an integration and learning perspective

As a university we focus on an inclusive and diverse academic culture.

*We believe diversity helps us create a more **innovative** academic environment and increases **learning and integration**.*

University statement with no diversity statement (control group)

As a university we focus on an excellent academic culture.

*We believe in developing an excellent **academic environment**, delivering **education and research**, and enabling **scholarly debates**.*

Appendix C Note

Hi there,
I'm doing a master research about how students choose their university and I need respondents for my survey. Filling it out it will take only 7 minutes of your time, but the cool thing is that you will help a fellow student to graduate. It is really hard to collect data during Covid-19 and your help would be much appreciated!
If you are down to help, please scan the QR code and it will lead you directly to the survey.
Thank you so much for your time and have a great day