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Instructors' and Students' Perceptions of the Integration of EU Values into Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study in The Netherlands, Türkiye, Greece, Czechia, and Italy

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore how university instructors and students in five European countries (The Netherlands, Türkiye, Greece, Czechia, and Italy) perceive the incorporation of European Union (EU) values into higher education. To achieve this, a phenomenological research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured group interviews with 42 participants, comprising 20 instructors and 22 undergraduate students from various disciplines. While the findings revealed a shared understanding of fundamental EU values including democracy, human rights, equality, freedom, human dignity, and rule of law, they also demonstrated considerable challenges regarding their effective integration into educational practices. The main barriers identified include insufficient educational materials and training opportunities, a lack of coordination in exchange programs, a lack of time, and financial limitations. This study highlights that more structured and systematic strategies are needed to successfully integrate these values in university curricula. The implications of this research underscore the need for universities to enhance their support mechanisms, foster inclusivity, and develop innovative pedagogical approaches to overcoming these challenges and fully integrating EU values into higher education.

Keywords: European Union values; higher education; instructors' perceptions; perceptions; transnational research; qualitative research



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1. Introduction

From the early roots of the European Union (EU), scholars have observed a widespread distrust or wariness toward its institutions, policies, and founding values [1]. This widespread phenomenon, commonly referred to as Euroscepticism, can take several forms, from general skepticism towards the EU's reasoning for its existence to more nuanced critiques surrounding the effectiveness of its decisions, its relevance to and consideration of national governments' sovereignty, and its influences over domestic political systems [2].

According to the literature in this field [3–5], different engines of Euroscepticism can be described: economic dissatisfaction, political mismatch, and cultural distance, as well as many other historical or geographical characteristics. Additionally, in certain EU member states, political entities and movements have emerged which criticize the EU's way of working and call for a decrease in its power over individual lives. Such organizations tend to point to problems of accountability and bureaucratic stiffness, arguing that the EU is not responding adequately to the needs of national governments [6]. In light of these challenges, the EU must urgently tackle Euroscepticism through constructive interaction with citizens and political parties, increasing transparency and dialogue [7]. The current debate indeed highlights the importance of creating trust in the EU's ability to act on behalf of its citizens [8]. In order for Europe, and its knowledge economies, to innovate and sustain democratic societies, high levels of skills are necessary [9].

Higher education institutions play a vital role in instilling EU values within society through their programs of studies and enabling research activities that enhance a common identity and purpose among member states [10]. With respect to students as well-rounded, responsible individuals contributing to the well-being of society, universities are able to play a key role in promoting European values through teaching students about the core values of the EU: democracy, equality, human rights, freedom, human dignity, and the rule of law [10]. While such values are undoubtedly enshrined in European treaties, it is also obvious that these do not appear outside the cradle of national traditions but emerge and evolve through ongoing dialogue between EU institutions and the democratic foundations of individual countries. These values are already found in national constitutions, legal frameworks, and historical legacies, and a great opportunity to strengthen and harmonize them in diverse contexts is presented thanks to the EU.

More specifically, these institutions can promote European values by helping students develop critical thinking skills and engage in teamwork and civic-oriented activities through curriculum and non-curriculum activities, such as public lectures, public seminars, and student projects, which facilitate diverse points of view and reasoned debates [11]. Teaching staff play a key role in this process, charged with developing suitable pedagogical approaches to integrating these values across disciplines and course types. Such an approach requires students to be the protagonists in their learning process, fostering a critical and reflective understanding of EU values, thereby acquiring knowledge and developing skills to contribute constructively to the European discourse and society.

The increase in Euroscepticism and decreased trust in European institutions across member states underline that European countries need educational measures that foster democratic engagement, critical thinking skills, and shared values among the youth. Universities, as civic institutions, are suitable to counter such distrust—not only by disseminating knowledge but also by bringing into their midst diverse learning environments that reflect and give life to EU values such as democracy, freedom, human dignity, and the rule of law. In this way, universities can act as a bridge between the ideals promoted by these institutions and the lived reality of citizens, thus facilitating the building of a more cohesive and value-driven European identity.

In this context, the main research question of this study is the following:

- What are higher education instructors' and students' perceptions of the successful integration of EU values into teaching and learning in The Netherlands, Greece, Czechia, Italy, and Türkiye?

The sub-questions are the following:

- How do higher education instructors and students conceptualize the fundamental EU values and their importance to the teaching practice?

- How do undergraduate students and their instructors currently experience these values represented within their program of studies?
- What are the main barriers to the effective integration of EU values into higher education?
- In what ways can higher education institutions enhance the integration of EU values into teaching and learning?

The critical importance of integrating EU values into higher education necessitates comprehensive research in this domain. Hooghoff [12] introduced his vision of “Europe for the Citizens”, which advocates for the initiation of European initiatives to foster collaboration among experts in EU studies, curriculum development, didactics, and teacher training to integrate EU values into education. However, recent studies have revealed that efforts to integrate EU values into higher education have been scarce, either operating at a superficial level or through implicit mention, without a clear strategy [13]. An investigation into how teaching staff conceptualize and integrate EU values in their practice can help curriculum developers design curricula that prepare students to be ethical, inclusive, and democratic citizens. Understanding students’ perceptions also enables universities to tailor their academic offerings in order to meet students’ needs, creating an engaged student body driven by a common set of values. Identifying strategies to support teaching staff and enhance institutional backing for these efforts can create a cohesive and inclusive academic environment. The public good in such research is immense. These values help create an informed citizenry that respects democracy, equality, and human rights, leading to a joint European society that can better tackle common challenges.

2. Synthesis of the Related Literature on EU Values and the Role of Higher Education

Especially since its expansion after the end of the Cold War [14], the European Union has aimed to become a so-called “Union of Values”, as outlined in the Treaty on the European Union and the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. To create an integrated European identity and legitimize EU institutions, fundamental values—democracy, human dignity, freedom, the rule of law, human rights, and equality—were set in place [14,15]. While shared values are indispensable to collective decision-making and the sustainability of the EU as a democratic community [16], evidence of the convergence/divergence between member states is mixed [14]. EU’s constitutional identity, in spite of its internal indeterminacy, vagueness, and complexity, has borne, since the early 1990s, common origins, values, destinies, and characteristics of ‘uniqueness’ which make the EU distinguishable from other entities [17]. However, existing research has mostly focused on the correlation of European identity with national identities, leaving its interplay with education unexplored [18]. Promoting a European perspective within education is essential, as it fosters identity and favorable sentiments toward the EU [19]. One of these external determinants has to do with the role of universities in the construction of the European identity of young people, a process that is becoming more and more relevant within the changes that are taking place in both social and economic models that affect the traditional transition from school to work [20]. According to several research studies, universities instill values that, while historically embedded in their ethos, have great influence on the daily lives of university attendees [11,20,21]. Wike et al. [22] demonstrated the influence of these values on promoting societal well-being in Europe. In addition, several authors have highlighted how higher education institutions advance innovation through their archetype of the “Europe of Knowledge”, which prepares citizens to react to contemporary challenges and imagine a European future [23–26].

3. The Context of This Study

This study is conducted in the context of the Embed-EU project, which aims to develop and implement strategies to integrate EU values into higher education. The project focuses on developing a pedagogical framework, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), a digital self-reflection tool for university teaching staff, and a report with recommendations for policy-makers in order to promote EU values in teaching and learning. Participants from five countries—Greece, Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, and Czechia—were selected to represent varying attitudes toward the EU, from pro-European sentiment to Euroscepticism, as well as including Türkiye as a candidate country [27]. This diversity gave inspiration for the challenges and opportunities in introducing EU values into varied contexts. Ten focus groups generated rich data on the experiences of 20 teaching staff and 22 undergraduate students. The demographic information of these participants is reported in the following Table 1:

Table 1. The number of participants in the focus groups.

Country	Participant Type	Number of Participants
Greece	Undergraduate students	5
	Teaching staff	5
Italy	Undergraduate students	4
	Teaching staff	4
The Netherlands	Undergraduate students	5
	Teaching staff	5
Türkiye	Undergraduate students	5
	Teaching staff	3
Czechia	Undergraduate students	3
	Teaching staff	3
TOTAL	Undergraduate students	22
	Teaching staff	20
	ALL participants	42

4. Methodology

A phenomenological approach was adopted as the most suitable method for understanding human perceptions [28]. This method emphasizes open-ended descriptive accounts of experiences shared by individuals, avoiding broad theoretical assumptions [29]. By closely listening to the participants, the researchers gained deeper insights into the essence of their perceptions and experiences.

This study unfolded in several separate phases. It began by outlining the importance of the teaching staff's and students' perceptions of embedding EU values into teaching and learning through a literature review and expert knowledge-sharing across the five European countries. In phase two, the researchers reflected on their preconceived notions and biases to enter the study with an open mind, allowing them to better understand the study objectively. Phase three involved sampling of the teaching staff and students from the consortium countries, which provided important insights into the topic. Finally, the fourth phase involved the realization of ten focus groups in which the participants were invited to share their perceptions, while the researchers acted as empathetic listeners, allowing for a distinct experiential grasp [30] and facilitating the organic unfolding of narratives. By analyzing these narratives, the researchers were able to detect patterns, themes, and

meanings that would uncover the common ground on the integration of EU values into a teaching–learning context. To verify whether their interpretations accurately reflected the participants’ perceptions, a sample of the participants provided feedback on the researchers’ interpretations at the end of each focus group. This collaborative process resulted in a consensus on the final guide versions, which were validated by a panel of research method experts from the consortium countries for clarity and coherence.

Using semi-structured, open-ended questions, following Connaway et al.’s [31] recommendations, this study used group interviews with 22 undergraduates and 20 instructors to investigate the topic in depth. Erasmus University Rotterdam coordinated the development of the focus group guides, which were fine-tuned during a co-creating session in November 2023 held during a transnational project meeting. Pilot testing confirmed that the guides were able to establish a structure in which authentic expression of the perceptions could be facilitated. In particular, the aim of the focus groups was to explore the participants’ experience of practicing EU values in the teaching and learning context. They started with general questions connecting their personal experiences to the broader context of education and then went into detail about their own experiences. A convenience sampling method was used to efficiently and inexpensively gather a diverse population from various academic fields and career stages [32]. This diversity was crucial for understanding how EU values are perceived and implemented across disciplines and age groups. This study was performed in accordance with The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and was approved by the project coordinator’s Internal Review Board under reference ETH2324–0664. All participants provided their informed consent.

An interdisciplinary research team of specialists in education sciences, international studies, and teacher education, headed by the first author, conducted the data analysis. The team reviewed the focus group data, stopping to discuss when important segments arose. Drawing on Gadamer’s concept of “fusion of horizons” [33], this process blended different perspectives to enhance the collective understanding of shared experiences. The thematic analysis revealed specific themes within each focus group and across all focus groups, highlighting shared experiences. For validation of the findings, a comparison of the themes and supporting quotes was conducted with data from The Netherlands and Greece (first), Czechia (second), and Italy and Türkiye (third) to identify similarities and dissimilarities. Feedback from the participants ensured authenticity and credibility, resulting in nuanced findings that reflected the instructors’ and students’ perceptions of integrating EU values into higher education. This collaborative and iterative approach emphasized the importance of participant feedback and comparative analysis in research.

5. The Findings

The analysis of the data revealed key themes that aligned closely with this study’s research questions. These themes reflect, first, the participants’ understanding of EU values and the significance of integrating them into higher education. The exploration then transitions to the barriers that instructors and students face when it comes to the successful integration of EU values within educational practices. Finally, the focus shifts to the role of universities in shaping a future where EU values are successfully embedded into their curricula, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive and strategic approach to fostering a value-driven educational environment.

5.1. Demographics of the Participants

Table 2 below describes some demographics of the participants in this study. From the total of 42 participants, 18 were identified as men (43%) and 24 as women (57%), with an age range from 18 to 62.

Table 2. Participants' demographics.

Country	Participant Type	Discipline	Age Range
Greece	Undergraduate students	Social policy, English language, Chemical engineering, Primary education.	18–23
	Teaching staff	Law, Political sciences, Constitutional law, Fundamental rights, Legislative studies.	30–62
Italy	Undergraduate students	Languages, linguistics, cultural mediation, business administration.	19–23
	Teaching staff	Linguistics, Law, Economics, International relations and Security studies.	27–47
The Netherlands	Undergraduate students	Business administration, Digital media and creative industries, Political Science, Psychology.	18–22
	Teaching staff	Business administration, Education Sciences, Innovation management, Sustainability studies.	35–51
Türkiye	Undergraduate students	Business, Economics, Management.	18–21
	Teaching staff	Music and art, Primary education, English language.	47–53
Czechia	Undergraduate students	Economics, Management, Social policy, Social work.	20–21
	Teaching staff	Economics, Regional development, Language studies, Human resources.	29–40

5.2. The Instructors' and Students' Conceptualization of EU Values and Their Importance in Teaching and Learning

The conceptualization of EU values among the instructors and students in the five countries revealed both overarching and country-specific themes that highlighted the importance and application of these values in higher education. Overall, there is a shared understanding that EU values such as democracy, human rights, equality, and the rule of law are universally relevant. Additionally, concepts like “ethics”, “community support”, “diversity”, “justice”, and “inclusiveness” were identified by the participants as European values, even though they are not officially designated as such. Of the six fundamental EU values, 40 (20 instructors and 20 students) participants (95%) identified equality and democracy, 38 (19 instructors and 19 students) participants (90%) recognized freedom, 35 (18 instructors and 17 students) participants (83%) mentioned human rights, 28 (16 instructors and 12 students) participants (67%) identified human dignity, and 21 (13 instructors and 8 students) participants (50%) cited the rule of law. Despite the relatively lower numbers for human dignity and the rule of law, the participants often used similar concepts in their responses, indicating that they possessed a good understanding of these fundamental values, despite the fact that they did not name them all. According to the participants, these values are not merely abstract principles but are seen as essential guidelines that should be embedded within educational practices to create inclusive and fair environments. The instructors across all five countries stressed the importance of integrating these values into their teaching, recognizing their role in shaping future professionals who are equipped to foster democratic and intercultural understanding in their respective fields.

“Teachers can work anywhere in the world, so it is vital that they embrace universal values and reflect them in their teaching practices” (Instructor 2, Türkiye)

“EU values . . . are indispensable for the development of today's globalized society” (Instructor 1, The Netherlands)

The students, on the other hand, tend to focus more on the practical implementation of these values in their educational experiences. They are particularly concerned about

how EU values can lead to standardization, enhanced educational quality, and innovation within their universities.

“EU values in business are about driving innovation and competitiveness” (Student 1, The Netherlands)

“EU values [in higher education] guide us towards innovation while ensuring we adhere to ethical standards” (Student 4, Greece)

Reflecting on the country-specific responses, in Türkiye, the instructors place strong emphasis on the universality of EU values, particularly democracy, human rights, equality, and the rule of law. They believe that these values are crucial for preparing future educators who will, in turn, promote democratic and inclusive classrooms worldwide.

“[EU values] support equality in all conditions, fight against inequalities, and provide democratic environments in the classroom” (Instructor 2, Türkiye)

The Turkish students align with this view but focus more on the need for standardization in education and the practical benefits that EU values can bring, such as equality and freedom within the educational system. They express a strong desire for high-quality, modern, and innovative teaching methods that reflect these values, indicating a practical approach to the integration of EU principles into their education.

“[EU values] could lead to equality in university education and [the] university entrance system” (Student 4, Türkiye)

In The Netherlands, both the instructors and students view EU values through a business and economic lens. The Dutch instructors emphasize the importance of responsible innovation, ethical standards, and corporate social responsibility, seeing these values as vital for guiding business practices and leadership within Europe.

“[EU values are] integral to the curriculum, particularly in understanding and managing the complex relationship between business and society in relation to innovation, ethics and corporate social responsibility” (Instructor 2, The Netherlands)

The Dutch students similarly see EU values as integral to ethical business practices, economic cooperation, and innovation. They believe these values are essential for fostering a competitive yet socially responsible European market, indicating a strong alignment between educational content and the practical realities of the business world.

The Italian instructors highlight the role of EU values in promoting multilingualism, cultural diversity, and legal harmonization, viewing these values as essential for creating a cohesive and unified European educational framework.

“EU values are essential for legal harmonization [. . .] underpinning the foundation of a unified European higher education system” (Instructor 2, Italy)

However, Italian students demonstrate a more general understanding of EU values, often associating them with broad concepts like peace, cooperation, and democracy.

“Teaching about values like democracy, human rights, and how different European cultures can coexist peacefully would be important” (Student 4, Italy)

“[. . .] it'd be good to learn about them. Maybe things like diversity, working together, and respecting each other's culture” (Student 3, Italy)

In Greece, both instructors and students place a strong emphasis on the role of EU values in shaping social policies. Greek instructors stress the importance of these values, particularly human rights, equality, and social justice, in developing policies that promote welfare and community support.

“[EU values] guide the development of policies, practices, and the overall ethos of educational institutions. They enrich the understanding of and approach towards human rights and community support at the national level” (Instructor 2, Greece)

Greek students echo these sentiments, associating EU values with social justice, solidarity, and inclusion. They see these values as essential for addressing social challenges and fostering inclusive communities, indicating a deep connection between their understanding of EU values and their implications for social policy.

“EU values like human rights and equality are not just ideals; they are the cornerstones of our social policies, shaping how we approach welfare and community support” (Student 2, Greece)

Czech instructors and students both emphasize the importance of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as foundational EU values. Czech instructors focus on the integration of these values into education, stressing their importance in ensuring that educational institutions respect and enrich each other.

“It is important to teach this to students because these values then lead to development and guarantee that institutions and staff respect and enrich each other” (Instructor 2, Czechia)

Czech students similarly highlight the significance of these values, expressing a desire for more emphasis on them within their educational curriculum to better understand and uphold them in society.

“In my view, the integration of these fundamental values is already taking place in universities, where these topics are covered in some quantity. The question remains, however, whether this quantity is sufficient” (Student 1, Czechia)

While the participants’ perceptions varied by national context, several cross-cutting themes emerged. The Dutch and Czech participants emphasized rule-based practices and ethical professionalism, and the Turkish and Greek respondents focused on participatory learning and inclusion, while the Italian responses highlighted cultural diversity and legal harmonization.

5.3. Examples of Integration of EU Values into Higher Education

The integration of EU values into higher education was approached through a variety of strategies that were both universal and country-specific, reflecting the diverse educational contexts of the participating countries. Universally, the instructors emphasized the importance of embedding EU values such as democracy, human rights, and equality into their teaching methods through practical applications and real-world examples. For example, the majority of the participating instructors reported using case studies, role-playing exercises, and group projects to create environments where students could actively engage with these values. These strategies were designed to promote critical thinking and encourage students to internalize EU values by experiencing them in action rather than merely discussing them theoretically. In this context, it is important to mention that the instructors from different countries adapted these universal strategies to suit their educational and cultural contexts.

The Turkish instructors designed course-related activities that allowed the students to practice democracy, equality, and freedom in their classrooms. For example, students were asked to form groups to decide the topics and the mode of presentation, owning the right to decision-making and evaluation. In addition to this, the Turkish instructors used various literary books in certain courses, such as children’s literature, to reflect on different cultures and perspectives. This inclusive approach allowed the students to appreciate diversity.

However, they also faced challenges since some students were not familiar with some of these values since their campus life and the general education system did not include them extensively.

In Czechia, the instructors reported the integration of EU values at the course level through practical examples regarding European realities. For example, in a course about international companies, the instructor used the example of European companies and Brexit to explain the impact of EU policies on corporate environment. Secondly, most of the instructors invited speakers from other EU countries to share their experience and practices in human resources and business management. Though such initiatives were considered quite effective in bridging the theory–practice gap, the instructors underlined that many students were unable to critically analyze their country’s membership in the EU.

On the other hand, the instructors in The Netherlands tackled EU values through case studies of European companies that had managed to practice sustainable innovation. Moreover, they taught students about the preservation of their data through the GDPR, while leadership courses featured role-playing exercises simulating EU parliamentary decision-making. These types of activities provided students with a more hands-on understanding of democracy with the European Union.

In Italy, the instructors adopted a similarly pragmatic methodology, integrating EU values across multiple subject areas. They stressed linguistic diversity and multilingualism in language courses and other aspects of the multilingual character of the EU in their commitment to cultural diversity. Legal and economic courses analyzed EU case studies to emphasize the political significance of EU regulations in shaping markets, while literature courses used EU-sponsored multicultural events to promote cross-culture dialog. While these practices were put into use, the instructors faced difficulties in showing how relevant EU values were to students, especially when they did not relate directly to the subject being taught, such as literature.

Greek teachers have incorporated EU values into their teaching practice through examples from EU policies and legislation and by taking part in exchange programs and collaborative projects. They acknowledged the need to balance different perspectives in a diversified classroom, especially in the post-Greek financial crisis context, and called for more coordinated efforts in curriculum design to align with evolving EU policies. They also emphasized the importance of teaching staff exchanges as a way to gain a deeper comprehension of EU values, beyond surface-level knowledge, fostering a shared consciousness that extends into real-world applications.

5.4. Barriers to the Effective Integration of EU Values into Higher Education

In general, all five countries shared common issues in promoting EU values, indicating that integrating these EU values into their education offerings is not an easy task. The demand for better educational tools to communicate the breadth and depth of EU values and their importance was one of the key challenges. They also expressed concern that the existing resources often fell short, lacking the detailed content and practical examples necessary to make these values resonate with students. Another major issue was coordinating exchange programs. Such programs are crucial to fostering cross-cultural understanding and a common sense of identity as Europeans, but both the teaching staff and students agreed that far too many of these initiatives were poorly organized or not sufficiently integrated into the program of studies of their home country. A need for more professional development opportunities was voiced, with workshops, seminars, and cooperation projects among EU institutions considered suitable for keeping teaching staff updated on EU policies and developments while providing them with the tools to effectively implement values in their teaching practice. Such opportunities, however, were often few and far

between, either because of limited funding or insufficient access to relevant training programs. Another challenge was economic constraints, especially in countries with weaker economies. The Turkish participants mentioned that recent economic difficulties made it impossible for students to reach academic materials that could assist in their learning of EU values. Financial strain affects the availability of educational resources, mostly in terms of navigating or contextualizing existing resources within their teaching but also in terms of organizing or participating in activities that could help instill or reinforce these values amongst students using existing resources. In addition, the teaching staff from the five countries indicated that the one-semester framework in which they currently work makes it challenging to cover EU values in depth in addition to the subject matter, forcing them to prioritize certain topics over others. This frequently results in a superficial approach to EU values, and students may be introduced to the concepts but do not have the time or resources to engage with them on a deeper level.

Although the integration of EU values into teaching practice was considered necessary for the development of a well-rounded and ethically grounded student body, the students' feedback across the five countries in this study suggests that student support mechanisms need to be strengthened.

The Dutch students emphasized the difficulty of balancing EU values, such as ethical practices and sustainability, with the demands of profit-driven business models and rapid technological advancements. One student pointed out that

"It's challenging to find a balance between profitability and ethical practices, especially when real-world business scenarios often prioritize the former" (Student 3, The Netherlands)

This sentiment was echoed in the context of sustainability, where students struggled to navigate the tension between immediate economic benefits and long-term ethical goals.

The Turkish students highlighted significant communication barriers and a perceived disconnect between themselves and their EU counterparts, noting

"We have communication problems even if there are activities that plan to implement EU values; we cannot access or even hear of those activities" (Student 1, Türkiye)

These challenges are exacerbated by difficulties in engaging with faculty and administration, which students feel limits their freedom and opportunities for meaningful dialogue.

The Italian students pointed to a general lack of motivation regarding EU values, both among students and instructors. One student candidly admitted,

"I am not sure what values are included" (Student 2, Italy)

reflecting a broader issue of insufficient engagement with these principles.

The Czech students shared experiences of discrimination and unequal treatment, underscoring the importance of upholding EU values such as human dignity and equality within academic institutions. One student recounted facing ridicule and categorization based on origin, stating

"Discrimination is unacceptable, and to label all foreign students as bad is definitely not appropriate in academia" (Student 2, Czechia)

The Greek students, on the other hand, highlighted the challenge of applying EU policies and values in local contexts and outdated educational models. One student remarked,

"While we study EU policies, there's often a disconnect between these ideals and local applications" (Student 2, Greece)

5.5. Empowering Universities to Overcome Barriers in Integrating EU Values into Higher Education

To effectively integrate EU values into higher education, universities must take concrete steps to address the diverse challenges identified across different countries. First

of all, universities must prioritize the integration of ethical considerations into business simulations, research projects, and other academic activities.

The instructors from The Netherlands indicated that the investigation of sustainable and ethical innovation needs additional funding and resources. This will allow students to be armed with the right tools to ensure that they have the ability to balance profit with ethics and sustainability—exactly what embodies the foundation of the European Union and what we want to see in their future academic and professional endeavors.

To support Turkish students and others who face communication barriers, universities should create more transparent communication channels and ensure that activities promoting EU values are accessible to all students, especially by creating an inclusive space in which students feel empowered to interact with their peers, as well as their instructors. On the other hand, universities should also establish firm policies outlining zero tolerance of discrimination and abuse, as suggested by the Czech students; having teaching staff trained to include and not alienate students would go a long way in creating a more supportive academic environment.

The students from Italy cited a general lack of motivation towards values related to the EU. Universities can overcome this by implementing educational campaigns and workshops that will inform students and enliven these values for both students and instructors. Specifically, EU values need to be included in the syllabi not as an additional subject but as a transversal element that characterizes teaching, with enough class time dedicated to them, alongside clear and functional pathways for students and faculty to engage in projects and initiatives related to the EU.

The students from Greece highlighted the disconnect between EU policies and their local applications, while the Turkish respondents emphasized the communicative need for functional coordination between institutions and teaching staff. To address this need, universities should revise their course offerings to emphasize how EU values manifest in real-world contexts, providing dynamic avenues for students to interact with and explore EU principles beyond theoretical discussions. This could be fostered further by empowering teaching staff with avenues and tools for working together on cooperation in international projects that explore EU values within their respective cultural contexts. As examples, the Dutch instructors expressed the need for partnerships with EU policymakers and businesses, while the Czech instructors suggested training or visits to other universities and companies to enhance their understanding of how these values are reflected in other contexts. The Italian instructors emphasized the importance of reducing the administrative workload to increase the time available for teaching preparation. Finally, the Greek instructors also proposed attending courses on how to integrate these core EU values into their teaching practice. Along these lines, universities should implement robust evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of their efforts in this area. This includes regularly reviewing the course content, gathering feedback from students and instructors, and making data-driven adjustments to ensure that EU values are meaningfully incorporated into the educational experience.

6. Discussion

The findings from this study indicate both successes and challenges for the integration of EU values in these five European countries. These findings contribute to the literature available on this subject whilst corroborating it, in addition to highlighting their importance to the teaching practice and the personal and professional development of students. A key takeaway is the acknowledgement that the core values—democracy, human rights, freedom, human dignity, equality, and the rule of law—are of universal scope within higher education. This aligns with the existing literature, which underlines the significance of these values in

developing a European sense of identity that is coherent and anchored in a common ethical foundation [14,34,35]. At the same time, these findings show that while there appears to be an awareness of these values, their application appears disconnected and often rather shallow; similar observations were recently made by Querci and Vlachopoulos [13], who commented on the (superficial) embedding of EU values into university curricula. For example, this study found that they are highly associated with ethical business practices, sustainability, and innovation among Dutch students and instructors. This is in agreement with the literature, which recognizes that higher education can help incorporate ethical standards and corporate social responsibility into the European market [11,36]. However, and despite this alignment, the results also uncover a tension between profitability and practicing ethics, which indicates that further integration of ethics within higher education is still needed.

Similarly, the challenges that the Turkish students identified, especially with their concerns about not being able to communicate and feeling left out of EU-related activities, further show that educational practices need to be more inclusive and transparent. This is in line with Savvides and Faas [19], who emphasized accessibility and inclusivity in fostering a genuine understanding of EU values. This situation reflects the Turkish students' narrative, as lacking communication and support eventually leads to inequality in their access to education opportunities, as pointed out by a scholar who indicated wider issues across EU values in education [37].

Unmotivated and unaware of these values, the Italian students reflect a larger problem of engagement that has emerged as an important obstacle to embedding these values into higher education [38]. The results point to the necessity of implementing more explicit and organized educational actions to promote knowledge about these values among students. This aligns with and builds upon prior studies that have advocated a more active, participatory, integrated facilitation of EU values into education (e.g., [16]), as well as one that has a job-readiness component, where these values are further emphasized in real professional scenarios, beyond theory.

The key findings on the discrimination and unequal treatment reported by the Czech students highlight the importance of humanity and equality in academia. Such findings align with studies that have shown how discrimination persists and how institutional policies in relation to discrimination should be implemented [15]. The call for stricter policies and better training for faculty on inclusivity reflects growing recognition that educational institutions must play a proactive role in combating discrimination and promoting a culture of respect and equality [5].

The insights from Greece, which underscore a discrepancy between EU policies and their actualization at the ground level, highlight a shared challenge of translating EU values into practice. This was noted as a more general problem described in the literature, in which there is often a significant gap between the policies articulated and practices regarding how those policies are enacted in schools, thereby making the application of these values in knowledge education settings difficult to fulfill [1]. At the same time, the gap between such values and the "real world" can only be overcome through the implementation of curricula suited to these values and their real-world application, which is key to allowing students to relate to the EU principles on a more substantial level.

Fascinating differences have been observed in how the participants from these five European countries understood or assimilated the core values depending on their levels of Euroscepticism and EU affiliation [27]. In Eurosceptic countries like Czechia, Greece, and Italy, the participants showed a degree of commonality in conceptualizing them, such as democracy, human rights, and equality being a foundation for a post-EU society, but these perceptions were stymied by some issues around limited participation, motivation,

and institutional commitment. By contrast, in The Netherlands, where Euroscepticism is admittedly less pronounced, the participants tended to take a more pragmatic and practical approach to the values, linking them to ethics, sustainable development, and innovation, suggesting deeper, more ingrained knowledge. In Türkiye, one of the candidate countries, the participants stressed the core European Union values as universally relevant and described them as a way to modernize and standardize education. They stressed the importance of democracy, equality, and freedom to creating conducive spaces in education, but the financial and organizational barriers appeared to be substantial, emphasizing the need for the development of tailored support mechanisms.

7. Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

In conclusion, this study shows wide awareness of the values of the EU among both students and instructors, but significant barriers to effective embedding of these values into higher education remain. Such demands must be translated into approaches which are more comprehensive and structured, such as increased institutional support and a commitment to inclusivity and equality. Tackling these challenges is necessary to helping the next generation of students not just be aware of EU values but have the means to implement them in their academic and professional, as well as their private, lives.

While this study identified shared recognition of core EU values, the contextual differences exposed in the interpretations of these values by the participants are notable. Freedom provides an example: On the one hand, it relates widely to such things as input in the classroom and autonomy (Türkiye, Greece) and, on the other, to market innovations and data protection (The Netherlands). Equality was often discussed in relation to access to education and social inclusion, but its implications varied—ranging from gender equality in Italy to addressing socioeconomic barriers in Czechia. In this way, democracy conjured up images of institutions and student representation on occasion, whereas at other times, it was extrapolated to mean interactive methods and learning through shared decision-making in a classroom setting. These differences typically point toward the conclusion that the EU values, though shared in principle, manifest in interpretations and practices that are specific to each country's traditions in education, policy priorities, and culture. The need to recognize variability is therefore emphasized with regard to the formulation of pedagogies that would outstretch sensitivity to context to provide states with a driving aim toward the goal of European integration.

To move from awareness to meaningful implementation, three concrete steps are recommended for higher education institutions. First, EU values must be integrated transversally across all disciplines and levels of study, ensuring they are not treated as add-ons but as foundational principles that inform the course content, assessment practices, and student engagement across the curriculum. Second, structured teacher training programs and peer learning platforms to equip academic staff with practical tools and shared pedagogical strategies must be established. These trainings require a universal “curriculum”, establishing a common framework and shared learning outcomes among EU countries. Third, international teaching collaborations and student exchange initiatives should be promoted, with particular focus on cross-cultural dialogue and real-world engagement with core EU values.

Although this study provides important insights into how university teaching staff and students perceive the integration and effects of the EU values in their educational contexts, some limitations need to be acknowledged in considering and interpreting the findings. This study worked with a sample of 42 academics and students across five different European countries, creating variability in terms of their priorities and approaches. While attempts were made to recruit participants with a wide range of academic and educa-

tional backgrounds, contextual differences, and diversity within geographical regions, the sample may not have adequately reflected the full range of experiences and perspectives of teachers and students across the EU, or even within the selected countries. In addition, this study found that respondents from certain disciplines tended to furnish discipline-relevant responses with respect to the significance and comprehension of EU values, which might not have accurately reflected the view of other domains of study. For example, the social policy students from Greece mentioned the importance of social cohesion and equality, as was appropriate to the orientation of their discipline. The visibility and integration of these values may also vary notably across disciplines. Fields with a strong technical or quantitative orientation—such as engineering or natural sciences—tend to engage less explicitly with these values compared to the social sciences or humanities. This disciplinary gap highlights the need for a more transversal, integrated approach to the curriculum design, where EU values are embedded not as standalone topics but as underlying principles that inform teaching across all fields of study. Since some academic disciplines were underrepresented in this study, such as sciences, health sciences, and engineering, it might have missed how EU values are perceived and incorporated in these areas. So, the evidence may be somewhat biased towards the academic areas represented, and further research is needed to explore how EU values are understood and applied across a broader range of academic fields. However, even in these underrepresented fields, transmitting values as transversal elements in university studies could enable students to reflect on the environmental and societal implications of their processes and materials and connect their practices with values such as sustainability and human dignity. For the sciences, collaborative projects might investigate sustainable technologies or greener materials, aligning with the priorities of the EU regarding sustainability and innovation. By completing such projects, students would be encouraged to think about the prevailing socioeconomic impact of their work. Also, core EU values such as equality and inclusiveness might also shape how these sciences are taught, which could secure the representation of diverse voices in case studies, historical contributions, and team-based assignments. For example, teachers can emphasize contributions from groups traditionally underrepresented in science, fostering a more equitable learning environment. Lastly, this study reports on instructors' and students' perceptions and experiences at a specific point in time, and a longitudinal approach could have given a fuller picture of how these perceptions and practices evolved over time. In the same line, familiarity with EU values, which is influenced by prior educational experiences, levels of civic education, and national policy frameworks, affects how participants engage with these values in higher education.

Future research could explore the most effective pedagogical strategies for embedding EU values across diverse disciplines, as well as the role of digital tools and online platforms in promoting and integrating EU values in higher education through the provision of learning resources and flexible training opportunities.

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