

**LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #12**

Approaches in learning  
and teaching to promoting  
equity and inclusion

Thematic Peer Group Report

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March 2021



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# Introduction

Making higher education systems inclusive and equitable requires providing conditions for all students to succeed, irrespective of their background and experiences. This, in turn, requires a concerted approach to how admission, participation in learning and teaching processes and assessment are organised at higher education institutions, and to how academic and non-academic support is made available to students. Following on from some previous work in this area,<sup>1</sup> EUA chose to explore this topic further through one of its 2020 Thematic Peer Groups (hereafter “the group”), in the framework of its learning and teaching activities. The group comprised participants from eight EUA member universities, representing an array of institutional profiles (see Annex).<sup>2</sup>

In light of the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the group was not afforded the opportunity of engaging face to face. Consequently, four online meetings took place, during which the group explored how universities can best support inclusion and equity and accommodate the different backgrounds, needs and aspirations of students through different approaches, initiatives and methods. This report outlines the main challenges identified in addressing equity and inclusivity and provides recommendations for mitigating these challenges for higher education institutions in Europe and elsewhere.

# Findings

## I. CONTEXT

While strategic commitment to the social dimension of higher education has been high on the agenda of the European Union,<sup>3</sup> the European Higher Education Area<sup>4</sup> and universities themselves, some university leaders still consider it necessary to prioritise either financial aspects, equity or excellence, with the conviction that the three are mutually exclusive.

Against this backdrop, the group would like to put forward another rationale, in which equity and inclusion, beyond their ethical dimensions, are *sine qua non* conditions for excellence. Following up this excellence case,<sup>5</sup> universities that want to enhance or retain their high levels of quality and success need to be able to attract and retain diverse talents, irrespective of background, origin, first language, etc. In higher education and beyond, diverse research and learning teams are potentially more successful, innovative and creative than homogeneous ones.<sup>6</sup>

The group members acknowledged early in the course of the work that not all students have the same opportunities to achieve success. It was, therefore, suggested to frame the group's work around inclusion and equity within the "capability approach" pioneered by the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Rather than discussing rights and opportunities that are available "only" on paper (i.e.

formally/legally), the capability approach emphasises people's genuine opportunities to achieve success and overall well-being. As Sen puts it, "seeing opportunity in terms of capability allows us to distinguish appropriately between (i) whether a person is actually able to do things she would value doing, and (ii) whether she possesses the *means or instruments or permissions* to pursue what she would like to do (her actual ability to do that pursuing may depend on many contingent circumstances)."<sup>7</sup>

While higher education can be made formally available to all citizens as a legal right, the reality is that access and participation are not always equally available to everyone. For example, opportunities may be limited for people with protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation), those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, working students or those with caring responsibilities. The capability approach acknowledges the obstacles and hindrances of people from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds, offering a sobering understanding of their real opportunities and capabilities to succeed in education. Within the capability approach, education is expected to be empowering and transformative, with the understanding that behind equal educational outcomes for students may lie very different stories and struggles that educators and institutions need to account for.<sup>8</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the entire student population, further magnifying existing inequalities and adding new, deeper ones. Although all students have encountered challenges in navigating their university experience during the pandemic, several categories of learners were identified by the group as being particularly impacted (Figure 1).

### CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS IN NAVIGATING ACADEMIC LIFE DURING COVID-19

**International and Erasmus+ students:** These students had difficulty in accessing accommodation and study facilities, given that campuses and student dormitories were closed; and on a psychological level, international students found it very difficult being far away from their families and loved ones.

**Students with refugee and migrant backgrounds:** In addition to differences in attainment gaps that now risk being further amplified by the crisis, there were cases of Chinese students being singled out and discriminated against.

**Students with special needs:** Although some institutional surveys have found that students with visual impairments prefer distance teaching as they find it better suited for their needs, other categories of learners with special needs (e.g. those with hearing impairments) found the transition to distance teaching very difficult as a result of the lack of subtitles and other techniques to ensure their access to online learning.

**Students with low computer literacy:** Switching to online learning in such a short time was particularly challenging for students with low technological expertise and information literacy.

**Students undertaking practical/laboratory work:** As practical assignments could not be organised through remote teaching, students for whom such work should have been part of their curriculum were particularly disadvantaged in this period.

**Transitioning students:** Students transitioning to higher education during the crisis may find it particularly challenging; therefore, it is important to consider first year students as a new impacted student category.

**Students with caring responsibilities:** The duties of students with caring responsibilities towards children or sick family members became even greater during the pandemic.

**Students with financial pressures:** Financial pressures on some students increased, e.g. due to a loss of job triggered by Covid-19, or due to already existing economic difficulties that were made more acute by the pandemic.

Acknowledging the work that one of EUA's previous Thematic Peer Groups completed on access to education<sup>9</sup>, the group focused primarily on equity and inclusion through participation in learning and teaching processes. As such, the discussion centred on the process of learning, i.e. how students learn and perform, and how they are included once they are at university.

## II. CHALLENGES

In some systems, an overarching challenge in addressing the topic of inclusion and equity in higher education is the difficulty of identifying those students who need to be included and specifically supported to participate and succeed in their learning journey. This is due, in part, to the unavailability of data about students' personal backgrounds and circumstances. In several countries, the collection of data on equity and inclusion is a sensitive exercise; understandably so, given the inherent risk of misuse or misinterpretation of such information. In this case, higher education institutions must rely on the self-identification of students with difficulties. Yet, in some systems, although data on students' personal backgrounds is collected, it is not being acted upon, either due to a lack of resources or a lack of national and institutional policies on addressing disadvantage.

### Challenge #1: Lack of concrete measures and initiatives to address equity and inclusion at higher education institutions

#### Why is this a challenge?

- Leadership commitment is critical, because in addition to strategy development, institutional leadership is responsible for allocating resources and setting up institutional structures to tackle the topic.
- The implementation of strategic measures and action plans on equity and inclusion often meets internal barriers related to communication with all university stakeholders. Without good communication, stakeholder buy-in and continuous engagement are difficult to achieve.
- In the absence of a coherent institutional policy on inclusion and equity, there might be small-scale ongoing activities, but they are often disparate and disconnected, and usually unsustainable over a long period of time.

Figure 1: Challenges for students in navigating academic life during Covid-19

### Considerations to address the challenge:

While special roles (e.g. diversity officer) and units (e.g. accessibility unit, anti-discrimination counselling office) exist at some higher education institutions as structures intended to address equity and inclusion, there is a risk that once a specific office has been appointed to the matter the institutional community will lose interest and concern. The question of how much universities isolate this issue within specific offices is critical. One of the main messages that the group would like to convey is that inclusion is not an island, and that initiatives around inclusion and equity need to be embedded into the entire learning and teaching process and the whole institutional approach.

- Other considerations include
  - a. raising awareness and support for institutional initiatives on equity and inclusion;
  - b. revising existing regulations and institutional structures to integrate explicit orientations related to inclusion and equity;
  - c. involving students in conversations to gain their engagement in jointly attaining inclusion-related goals;
  - d. initiating projects that involve students and that address the physical, psychological and social accessibility dimensions of learning and teaching.

## Challenge #2: Digital poverty and digital inclusion

### Why is this a challenge?

- While digital poverty and inclusion have been challenges since long before the outbreak of the pandemic, the disruption Covid-19 has caused has increased the sense of urgency surrounding this issue at higher education institutions.
- Access to hardware and good bandwidth has been problematic in various countries, regions and institutions across Europe. With the sudden transition to emergency remote learning and teaching in March 2020, higher education institutions struggled to identify financial resources to purchase software licences and computers for students in need, and later to develop procedures on how to lend IT equipment to students.
- Guidelines have been lacking at some institutions on how to use online software for learning and teaching, which can be a challenge for both teachers and students.

- Since the closure of the campuses of most higher education institutions in March 2020, lack of interactions (both peer to peer and student to teacher) and a sense of isolation have challenged students' well-being.

### Considerations to address the challenge:

- Institutions should enable learners to access computer equipment by implementing a programme of social support, for instance through a needs-based loan system. In the context of Covid-19, some countries have offered financial support to students by setting aside money that was already earmarked for student support, invested in IT equipment for low-income students, allowed economically disadvantaged students to defer their tuition fees or granted more time to learners to graduate. Higher education institutions have complemented or, in some cases, substituted for government help by adapting their procedures related to student fees or by developing their own social support systems for students.
- Institutions should set up one central point of contact for all e-learning related questions, both for learners and teaching staff.
- It is recommended that institutions organise continuing professional development for academic teaching staff on online inclusive approaches in learning and teaching. This would not only enhance the digital skills of the teaching staff, but would also ensure that they are confident in delivering online sessions that are inclusive and that cater for the needs of all learners.
- Institutions may consider launching online resources, such as a website on addressing discrimination through digital teaching and learning, to support teachers with online teaching activities in such a way that all those involved can work together efficiently and equitably. This would require designing and conducting teaching and assessment with time, space, technical and emotional resources in mind, as well as the caring responsibilities that some students might have.
- Institutions should identify and implement efficient ways to share information, guidelines and resources between one another to enhance digital inclusion at both individual and institutional levels.

**Challenge #3: Training for academic teaching staff on inclusion and equity topics****Why is this a challenge?**

- Despite evidence in its favour,<sup>10</sup> training for teaching staff (i.e. continuous professional development) is not unanimously perceived as a prerequisite for student success. Moreover, it is still not widely acknowledged that the way academics teach is of critical importance for any reform meant to enhance inclusion and equity in higher education.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, specific teacher training on these topics is still rather uncommon.
- Universal design for learning is not always at the forefront of institutional policies in learning and teaching, despite some EU directives requiring accessibility of websites and mobile applications. Meaningful dialogue on universal design for learning can be lacking without institutional support. It is important to acknowledge that the “universal” aspect of universal design for learning does not mean finding one single way to teach everyone, but rather finding multiple methods to do so. Employing a variety of learning and teaching methods can help to give all students equal opportunities to succeed.
- The need for teacher training became more evident during Covid-19, when the pedagogies of online teaching were sometimes misunderstood. For example, some academic teaching staff merely recorded their lessons and uploaded them onto a platform, without indicating their availability for follow-up discussion or online Q&A sessions, and without developing interaction with students.

**Considerations to address the challenge:**

- Institutions should organise continuous professional development workshops on equity and inclusion topics, involving all interested teaching staff irrespective of their discipline and seniority. Consequently, to build an institutional culture of inclusivity, learning communities should be encouraged to start conversations around the topic and share experiences and good practices on how to teach for inclusivity.
- Institutions should consider embedding inclusion-related themes (e.g. gender and minority studies) into their degree courses.
- One idea might be to release digital bulletins on learning and teaching topics, and also on inclusion and equity in higher education.

# Final recommendations and concluding remarks

While several learning and teaching methods, such as team-based learning, problem-based learning and multilayered lecturing, have proved their efficiency and success in various contexts, the group believes that there is no single teaching method that can act as a silver bullet in fostering inclusion and equity.

Providing an inclusive and equitable learning experience through learning and teaching approaches requires

- attention to diversity and ability to actively involve students in the learning process, while also addressing factors that make the student's learning path harder or discontinuous;
- curriculum design that considers all kinds of different learners;
- accessible learning materials;
- flexible and alternative study options in all study programmes;
- encouragement of a learning and teaching atmosphere conducive to student well-being.

The group suggests using the capability approach as a reflective framework to enact inclusion and citizenship in higher education. This approach invites consideration

of the contingent circumstances in students' lives, including concrete opportunities and the invisible barriers they are faced with to access, participate in and successfully graduate from higher education.

Important prerequisites for practicing inclusion and equity in learning and teaching are teacher training and awareness raising about inclusion. This would enable teachers to first reflect upon their own teaching practice, challenge unconscious biases and stereotypes, and stimulate meaningful conversations in the classroom.

Leadership commitment is one of the top success factors in advancing an agenda around inclusion and equity. This would ensure a strategic approach, with concrete and sustainable activities being undertaken and supported by adequate funding.

While Covid-19 has negatively impacted the lives of all students, new opportunities may arise once the pandemic comes to an end. Taking full advantage of these opportunities will require higher education institutions to rethink their educational offer and cater for the more individualised learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population.



# Annex

## EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA carries out activities with the aim of engaging with university communities in charge of learning and teaching. One of these activities is coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups. The groups consist of universities selected through a call for participation to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities, and to
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2020 Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2020 to February 2021, invited universities to participate in peer learning and exchange of experience, while at the same time contributing to EUA's policy work as the voice of European universities in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by one university and supported by a coordinator from the EUA secretariat. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the groups met in multiple online meetings organised throughout 2020 instead of gathering in person at group members' institutions, as was common practice in previous years. This setting entailed many challenges, but it also provided an occasion to address the respective group themes in the context of the pandemic, which threw a spotlight on issues related to all three themes – environmental sustainability, employability and the skills challenge, and equity and inclusion.

During their online meetings, the group members discussed key challenges related to the theme, how to address the challenges through innovative practices and

approaches, and what institutional policies and processes support the enhancement in learning and teaching. In addition, the groups were welcome to discuss any other issue that was relevant to the theme. Members of the groups also contributed to the 2021 European Learning & Teaching Forum from 18 to 19 February, where focus groups based on the work of the Thematic Peer Groups were organised to obtain feedback on their results.

### **Composition of the Thematic Peer Group “Approaches in learning and teaching to promoting equity and inclusion”**

(starting with the group chair and by alphabetical order of the country name)

- University of Göttingen, Germany: Andrea Dorothea Bührmann (chair)
- Tampere University, Finland: Sanna Kivimäki, Eila Pajarre
- Democritus University of Thrace, Greece: Zoe Gavriliidou
- University of Limerick, Ireland: Mary Fitzpatrick, Lydia Bracken
- University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy: Tindara Addabbo, Giacomo Cabri, Luca Bonacini (PhD student), Laura Simoni (student), Samar Zaoui (student)
- University of Minho, Portugal: Manuel João Costa
- Christian University Dimitrie Cantemir, Romania: Ramona Mihaila
- Kingston University, United Kingdom: Annie Hughes
- Group coordinator: Luisa Bunescu, Policy & Project Officer, EUA

# Endnotes

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Claey's-Kulik, A. L., Ekman Jørgensen, T., and Stöber, H., 2019, *Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions. Results from the INVITED project*. (Brussels, EUA). <http://bit.ly/2vajgED> (accessed 01/03/2021).
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_ The contents of this report were first presented during a focus group that took place as part of the 2021 European Learning & Teaching Forum. The group would like to thank the participants of the focus group for their feedback and further input.
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_ European Commission, *Inclusive and connected higher education*. <http://bit.ly/3sEwnWG> (accessed 01/03/2021).
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_ European Higher Education Area, *Rome Ministerial Communiqué, Annex II*. <https://bit.ly/3bYk6pf> (accessed 01/03/2021).
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_ Bührmann, A. D., 2021, *The Reflexive Diversity Research Program: An Introduction*. (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars) (in press).
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_ Claey's-Kulik, A. L., Ekman Jørgensen, T., and Stöber, H., 2019, *Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions. Results from the INVITED project*. (Brussels, EUA). <http://bit.ly/2vajgED> (accessed 01/03/2021).
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- 11 \_\_\_\_\_ Robinson Canham, A., and Bunescu, L., 2020, 'Advancing inclusivity and citizenship: adapting theory, changing practice', in Sengupta, E., Blessinger, P., and Makhanya, M. S. (eds.), *Developing and Supporting Multiculturalism and Leadership Development: International Perspectives on Humanizing Higher Education*. (Howard House, Emerald Publishing Limited).

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

This paper is one of a series of reports specifically focused on learning and teaching. It is designed to gather the knowledge and experiences of experts on the topic from across Europe. EUA's activities in learning and teaching aim at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision, underline the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and advocate for learning and teaching activities to be geared towards student learning and success.