

Inclusive-Uni:
*Promoting Inclusive
Campuses for Equity
and Diversity*

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Module 1 – Unit 1: Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter in Higher Education

Module 1 • Unit 1

Why Diversity and Inclusion Matter in Higher Education



MODULE 1

Six units, one foundation

1 Why diversity and inclusion matter

2 Understanding key concepts

3 Understanding diversity

4 Barriers to inclusion

5 Creating a culture of belonging

6 Reflection and looking ahead

01

The community you already have

Diversity is not something an institution introduces. It describes who is already here.

University is more than academics

Students

**Lecturers and
professors**

Researchers

Administrative staff

Student services

International offices

Library staff

IT and facilities

Human resources

Leadership

Inclusion concerns everyone who studies and works here; not the business of a single office.

Higher education is changing

- A Wider participation** More students from backgrounds that were previously under-represented in higher education.
- B International mobility** Growing numbers of students and staff studying, teaching and working across borders.
- C Recognition of difference** Greater awareness of disability, neurodivergence and mental health needs — and of how many go undisclosed.
- D Digital and hybrid delivery** Learning and working environments that create new forms of access, and new forms of barrier.

THE CORE DISTINCTION

Diversity is not the same as inclusion

DIVERSITY

Who is present

A description of the community — its backgrounds, identities and experiences. It can be counted.

INCLUSION

Whether they can take part

Whether those present can participate, contribute and belong. It has to be observed and built.

**An institution can be diverse and still be exclusionary.
Counting who is present tells you nothing about whether they can take part.**

02

Why it matters

Inclusive environments are not only fairer. They work better — for students, for staff, and for the institution.

BENEFITS

What inclusive institutions gain

STUDENTS

- A stronger sense of belonging, which supports engagement
- Fewer barriers to participation and progression
- A wider range of perspectives in seminars and projects
- Better outcomes for those who might otherwise disengage quietly

STAFF

- Clearer, simpler processes — which help everyone
- More respectful and psychologically safer workplaces
- Less need for last-minute adjustments under pressure
- A wider pool of candidates in recruitment

THE INSTITUTION

- Stronger teaching and research through varied perspectives
- Greater attractiveness to students and staff
- Alignment with legal, funding and quality obligations
- More capacity to adapt to change

***Inclusion does not promise identical outcomes, and it does not lower standards.
It removes avoidable obstacles between a person and the standard.***

03

The European frame

What international and European commitments ask of higher education institutions.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

The global baseline

UN CRPD

2006

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 24 establishes the right to inclusive education at all levels, including higher education.

SDG 4

2015

Inclusive and equitable quality education, and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 10

2015

Reduced inequalities within and among countries.

These are commitments made by states. Institutions are where they either take effect or do not.

EUROPEAN FRAMEWORKS

What Europe has committed to

European Education Area

A shared European space for learning, with the social dimension of education as a stated priority.

European Research Area

Open, equitable research careers — including the European Charter for Researchers.

European Pillar of Social Rights

Equal opportunities and access to education, training and lifelong learning as a social right.

Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030

The European framework for accessibility and disability inclusion.

Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy 2021–2027

The commitment under which this project itself is funded.

The focus here is what these mean for institutional practice.

Trust is a capacity, not a mood

Trust is not only a moral or social value. It is a measurable institutional capacity — one that underpins collaboration, transparency and sustainable change.

Why it belongs here

Inclusion depends on trust. People disclose a need, ask for help, raise a concern or suggest an improvement only when they expect it to be received well.

Where it is visible

In whether procedures are transparent, whether decisions are explained, and whether raising something changes anything.

Who holds it

Not one office. Trust is produced or eroded across leadership, teaching, administration and support services together.

What builds it, what erodes it

BUILDS TRUST

- Decisions are explained, not only announced
- Criteria are published before they are applied
- Raising a concern produces a visible result
- Mistakes are acknowledged openly
- Commitments made are commitments kept

ERODES TRUST

- Rules applied inconsistently between people
- Information that only some people have
- Consultation after the decision is taken
- Concerns absorbed with nothing changing
- Policies that describe a reality nobody recognises

None of the items on the right requires bad intent. Most are ordinary organisational habits.

A WHOLE-INSTITUTION APPROACH

Inclusion needs coherent action at every level

- 1 Leadership and governance** Sets priorities, allocates resources, and signals what actually matters.
- 2 Academic staff** Shape curriculum, teaching, assessment and the daily experience of learning.
- 3 Administrative and support services** Own the processes, forms, timetables and services people must navigate.
- 4 Students** Experience the result, and are the most reliable source of evidence about it.

Action at one level alone tends not to hold. A good policy meets an unchanged process; a committed lecturer meets an inaccessible building.

Policies exist. That is not the question.

What most institutions already have

- An equality and diversity policy
- An accessibility statement
- A complaints procedure
- A code of conduct

What decides what people experience

- How a form is worded
- How a meeting is chaired
- How a question at a desk is answered
- How a room is arranged

The gap between the two columns is where inclusion is won or lost — and it is made of ordinary decisions taken under time pressure.

Inclusion is a process, not a project

A project has a completion date. Inclusion does not.

Communities change

New students, new staff, new needs arrive every year.

Environments change

New buildings, new platforms, new procedures each create new barriers.

Understanding changes

What counted as good practice ten years ago often does not now.

This is why inclusion belongs in everyone's ordinary work rather than in a one-off initiative that finishes.

Inclusion and mental wellbeing

Whether a person feels included affects:

Motivation

Confidence

Asking for help

Disclosing a need

Engagement

Exclusion carries a psychological cost even when nobody intended it. Intention and effect are separate things.

Mental wellbeing is not a separate module. It runs through all four, because inclusion and wellbeing reinforce one another.

WHERE INCLUSION ACTUALLY HAPPENS

Every interaction is a small decision

The wording of a form

The way a meeting is chaired

The answer given at a service desk

The arrangement of a room

Whose name is remembered and said correctly

Who gets credited for an idea

None of these requires a budget, a policy change or anyone's permission. All of them are available to you.

Five things to carry forward

- 1 Diversity describes the community that already exists; inclusion decides whether it can take part.
- 2 Inclusive environments benefit students, staff and the institution — without lowering standards.
- 3 International and European frameworks establish inclusion as an institutional responsibility.
- 4 Inclusion is a continuous process, not an initiative that finishes.
- 5 Everyone contributes through everyday practice — which is where it is won or lost.

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