3.1 An attractive and inclusive learning environment

Steady focus on a thriving learning environment

The ITU Strategy 2022-2025 states that an attractive and inclusive study and work environment is a prerequisite for students and staff to thrive and excel together and hereby delivering on the strategic goals of ITU. To convert words into mindsets and actions, we have listened to students to define the factors underpinning a thriving learning environment at ITU. Faculty members play a central role and constitute the core asset of ITU by teaching, researching, and providing other learning activities that contribute to a thriving study environment. So, to ensure a thriving study environment, we must also consider the factors that contribute to a thriving working environment.

To reflect on and guide leadership values and behavior across ITU, we categorized six strategic drivers that are relatable and easy to recall. “BEWISE” is a thematic frame of reference to be used in conversations between teachers, students, staff, and management about what an inclusive and good study environment is or could be. Visibility of our communication and actions also enables documentation of our practices, e.g., we contribute to a good study environment when we do A, B, and C. But it can also lead to identification of other desired practices, e.g., we want to strengthen student feedback, so we will do X, Y, Z. Thus, BEWISE helps us identify and define the many good practices that already exist at ITU and frame discussions on what we will do wiser in the future.

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<tr>
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<th>E</th>
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<th>I</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balanced Learning</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Support</td>
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<td>We give students the best learning experiences based on our didactical and pedagogical principles. Student-driven and teacher-driven learning activities on campus and online are proportioned to ensure high learning outcome.</td>
<td>We prepare students for future careers by strengthening their capabilities and resilience to manage their own learning journeys. We appreciate student voice and autonomy that positively influence the ITU environment.</td>
<td>We care for students’ overall mental and physical health and strength to function well academically and personally. ITU embed wellbeing in the daily decision-making to ensure that we all thrive while being at ITU.</td>
<td>We encourage diverse, respectful, and tolerant behavior towards other fellow beings. A diverse student pool adds to an inspiring learning environment. Inclusion is reflected in interaction at all levels. Students learn and grow in ways that accommodate their needs, interests, and tempos.</td>
<td>We operate at different stages and processes to understand the academic, social, mental, emotional, and physical needs of faculty and students. This approach creates a responsive learning environment.</td>
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<td>I enjoy the variety of teaching formats and learning spaces for discussions and exercises with my peers, TAs, and teachers at Campus.</td>
<td>I develop personally and feel able to navigate my study at ITU successfully. I can make a difference to myself and to others.</td>
<td>I thrive and feel comfortable being a student. I can follow the pace and demands of the courses and am often in flow.</td>
<td>I have friends and good relationships with peers, lecturers and staff. I feel embraced and accepted for who I am.</td>
<td>We offer challenging and life-relevant learning to boost students’ inner motivation and optimal state of functioning and learning (flow). Social engagement in lectures, group work, lab activities is central to learning.</td>
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Balanced Learning

The ITU faculty is continuously making a huge effort to conduct teaching that aligns with formal requirements and students’ learning needs and skills. Part of this process is to decide what is the appropriate teaching style combined with the right proportions of online and onsite learning for getting the best teaching quality that meets the students' learning needs. Balancing online and onsite activities with student-driven and teacher-driven teaching styles basically rely on faculty’s didactical and pedagogical reflections on how to best interact with their students. We call that balanced learning, which does not refer to an even distribution of onsite and online learning or teaching styles, but a well-considered design. We encourage the ITU community to continue their work to explore ways of teaching, working, and learning that ensures wellbeing and academic performance for faculty as well as students.

The framework below can be used to identify and vary teaching styles, depending on the learning design and the skills of the students. It shows four types of teacher-student interaction and their varying forms, roles, values, and logics. The left hemisphere is mainly controlled and facilitated by the teacher, whereas the right hemisphere brings more student autonomy and practice-based learning outcomes.

Figure 1: The teaching interaction framework

“Teaching to learner” is a teacher-driven approach that can boost academic knowledge. Presentation of research papers helps students develop awareness of certain research areas and case studies help them remember and understand the application of different theories. Teachers can present their own research base or research group and discuss the possibilities and difficulties for their particular fields of interest in the course.

The “teaching from learner” approach has relating to research as a learning outcome. Considering what learning needs and interests of the students the research-based teaching can meet by relating research to their reality not only increases understanding as well as research interest.

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what are the consequences of taking a particular position of observation can also spark reflective perspective-taking. This style helps students acquire philosophy of science skills to define a precise research question, data processing and probing during a research process.

The “teaching with learner” approach organizes as research collaboration conducive to internalizing and practicing research methods. Involvement leads to methodological mastery when the teacher reflects on what scientific and systematic work processes (design, data, analysis, assessment) can help the students learn with them, like TAs do in the labs. Inviting students to participate in a small-scale study or publishing focus on the joint acquisition of new knowledge by lecturers and students. To evaluate the learning outcome in collaboration, teachers must reflect on their role as teachers as well as learners.

“Teaching for learner” is a student-driven approach engaging the student in a way that can truly evoke the desire for becoming a researcher. Here, the learning outcome is to create, so the teacher considers how to empower the student to run their own study. The labs are obvious settings for such activities. Propose projects that students can sign up for and conduct in collaboration with industry and other ITU students, TAs and/or researchers.

These few examples illustrate the variety of research-based learning styles and their different levels of teacher-student engagement. It can be used to help faculty document to students what research-based teaching and learning ‘the ITU way’ is as well as substantiate the methods of high-quality teaching at ITU.

**Empowerment**

We empower students by providing learning experiences that gradually increases their capabilities to manage their own learning journeys and life at and after ITU. Student voice (influence on their study environment) and self-actualization needs are discovered and nurtured by letting the students play a more shaping role in learning activities and letting them test the learning value in real-life settings2. An important purpose of education is to develop independent students and empower them for the labor market. Industry collaborations and lab activities are teaching elements that turn students into practitioners. The employability of ITU students is high, which indicates that ITU is doing this well.

**Wellbeing**

Promoting academic progress through wellbeing refers to a state of overall mental and physical health and strength to function well academically, socially, and personally. It forms a valid part of the ITU quality assurance because it is the foundation of students’ learning performance and of healthy relationships between fellow students, teachers, and staff. Wellbeing is considered when we review exam and evaluation methods and design courses considering the workload of students and teachers. Faculty and staff help students proactively manage stress, negative events, and mental challenges and keep focus on their studies while motivating themselves. Alignment of expectations increases understanding of the students’ realities and life aspirations which affects faculty and student performance positively.

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2 Supported by the Montessori Education method developed by Maria Montessori.
**Inclusion**

A diverse student pool at ITU contributes to an inspiring learning environment and a higher learning quality. Our community culture is therefore encouraging diverse, respectful, and tolerant behavior towards all fellow beings. Inclusion can be sensed in empathy and awareness of how our behavior affect other people in study-related activities as well as non-study related social events (at Analog, the canteen, during breaks or Scroll bar, etc.), which strengthen student relationships and the ITU community.

**Support**

Our supportive functions like Student Affairs and Programmes (SAP), Facility Management (FM) and the IT Department operate at different stages and processes to meet the academic, social, and physical needs of faculty and students. They continuously strive to better understand the diverse student community and study journeys to provide good administrative flexibility and support. Most students are very satisfied with the support at ITU, but technology developments encourage us to adapt practices on a regular basis which adds to a thriving learning environment.

**Engagement**

Important to a thriving learning environment is engagement as it shapes identity and fulfills esteem and self-actualization needs. Flow\(^3\) defines engagement as the optimal state of functioning and learning. Seeking flow also induces a growth principle: students develop and fulfill their potential by continually extending themselves beyond their perceived ability and being compelled to repeat this experience enabling continuous growth. Participatory teaching formats such as lab activities, hands-on exercises, projects or being a Teaching Assistant motivate students and increase their knowledge retention as the figure below illustrates.

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BEWISE IN ACTION

BEWISE is for the whole ITU community: faculty, students, staff, and management. The study environment at ITU is so dynamic that we should keep asking ourselves if what we do is creating the intended value to our learning environment. We have examples of past solutions become present pain points. We therefore believe that awareness of our decisions and own actions and their effects on others can have a tremendous impact on the environment and culture at ITU. From this setoff, we can propose, prioritize, and carry out relevant actions. On the longer-term, we will develop and apply more adequate methods for measuring how student wellbeing and performance resonate so BEWISE initiatives can be rewarded.

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