UNIC

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

UNIC TEACHING GUIDE
FOR UNIVERSITY EDUCATORS

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This is an UNIC European University document published on 31 March 2025.

*This teaching guide was developed under the **UNIC Centre for Teaching and Learning.** In case of questions or comments, please contact us via the UNIC CTL Information Hub*
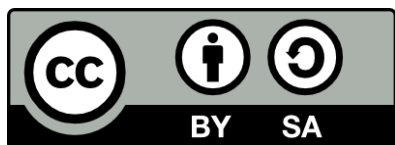
IN A NUTSHELL

This resource aims to support teachers in creating more **inclusive and equitable learning environments**. It provides an overview of the field of Inclusive Education, starting with a definition of what Inclusive Education entails. It emphasizes the importance of engaging in Inclusive Education, highlighting the benefits for both students and educators. The guide also offers practical steps for implementing Inclusive Education in higher education settings, combining theoretical foundations with actionable strategies to enhance teaching and learning processes. These can be summarised by: "Dream big and start small."

What is Inclusive Education?

Inclusive education is an educational system that ensures equitable access, participation, and success for all learners by addressing structural, institutional, and pedagogical barriers (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2015).

> It is based on the belief that every student, **regardless of abilities, disabilities, socio-economic status, or cultural background**, should have the opportunity to learn together in an inclusive environment (Sahani and Patel, 2023; Floyd, 2022).

Since 2008, inclusive education is a human right (Art. 24, UN CRPD). Higher education institutions must evolve to accommodate the varied needs, rather than compelling students to adapt to pre-existing norms. Consequently, higher education staff must address challenges related to the design of teaching practices, organizational and physical structures, and assessment methods to ensure the success of all learners and provide a high-quality educational experience.This should be done in collaboration with students, involving them in decision-making, and recognizing them as equal participants in this context.

Principles of Inclusive Education

Access

Ensuring that all students, regardless of their identities, can effectively access physically, cognitively, and affectively educational materials, environments, and opportunities (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, n.d.).

Collaboration

Connecting across institutional silos within our universities and working together with families, communities, and professionals is essential to support the educational needs of all students. This collaborative approach helps create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Equality

Ensuring that all students are treated the same and providing the same opportunities, regardless of their starting point or needs. It focuses on ensuring that everyone has the same resources and opportunities, but it does not account for the varying levels of support individuals might need to achieve similar outcomes (Minow, 2021).

Equity

Ensuring that all students have access to the same opportunities. It recognizes that individuals have different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome. Equity involves acknowledging and addressing systemic barriers and providing support tailored to individual needs (Minow, 2021) "accounting for differences in individual attributes and experiences for the purposes of achieving equal outcomes" (Bensimon et al., 2016).

Interculturalism

Embracing difference as a source of strength and cultivating one's abilities to understand others' world-views as defined by The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI): "Each of us has a worldview that is related to participation in one or more culture groups. These groups are often defined by national and/or racial or ethnic boundaries, but they may also represent other affiliations, such as region, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability, [socioeconomic status], etc" (IDI, n.d.).

Intersectionality

Recognizing and valuing difference is crucial to foster inclusion in our diverse environments. This principle emphasizes understanding how various cultural, linguistic, and personal backgrounds overlap and critically analysing the saliency of resulting power relations in their situated contexts (UN Women, n.d.).

Justice

Inclusive education is a human right (Art. 24, UN CRPD) and quality education for all is recognized as a core goal in the pursuit of a sustainable and thriving world and society (Sustainable Development Goals, SDG).

Participation

Inclusive education encourages the active involvement of all students in the learning process. This means creating environments where every student feels valued and experiences a sense of belonging and mattering (Cook-Sather et al. 2023).

Transparency

Transparency in teaching methods (explicitly connecting students with information about learning) and in assignment design (clarifying purpose, tasks, and criteria) improve students' success; these benefits are statistically significant for all students, and greater for first-generation, low- income and under-represented students in particular (Winkelmes, 2015; 2022).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

A framework for designing educational environments that enable all learners to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, n.d.). The Centre of Applied Special Technology (CAST) has created numerous helpful resources for educational designers and teachers in Higher Education to realise UDL.

Why should I engage in Inclusive Education?

As professionals in Higher Education institutions, we hold crucial responsibilities for educating leaders of tomorrow that will make thoughtful, just decisions that include a vast range of diverse ways of being and knowing. We want to educate next generations to impact the world in intentional alignment with the pursuit of common good, collective thriving, and sustaining and sustainable flourishing for all – responding "to the double purpose of education itself: to help people live well in a world worth living in (Kemmis, 2009)" (Magno et al, 2022).

It is particularly challenging to pursue this key educational mission because we are embedded in complex systems whose discourses and structures are often predicated on neoliberal value-systems driven by competition and individualism, especially in Western and Global North educational institutions.

Equity-minded teaching approaches (Artze-Vega et al, 2022) acknowledge the existence of injustices – such as historical accumulation of resources, unequal access to opportunities, and marginalization of diverse ways of being and knowing resulting in discrimination and oppression of minority cultures – and attempt to redress their effects in our current reality.

Helping shape more just educational ecosystems is both the right thing to do and the effective thing to do. It is the right thing to do because inclusive education means:

Decolonizing education by analysing its historical development, looking at who is harmed by its functioning, and addressing the **power relations** involved (University of Arizona, n.d.)

Actively advocating for those whose **identities** have been under-represented and minoritized in any system, addressing **discrimination**, and breaking down structural **barriers**

Querying habituated **norms** and interrogating **categories** such as race, gender, ability as socially constructed and reconstructed by our activities and relationships (Bourdieu & Passeron 1971)

Undoing harmful patterns grounded in monoculturalism, monolingualism, and/or ethnocentrisms, such as paying attention to how UNIC can challenge Eurocentric views

It is also the effective thing to do for our educational institutions, as inclusive teaching practices more effectively ensure students' enhanced long-term learning abilities by fostering transparency (Winkelmes, 2015; 2022), metacognitive development, embodied and affective integration, growth mindset (Dweck, 2008), purpose, connection, and sense of belonging & mattering (Cook-Sather et al, 2023). Thus, inclusion improves students' retention over time (Dewsbury et al, 2022; Winkelmes, 2015), guaranteeing continued success of our institutions' enterprise and ensuring better quality of education for more people.

The resources in these pages are meant to help you identify your next steps in this important continuous journey: "Every day, we walk together along our collective journey towards educational justice. In any discipline we teach, every day we can each take one little step that will make a difference. [...] we grow as critically inclusive educators by engaging in continuous dialogue with our students and ourselves." (Santucci, n.d.)

How can I implement Inclusive Education?

Inclusive education is realized through a synthesis of institutional and pedagogical practices that together promote equity and engagement for all learners. Institutional policies emphasizing quality assurance, accountability, and structural accessibility establish the basis for an inclusive learning environment (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2017).

> Inclusive education is first and foremost effective education. **There is not an end point that one can reach, but it is a continuous process of development and self-reflection. Every step, even small, is important**.

Moreover, there is not one approach or one method that gives a recipe for how to implement and realise it. Rather, inclusive education benefits from all measures that aim to implement quality education and good teaching and learning. That is for example to seek for impact on students' learning and assess and evaluate this impact, to make transparent the criteria of successful learning, and to align activities, levels of challenges, feedback and assessment with learning objectives (constructive alignment) (Biggs and Tang 2011). Collaboration with other teachers is key as well to good teaching (e.g. Hattie 2015).

In addition, inclusive higher education is based on emancipatory pedagogies that address discrimination in education and foster ways to achieve equity for marginalised groups. Socio-economic categories are used in inclusive education to analyse structures of inequality in education, assess systemic injustice, and implement equity-minded interventions. It is hence crucial to note that all categories are contextually-defined social, historical and political products and need to be deconstructed.

These construction processes occur and are discussed in different ways in different countries, and comparisons in international and intercultural settings can be a meaningful way to understand and further unpack them. Two main approaches are elementary in planning a learning unit.

1 **One approach** relates to the general design of the learning unit, that should be designed in a way that allows a wide range of different learners to participate in the learning process through multiple means of representation, engagement, action and expression (UDL framework). That means to offer differentiated options for all learners while realising cooperation and peer learning about the common content.

2 **The other, interrelated approach** is about being ready to make individual adaptations that go beyond the general design and responding to individual needs.

Points to consider in Inclusive Education

The considerations below are meant to support your pedagogical practice, and to contribute to your ongoing process of pedagogical development. All points must be adapted to the specific contexts, including discipline, institutional settings, local and national situations, teaching personalities and styles, and personal identities.

TEACHERS' SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection about one's role as a teacher is an important skill in education, as developing our teaching artistry includes authenticity in our expertise (King ed, 2024). In all actions you can increase your self-awareness, question your values, and analyse your mindset towards teaching and learning and towards your students. You can reflect on your role in power structures, and specifically the power dynamics in the Teaching and Learning process.

Challenge yourself by considering your own social identity in the construction of the Teaching and Learning setting you choose (see e.g. Georgetown University, n.d.). The "Deep Teaching" model (Dewsbury, 2020) describes the relationship between teachers' self-reflective competence and the use of varied pedagogies.

EXPECTATIONS, ROLES AND RULES

To guide the learning process of all students, it is crucial to make your expectations about successful learning explicit from the beginning. This implies explanations about what is considered to be 'usual' in the system, as well as the rules (explicit or implicit) of interacting, working together, self-organising, critical thinking and so on.

To well explain how the learning will be organised and what students are supposed to do also helps those who are new in the system (e.g. International students) or have less support from their families (e.g. first generation students); these constitute core principles of Transparency in Learning & Teaching (Winkelmes, 2015; 2022).

Involve your students as collaborators in shaping learning settings e.g. the rules for classroom conduct, and role model the behaviors you expect from students.

MATERIALS AND TOPICS

Ensure basic accessibility in terms of materials, rooms, tools, content and methods, e.g. through the use of captions, descriptions of pictures and graphics, structured text documents in a format that can be processed by screen readers, and allow for self-organisation regarding the time wherever possible. Keep in mind linguistic accessibility, for example by providing glossaries or simplified language versions of complex materials.

In line with UDL principles, offer a variability of materials (text, audio, video) and allow for choices. As not every material can respond to all conditions, providing a mix of materials that can respond to different of these conditions is a pragmatic way. It is important to overcome stereotypes and strive for diverse representation in topics and materials (e.g. examples, pictures, videos, etc.) and involve authors from diverse backgrounds.

There should be a diversity of people visible, especially those who have been historically minoritized in a field, may this be by their gender, culture, (dis)ability, social class or any other. A critical check of how colonialism and structural discrimination has shaped (or is still shaping) the field of research can be a valuable discussion point.

This helps to design curricula and facilitate learning experiences for increasingly diverse student populations, paying attention to who is represented and whose knowledge and value-systems are centred, and attempting to understand needs across a wide range of intersectional identities.

CONTACT AND COLLABORATION

Interaction is meaningful if it helps learners to discover differences and commonalities and to learn from each other. . Curiosity towards differences can be enhanced by setting up learning objectives in this field, and orient task design and assessment in it (constructive alignment). Interaction and collaboration is not a sure-fire success, but can be trained and should be mentored by the teachers.

Wherever possible, meaningful tasks that require interdependent work and negotiation should be organised in diverse groups. The aim is to leverage difference and inter-cultural diversity as sources of strength (rather than students' deficits to fix) and hence embracing cultural curiosity by cultivating our ability to entertain others' worldviews, learning to critically engage with difference (IDI). To accomplish this, it is fundamental to cultivate spaces grounded in dialogue where everyone involved in a learning encounter can feel "safely brave enough" to ask difficult questions (Santucci, 2024).

LANGUAGE

Developing our intercultural communication skills as teachers is key to ensure as best as we can our learners' psychological safety, with the intentional goal to bring people together, (re)build trust, inspire, energize, and motivate. Research evidence shows that language forms reality and shapes the way people expect to experience their environment.

Use of inclusive language is therefore a meaningful measure to ensure everyone feels respectfully addressed. This can mean to critically deconstruct gender related wording (chairperson instead of chairman), anti-disability phrases (wheelchair user instead of wheelchair bound) or colonial language (Global South instead of third-world countries) (UC Berkeley Haas School of Business, 2021).

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Assessment drives learning. The assessment must therefore be well aligned with learning objectives and learning activities during the course/module. This is called 'Constructive Alignment' (Biggs & Tang 2011).

In line with the UDL principles, providing a variety of different modes of assessment is useful.

As Hattie (2015) points out, collecting information from the students continuously about the impact of the teaching on their learning is important and one of the most powerful measures to ensure successful learning. Regular feedback processes between teachers and students e.g. through formative assessment are therefore strongly recommended.

Inclusive Teaching and Learning design process

Start small, choose one aspect to begin with

It can be a technical aspect, for example the accessibility of word, pdf and slides documents, but it can be as well a pedagogical aspect, for example to revise the used cases/texts/materials/pictures or to redesign a learning unit in a more interactive way.

Measures like TAPs (Teaching analysis poll) can be good to support this.

Ask your students, if they were to change anything to enhance their learning, what this would be.

Talk to your colleagues about your plans and thoughts

There might be colleagues interested in doing the same for their courses, and you can exchange ideas.

Write it down and make a plan for implementation. A different amount of time investment might be necessary if you want to find new case studies, which is related to a wide literature research, or if you want to revise cases and adapt pieces of them.Analyse and organise resources for this work. Check if you can have support from a student assistant. Dedicate a timeslot or a period to do the work.

Decide what exactly you want to do.

Realise the actions step by step.

The UNIC CTL can help you, and your local CTL will also be supportive.

Seek this both from your students and colleagues. Analyse the results and your ideas. Adapt as appropriate.

Iteratively seek and consider feedback

When you have finished your first project, reflect on your experiences. What have you learnt? How will it inform your next interventions? Then extend to bigger pieces or units of your course and areas of your teaching.

Where can I get help?

Your local Centre for Teaching and Learning is ready to support you. You can find more information on the UNIC CTL Information Hub.

Helpful resources for teaching design

Hub of Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST): UDL On Campus. Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education.

University of Michigan (n.d.): Inventory of Inclusive Teaching Strategies.

University College Dublin (n.d.): Assessment for Inclusion Framework

Inclusive HE (2025): Inclusive HE Toolkit and Resources.

Georgetown University (n.d.): Inclusive Pedagogy Toolkit.

UC Berkeley Haas School of Business (2021): Understanding Inclusive Language. A Framework.

Literature and Resources

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