



ROAD2EU WINTER SCHOOL 2025

Digital Social Inclusion, Accessibility and EU Citizenship in Higher Education

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Lecture 5

What This Lecture Covers



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01

Inclusive and connected
higher education

02

Accessibility

03

Migrants and refugees

04

Citizenship competence

05

Institutional implications

Inclusion Is Part of Quality, Not an Optional Add-On

- The EU presents **excellence and inclusion** as complementary forces, not competing priorities.
- Higher education institutions are expected to actively help build a more **inclusive, digital, and democratic Europe**.



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CORE PRINCIPLE

Inclusion must be understood as a fundamental component of educational quality, rather than an optional add-on or peripheral initiative.

EU Policy Frames Inclusive Education as a Right, Not a Privilege

- The **European Pillar of Social Rights** explicitly frames high-quality and inclusive education as a fundamental right for all citizens.
- The **European Education Area (EEA)** links education directly with active citizenship and social participation.

RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Institutional strategies must be anchored in this EU rights-based and policy-based language, moving beyond charity models to structural equity.



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Inclusion Means More Than Open Admission — It Means Enabling Success

- Student access, participation, success, and completion should accurately reflect **social diversity**.
- Institutions must actively create conditions in which learners from **all backgrounds** can succeed.
- Inclusion goes far beyond admission alone; it requires sustained support throughout the entire student lifecycle.

The Inclusive Student Journey:

- ▶ Access & Admission
- ▶ Active Participation
- ▶ Academic Success
- ▶ Completion & Graduation



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Exclusion Is Structural and Multi-Dimensional

1

Socio-Economic

Students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds facing financial and resource barriers.

2

Migrant Backgrounds

Students navigating new educational systems, language barriers, and recognition issues.

3

First-Generation

Students lacking familial experience with higher education norms and expectations.

4

Disabilities

Students requiring accessible physical and digital environments to participate fully.

5

Gender Imbalance

Students in fields where their gender is significantly underrepresented (e.g., women in STEM).

Inclusion Is a Whole-Institution Responsibility from Admission to Graduation

Institutions must provide **holistic support** throughout the entire student lifecycle, ensuring that inclusion is a shared responsibility across all departments.

Mentoring

Peer and faculty mentoring programmes to guide students through academic and social challenges.

Comprehensive Support

Integrated academic tutoring and non-academic services (e.g., mental health, financial advice).

Flexible Pathways

Adaptable study formats, part-time options, and modular learning to accommodate diverse needs.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Validating non-formal and informal learning to facilitate access for non-traditional students.



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Digital Accessibility Is a Prerequisite for Equitable Participation

- **Accessibility** is a fundamental part of equitable participation in digital learning and services.
- Web accessibility must be directly connected to **teaching practices**, service design, and overall student success.
- Digital environments must adhere to the **POUR principles** to ensure no student is left behind.

PERCEIVABLE

Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.

OPERABLE

User interface components and navigation must be operable by all users.

UNDERSTANDABLE

Information and the operation of user interface must be understandable.

ROBUST

Content must be robust enough to be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents.



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Five Practical Accessibility Principles for University Digital Environments



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1

Clear Navigation

Logical, consistent, and predictable structures across all digital platforms and learning management systems.

2

Accessible Formats

Providing materials in multiple formats (e.g., screen-reader friendly PDFs, captioned videos).

3

Plain Language

Using clear, concise language to ensure information is easily understood by diverse audiences.

4

Alternative Access Routes

Ensuring that core services and learning materials can be accessed via different devices and connection speeds.

5

Feedback Mechanisms

Establishing clear channels for students to report accessibility barriers and request specific accommodations.

Refugee and Migrant Student Support Must Be Coordinated and Practical

- Key barriers for displaced learners include **language skills** and the complex **recognition of prior qualifications**.
- Support services must seamlessly connect **academic, linguistic, and administrative** pathways.
- Institutions need clear, accessible procedures that do not place undue bureaucratic burdens on vulnerable students.

ANTI-SILO APPROACH

Support for displaced learners must be highly coordinated and practical. Siloed administrative departments often create insurmountable barriers for those navigating a new system.



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Citizenship Competence Is a Teachable Skill, Not Just a Slogan

1

Responsible Participation

Active and ethical engagement in democratic processes and civic life.

2

Critical Thinking

The ability to analyse information, question assumptions, and form independent judgments.

3

Understanding EU Values

Knowledge of European institutions, fundamental rights, and shared democratic principles.

4

Media Literacy

Navigating digital information landscapes safely, critically, and responsibly.

5

Community Engagement

Applying academic knowledge to solve real-world problems in local and global communities.



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Inclusive Digital Services Shape Whether Students Feel They Belong

- The accessibility and inclusivity of digital services directly shape whether students feel they **belong** in the academic community.
- Support systems should go beyond academic help to actively strengthen **common values**, social cohesion, and civic participation.
- A welcoming digital environment reduces alienation and improves retention rates.

SERVICE DESIGN & CULTURE

Service design is intrinsically linked to campus culture. How an institution designs its digital interfaces reflects its commitment to inclusion.

A Five-Point Institutional Checklist for Inclusive Digital Higher Education



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Inclusive Strategy

Embed inclusion into core institutional policies, not just isolated diversity initiatives.



Accessible Systems

Ensure all digital platforms and learning materials comply with POUR accessibility principles.



Recognition & Support

Provide clear pathways for recognising prior learning and offer robust language support.



Citizenship & Media Literacy

Integrate civic engagement and critical media literacy directly into the curriculum.



Staff Development

Train educators and administrative staff continuously on inclusive pedagogy and accessibility.



Selected References

- ▶ **European Commission.** *Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025.* COM(2020) 625 final. Brussels, 2020.
- ▶ **European Commission.** *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.* COM(2021) 102 final. Brussels, 2021.
- ▶ **Council of the European Union.** *Recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching.* 2018/C 195/01. Brussels, 2018.
- ▶ **W3C.** *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1.* W3C Recommendation, 2018.
- ▶ **European Higher Education Area (EHEA).** *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.* Rome Communiqué, 2020.



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Questions & Discussion

- ? What is the most urgent institutional priority for your context: **accessibility**, **migrant support**, or **citizenship-oriented curriculum design**?