

Ensuring equity, diversity and inclusion in University Lifelong Learning ¹

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Equity, diversity and inclusion in University Lifelong Learning as an imperative

EUCEN believes that equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in lifelong learning (LLL) and continuing education (CE), in addition to being central to the lives of the individuals concerned, is vital to local, regional, and national economic and social development.

It is crucial that all people, regardless of their background, are able to access the resources and opportunities that can provide them with the skills to make a positive contribution to society and fulfil them with a sense of purpose, pride and achievement. This is all the more true given the demographic trends in Europe, where a shrinking of the working population makes up- and re-skilling, especially as regards green and digital skills, even more important. Thus, inclusion is not only a moral obligation, that brings about social cohesion, reduces disparities and promotes civic engagement, it is also imperative if we are to create a more prosperous society in which economic disparities are reduced and opportunity more equitably distributed.

EDI in universities

In view of their unique role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, universities and partner institutions are critical to the delivery of these objectives. Irrespective of the United Nations's Education 2030 goal to 'leave no one behind', inequalities persist for many in our societies and much more needs to be done for universities to guarantee an inclusive educational environment. Access to tertiary education for both traditional and non-traditional learners, is still not guaranteed for all.

Many migrants, for example, regularly encounter difficulties in accessing the labour market at a level commensurate with their knowledge, skills, and experience and can often experience either unemployment or underemployment as a result. Obstacles faced by migrants include a lack of host country language

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skills, absence of documents attesting to the level of education they previously obtained, lack of systematic recognition of qualifications acquired abroad, temporary residence status, insufficient financial resources, and family or caring responsibilities limiting the time available for up-skilling or re-skilling. Such obstacles can often prove to be a major barrier to their inclusion and integration in host societies.

Migrants are not the only ones facing difficulties regarding access and recognition in universities and other institutions of higher education. Unfortunately, many other marginalised groups face similar or different – but equally challenging – barriers in accessing learning opportunities in universities. These include: individuals from the lowest income groups; women; groups with a minority status linked to their ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, age or residence characteristics; and people with disabilities².

What Universities need to do

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must promote EDI as core values in contemporary society.

HEIs and a broad range of different stakeholders, including employer and civil society organisations, should be encouraged and supported to collaborate so as to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in HEI continuing education.

HEIs must create relevant learning pathways responsive to individual learners' circumstances which support marginalised groups in both participating and succeeding in university programmes. Lifelong learning opportunities must be better communicated to the groups concerned, along with details of the guidance and supports available. Programme entry requirements must be adapted to ensure the recognition and validation of prior learning and experience. HEIs should explore the use of short bridging courses to help upgrade knowledge and academic skills as an entry route to further study.

HEIs should ensure that their own administrative procedures are not a deterrent. Mentoring or other support services should be made available to students or prospective students from marginalised groups to help them navigate institutional processes. Financial support for such learners should also be made available where possible.

All of the above will require adequate funding for HEIs, partner institutions and individuals so that Lifelong Learning meets both the needs of society for a trained workforce and those of disadvantaged individuals.

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² UNESCO Report: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373689> (p.9)

The SMILE project

In view of its reach and expertise, EUCEN is the vehicle through which European universities are able to communicate and support the realisation of the vital objective of EDI.

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To help HEIs in their endeavor, EUCEN has carried out the research project SMILE (Social Meaning Impact through LLL in Europe) focusing on three areas of inclusion and diversity: migrant background students, women in leadership, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Within the framework of this project, EUCEN and its partners have developed:

- A set of **Policy Recommendations and Action Plan** to be implemented at short, medium and long term intervals in HEIs, at policy level and with the support of civil society
- A **Diversity Audit Model and Self-Assessment Tool** to measure the strategy of universities in EDI and to help identify ways to improve it
- A set of **4 Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses for HE staff**, to introduce diversity and inclusion, and then to broaden HE staff awareness of the barriers facing learners from marginalised groups and how they can help students to overcome these challenges.

The SMILE resources are available on: <http://smile.eucen.eu>

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