



INCLUSION EDUCATION



A PRACTICAL
GUIDE

ESTABLISHING THE ROLE OF AN
INCLUSION OFFICER IN A HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTION



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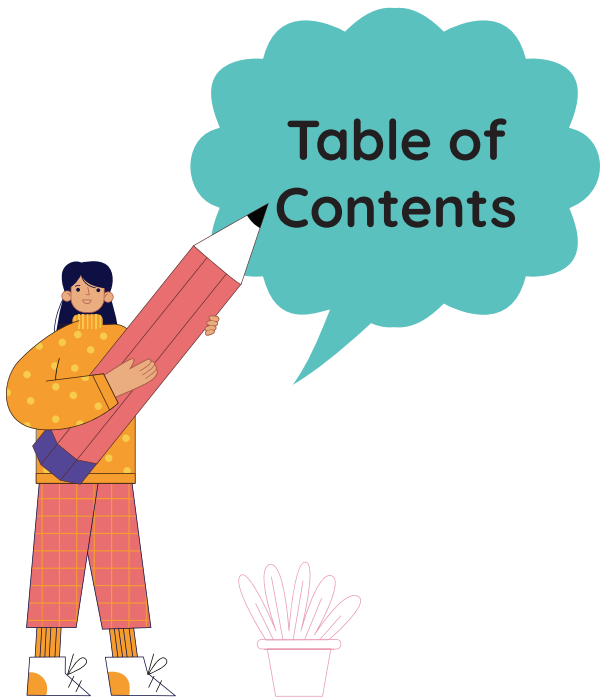
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1 Introduction

04

2 Methodology

05

3 Defining the Inclusion Officer Role

06

4 Case-Based Scenarios: Understanding Different Contexts

11

5 Case-Based Scenarios: Real-Life Situations

14

6 Onboarding an Inclusion Officer: Three Steps to Initiate the Process

19

7 Conclusion

21



Introduction

The role of an Inclusion Officer is crucial in higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to fully **implement the principles of the Erasmus+ programme and the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)**, as well as EU policy initiatives such as **European Education Area and Europe on the Move**. To make mobility opportunities accessible to all students and staff, HEIs must ensure equal and equitable access for participants from all backgrounds, including those with **physical, mental, or health-related conditions, students with children, working students, professional athletes, and individuals from underrepresented study fields**. As stated in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, individuals can also face **barriers to participation when the structure of curricula makes it difficult to undertake a learning or training mobility abroad as part of their studies**¹.

Inclusion Officers play a key role in shaping institutional policies and accounting for barriers some may face. Inclusion Officers are essential in building a supportive environment that **promotes diversity and addresses systemic barriers**. They help raise awareness about inclusion among staff and students, work together with International Offices in designing targeted communication and outreach strategies, and ensure that support measures are in place before, during, and after mobility periods. By coordinating efforts between various departments and leveraging the expertise of staff working on inclusion and diversity, Inclusion Officers facilitate a more **cohesive institutional approach to equitable mobility**. Their work ensures that inclusion is not treated as a peripheral concern but becomes **an integral part of the university's internationalisation strategy, ultimately broadening access to Erasmus+ opportunities**.



¹ For more information, see the non-exhaustive list of potential barriers in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-programme-guide>



Methodology

This publication was commissioned by the **Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (AMEUP)**, which has been appointed as the **SALTO Resource Centre for Inclusion and Diversity in Education and Training (SALTO ID ET)**. SALTO ID ET offers a range of resources and services to support National Agencies in the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as to help individuals, organisations, and institutions participate in Erasmus+ in an inclusive way. This includes guidance on how to design their Erasmus+ projects and information on good practices for promoting inclusion. The services provided seek to support the mission of the Programme, which is that everyone should have the opportunity to participate and benefit from Erasmus+, regardless of their background or circumstances.

This publication is based on five interviews with colleagues working as Inclusion Officers, or in similar roles, at different types of HEIs in Europe.

Their input and feedback were instrumental in shaping its content.





Defining the Inclusion Officer Role

The Role of an Inclusion Officer in a Higher Education Institution

An Inclusion **Officer**, or an **Inclusion Office**, plays a crucial role in fostering Inclusion & Diversity (I&D) within higher education institutions (HEIs). Their primary responsibility is to **promote inclusive practices, ensuring that students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed, supported, and valued within the university community.**

Institutional Context and Justification for the Role

The need for an Inclusion Officer arises from a growing commitment to equity and diversity in higher education and internationalisation programmes such as Erasmus+. Many universities recognise that fostering an inclusive environment requires **dedicated leadership and structured efforts**. The establishment of this role is often driven by institutional commitments to internationalisation, student well-being, and broader societal shifts toward inclusive education.

To ensure that inclusion efforts are effective, the **Inclusion Officer collaborates with multiple university departments**, such as student affairs, academic affairs, research offices, and accessibility services. Their work also extends beyond policy creation, actively shaping how inclusion is practiced in day-to-day university life.

Core Responsibilities and Key Functions

Inclusion Officers are responsible for developing and implementing policies that enhance inclusivity across various aspects of university life, including access to internationalisation opportunities. Their work includes:

- **Policy Development and Institutional Strategy:** They contribute to shaping the university's strategy, ensuring that inclusion is embedded into institutional policies, recruitment, student support services, and faculty development.
- **Assessing Accessibility of Services:** They provide guidance and resources to students from diverse backgrounds, helping them navigate challenges related to access, equity, and belonging. While many university services support specific student groups, they are not always easily accessible to international or underserved students. The Inclusion Officer collaborates with different offices to identify participation barriers and improve access to available resources.
- **Supporting Inclusive Internationalisation:** They work closely with the international relations office in communication with incoming and outgoing students through Erasmus+ and other exchange programmes.
- **Faculty and Staff Engagement:** They collaborate with academic departments and administrative offices to create inclusive learning and working environments.
- **Programme Development:** They implement initiatives that promote diversity, such as mentorship programmes, awareness campaigns, and accessibility improvements.
- **HE Community Engagement and Collaboration:** They work with student organisations, external stakeholders, and faculty networks to foster an inclusive campus culture.

Organisational Structure and Leadership Support

Inclusion Officers typically operate within the **university's central administration but work closely with faculties, student services, and leadership teams**. They may report to a diversity office, student affairs department, or senior leadership, depending on the institution's structure. Many universities establish advisory committees or working groups to support I&D efforts, ensuring that inclusion policies are shaped by diverse perspectives and informed by lived experiences within the academic community.

Perceived Inclusivity vs. Actual Practice:

A common **institutional mindset** is that having many international students automatically makes the university inclusive. This can sometimes create **resistance** when advocating for additional inclusive practices, as the presence of international students is seen as a marker of success.



Working with Inclusion & Diversity as an Erasmus+ Coordinator

At some institutions, student mobility is coordinated at the faculty level, with departmental coordinators playing a central role in advising students. To support inclusion, the Erasmus+ coordinator operates at the central university level to update Erasmus+ regulations, ensure they are well communicated, and integrate them into existing support structures. Regular meetings are held with departmental coordinators to share changes that affect students, particularly in relation to underrepresented groups. A key focus is on students with fewer opportunities, especially those participating in international mobility, with specific efforts made to secure accommodation in student halls through cooperation with the university's Welcome Centre.

The Erasmus+ coordinator also serves as a mediator between various university units, ensuring that information flows effectively and that support systems align with the goals of the Erasmus+ programme. This includes close collaboration with the National Agency (NA) and participation in expert groups working on Inclusion & Diversity priorities. A key part of this role is improving visibility of mobility opportunities and refining the criteria used to define target groups.





Example: Working with Erasmus+ Top-ups

At this institution, support for outgoing students applying for Erasmus+ top-ups is structured and decentralised. **Students are informed early on through faculty coordinators, orientation sessions, and online materials about the availability of top-ups and their eligibility criteria,** especially for groups like first-generation students or working students. The process is based on a declaration of honour, deemed sufficient by the NA, without requiring additional documentation upfront. **Students indicate their eligibility, sign the declaration, and receive the top-up if they meet the general conditions and have secured a mobility spot.**

While this approach prioritises trust and accessibility, it occasionally raises concerns about potential misuse. However, **most students act in good faith and proactively seek clarification about their eligibility.** To monitor the budget, the university collects estimates of how many students may apply, but ultimately guarantees the top-up to all eligible applicants. **Due to the growing number of applications, the institution sometimes shortens the funding period for all students to remain within budget.**

Faculty coordinators play a key role in promoting these opportunities, though engagement levels vary. Some provide tailored counselling, while others refer students to centralised resources. Clear and consistent communication from the central level remains essential to ensure equal access, particularly in smaller departments with limited capacity.



Example: Working with Erasmus+ Inclusion Support

The institution provides inclusion support to Erasmus+ participants with additional needs, such as students with children, caring responsibilities, or disabilities, through a real-cost funding track in addition to top-ups. Students are **informed at an early stage about available support and the application process.** However, **applying for real-cost inclusion support requires a proactive approach from students,** who must coordinate with local service units (e.g., social services, insurance providers) to determine which needs are covered and to gather supporting documentation.

The central international office supports students with the application submission. Departmental coordinators also assist in planning, particularly for **assessing the feasibility of mobility and coordinating with potential host institutions.** If students need further clarification or face uncertainty, **preparatory visits can be arranged and funded, though these are not commonly used.**

Once real-cost inclusion support is approved, the university pre-finances the mobility costs, which are later reimbursed through interim reports submitted to the NA. This process can be a challenge for smaller institutions. After completing the mobility, **students must submit receipts to justify expenses.** Eligible costs must be additional and linked to special needs (e.g., accessible accommodation, mobility training, personal assistance). When the NA ultimately approves the funding, students know the amount of their funding in advance. The system relies heavily on **student initiative, supported by institutional guidance.**



Engagement with Faculty, Students, and Minoritised Groups

A key aspect of an Inclusion Officer's role is **engagement with different university stakeholders**. They facilitate discussions, organise focus groups, and create spaces for underrepresented voices to be heard. Inclusion efforts are most effective when they are integrated into the broader university culture. An important part of their work involves close collaboration with international relations offices and external partners, including colleagues within European University Alliances and other academic networks. Working in collaboration with student associations, faculty committees, and administrative teams helps create an inclusive institutional environment which significantly enhances access to international opportunities for students from all backgrounds.

Challenges and Strategic Approaches

While universities increasingly recognise the importance of inclusion, challenges remain in effectively implementing I&D policies. These include:

- **Ensuring Meaningful Representation:** Engaging diverse voices in decision-making and governance processes is essential for authentic inclusion.
- **Sustaining Long-Term Commitment:** I&D initiatives require ongoing investment, rather than short-term projects, to create lasting change.
- **Balancing Institutional Priorities:** Inclusion work must be integrated into academic and administrative structures without being seen as a secondary concern.

To address these challenges, Inclusion Officers work to ensure that inclusion is seen as **a shared responsibility** across the university. They advocate for systemic change while providing practical tools and resources to make inclusion a tangible reality in higher education, also by making international programmes more inclusive.



Example: Kickstarting a University-Wide Initiative

The institution first develops a **four-year action plan** by advising the **rectors** and working closely with leadership across different focus areas. This plan outlines top priorities and is created in **consultation with faculties**, who are ultimately responsible for **implementation**. Each faculty is encouraged to develop its own **action plan** with **clear indicators** to ensure accountability. The **templates and guidance** are provided to them, but they must decide on the indicators. Progress is monitored through **regular meetings with Deans and Vice Deans**, held three times a year, where updates are shared, and support needs are discussed.

A major focus is on making diversity policies **visible and accessible**, not just internally but also to potential students and staff. The goal is for each faculty and department to **publish clear diversity actions** on their websites, ensuring transparency.

Within faculties, **diversity teams** are established, composed of **(international) students, teaching staff, experts, and administrative personnel**. These teams design and implement diversity initiatives at the faculty level. To foster collaboration, the university organises **networking events** where these teams can exchange good practices and learn from external experts. This approach ensures that diversity efforts are **embedded at all levels** of the university, from strategic planning to day-to-day faculty work.



Essential Skills and Qualifications

There is no strict requirement for a specific degree or professional background to become an Inclusion Officer. Professionals in this role come from diverse educational and career paths, bringing expertise from various fields such as education, social work, human resources, psychology, and public policy. This diversity of experience enriches the work of inclusion, as different perspectives contribute to more holistic and innovative strategies. However, a deep understanding of **inclusion-related concepts** and a strong conceptual and practical grasp of systemic barriers—particularly those present in higher education—is essential. Inclusion Officers must thoroughly **understand the research-backed foundations and real-world implications of concepts such as inclusion, diversity, accessibility, and equity**. They are expected to not only advocate for these principles but also design, implement, and assess policies and initiatives that actively dismantle structural inequalities within their institutions.

There are multiple pathways to acquiring the necessary knowledge. Some individuals hold **formal degrees in Inclusion & Diversity** or related fields, while others develop expertise through **years of practical experience** in inclusion-focused roles. Both academic and hands-on approaches can provide the necessary competencies for this position. An essential component is **developing empathy, curiosity, intercultural competences, and community engagement and empowerment as skills**. This is because Inclusion Officers engage in conversation with people who bring their lived experiences, which is a fundamentally different type of conversation from policy-making.

Key skills for Inclusion Officers include **networking and relationship-building**, which are crucial for developing strong connections across faculties and departments. Collaboration with different institutional structures ensures that inclusion policies receive broad support and can be effectively implemented. **Strategic thinking and institutional awareness** are also vital, as inclusion work requires balancing advocacy with an understanding of university decision-making and policies.

Additionally, successful Inclusion Officers focus on **ensuring long-term institutional commitment** to inclusion efforts. Sustainable change requires **cross-departmental collaboration** and integration, rather than isolated, one-time initiatives. While **activism is valuable**, working **within a university setting** requires an understanding of **institutional decision-making** and structures. Successful inclusion officers must **balance advocacy with strategic engagement**, ensuring that diversity and inclusion efforts align with **institutional priorities**. The ability to **navigate university policies, politics, and structures** is key to implementing **sustainable, systemic change**. By embedding inclusion within broader university strategies, Inclusion Officers help drive systemic, lasting improvements in diversity and accessibility.

Finally, inclusion work benefits greatly from having a **team with diverse professional backgrounds, where possible**. For example, a core team consisting of lawyers, a psychologist, a sociologist, and a political science graduate, combining legal, social, and psychological expertise. This diversity allows them to address complex cases like discrimination or harassment from multiple perspectives. In this setting, meetings with students or staff are always handled by two people from different fields to ensure a balance between legal knowledge and soft skills like active listening. Team members bring experience from different sectors outside academia, enriching the approach to intervention and education work. Rather than operating within narrow professional boundaries, team members continuously learn from one another, expanding their skills and adapting their practices. This interdisciplinary collaboration might be seen as unusual but highly valuable in a university administration setting, helping the team respond more flexibly and effectively to the varied needs of the university community.



Case-Based Scenarios: Understanding Different Contexts

☞ Institutional Example: The International Relations Office Supports Incoming International Students

At this institution, the process of supporting outgoing students starts with early and proactive communication. Incoming students with disabilities or other additional requirements must inform the university in advance, as **support measures cannot be offered unless specific needs are known**. Once consent is provided, the International Office and Welcome Centre coordinate the necessary services, such as translations for visually impaired students or hybrid class formats. They also liaise with relevant faculties to ensure academic adjustments are made, such as tailored learning agreements or adapted classroom arrangements.

While students are typically nominated and registered centrally, the actual preparation and implementation of support takes place at the decentralised faculty level. This decentralised approach allows for more personal communication and responsive solutions, particularly when students cannot attend classes regularly or require a flexible schedule. In cases requiring specific preparations, the institution often **communicates with the student's home university and may arrange pre-mobility online meetings** to identify and plan for support needs.

However, **the system depends heavily on the student or sending institution proactively sharing this information**. Without such communication, the institution cannot identify students who may need top-ups or other inclusive measures, particularly when such details are not captured in standard nomination processes.

☞ Institutional Example: Collaboration between the Inclusion Office and the International Relations Office

The department or the officer collaborates closely with the university's International Relations Office, particularly around activities for incoming and outgoing international students and researchers. They participate in orientation weeks, introducing themselves as a support unit for international students and using the opportunity to raise awareness of Inclusion & Diversity issues. In addition to these events, the department is involved in international projects, often funded by the European Union, which is uncommon for administrative units but typical for international offices. Their collaboration includes preparing initiatives like online courses related to student mobility, demonstrating a strong partnership between the support services for international affairs and I&D work within the university.

☞ Institutional Example: Inclusion Office

The Inclusion and Diversity team operates within the university's central offices, aligning with its core missions: research, education, and service to society. Reporting to the Head of the Department of Service to Society, the **team works under a steering committee of professors, PhD students, and minority student representatives**. A Vice Rector explicitly responsible for diversity and inclusion ensures high-level commitment.



The Diversity Team consists of seven members, **including a coordinator, administrative staff, and project & policy officers**. Their primary focus is institutional policy work, supporting faculties and departments in embedding inclusive practices. They also implement concrete projects, such as tutorial programmes, inclusive mentoring, and student ambassador initiatives. **Each member specialises in key areas** like LGBTQI+ inclusion, disability accessibility, and socioeconomic barriers, ensuring an intersectional approach.

Faculty collaboration occurs through an **interfaculty working group**, integrating I&D policies across all faculties. Student engagement is structured through **focus groups and partnerships with student associations**, rather than permanent advisory bodies. The university also hosts forums on inclusion, providing space for policy discussions. This structure ensures that diversity efforts are institutionalised, impactful, and sustainable.

☐☐☐ Institutional Example: Inclusion Officer

The university has a significant international student population, with around 25% of students. This diversity underscores the need to address **structural barriers that affect international students' participation and success**. Building on extensive experience with students from refugee backgrounds, staff recognised that many of the challenges identified, such as access, orientation, and academic integration, also impact other international students whose needs had often been overlooked.

In response, the university created the position of Inclusion Officer for International Students. Based in the International Office, the role combines **student-centred advising with strategic advocacy for institutional change**. It focuses both on individual support and on the inclusive transformation of structures, services, and policies.

The position also includes international collaboration, particularly within their European University alliance, enabling the university to **exchange practices and co-develop shared approaches to inclusion and accessibility**. In this way, the Inclusion Officer contributes to embedding inclusive internationalisation both within the institution and across the wider higher education landscape.





⋮ Different Levels of Institutional Willingness to Support Students

Institutions tend to show **strong recognition and support** for certain inclusion topics, such as **disabilities and chronic illnesses**. In these areas, there is a **clear understanding** that formal support structures should exist, and concrete actions are typically taken to ensure accessibility and accommodations.

However, when addressing the needs of student groups that are less visible or not traditionally recognised, like **first-generation students, nonbinary, or transgender students**, institutional willingness to provide support is often more limited. The response frequently shifts to a narrative of constraints, with statements such as:

“We cannot do everything.”

“We are a university, not a social service provider.”

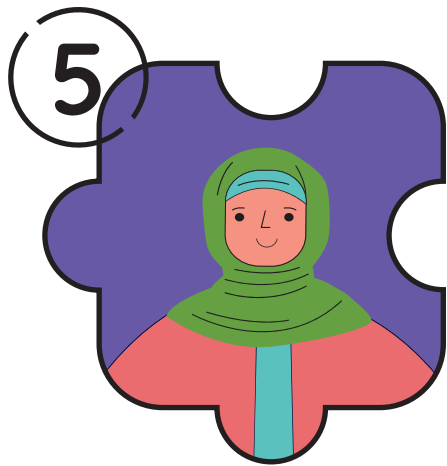
“We cannot change the world.”

This framing can create barriers to progress, making it harder to advocate for new inclusion initiatives in these areas.

Some faculty and administrators view **certain aspects of inclusion work as optional** or beyond the university’s responsibility, particularly when historically underserved student groups face these challenges.

For Inclusion Officers, these variations in institutional support require **careful navigation** and strategic advocacy. Effective inclusion work involves **challenging preconceived notions** of who “deserves” support and addressing the assumption that universities can only accommodate **a limited scope of diversity and inclusion efforts**.





Case-Based Scenarios: Real-Life Situations

Students from marginalised backgrounds often experience higher education institutions as spaces where they do not naturally feel they belong. **Opportunities such as mobility programmes can appear inaccessible** or mystified, as access is often shaped by prior knowledge, economic barriers, and systemic exclusion. For students whose families have no history of tertiary education or who face financial pressures, participating in mobility programmes may seem unattainable or irrelevant. Institutions often promote excellence and opportunity without addressing these deeper structural barriers, leaving many students without the support or information they need to access such initiatives.

Intersectionality is crucial in this context, as it helps institutions recognise that students do not face single, isolated challenges but rather interconnected obstacles based on socioeconomic status, migration background, race, and other factors. Without an intersectional approach, universities risk designing policies that seem fair but fail to address the lived realities of many students. True inclusion requires acknowledging these multiple layers of disadvantage, creating shared spaces for dialogue, and shifting the conversation from surface-level identity celebrations to deeper reflections on privilege, systemic inequality, and belonging.

▲▲▲ Case Study: First-Generation Students

Different cultures interpret and **experience inclusion in unique ways**, which can pose challenges in designing effective and accessible support structures. What may be considered necessary support in one country might not be perceived as relevant in another, requiring an adaptable approach to inclusion efforts.

A clear example of these cultural differences can be seen in **the experience of first-generation students who are studying in Europe**. Across different countries, their definition and access to support vary significantly. In some countries, first-generation students receive official certification, which entitles them to specific support services. In contrast, in other countries, being a first-generation student is so common that there is little emphasis on designated support structures. These **differences influence how students express their needs when they are in Europe**—some expect formal recognition and targeted assistance, while others may not see themselves as requiring support because their experience is widely shared by their peers.

For Inclusion Officers, these cultural variations add layers of complexity to their work, requiring a nuanced and flexible approach to student engagement and support. Many of these insights only emerge through direct interaction with students, rather than being challenges anticipated at the outset. Such issues are not unique to a single institution but are common across universities with large international student populations, highlighting the need for adaptable and culturally responsive inclusion strategies.





▲▲▲ Case Study: Implementing Inclusive Bathrooms

The push for inclusive bathrooms at the university was driven by **advocacy from the trans community and members of the I&D Office**. Initially, the plan was to implement these changes rapidly. However, concerns arose about **potential backlash from different campus groups**, leading to a reassessment of the approach.

To ensure that the new facilities addressed the needs of multiple minority groups, the team engaged in broader discussions. One key concern came from women who wear headscarves, who expressed the need for private spaces to adjust their coverings—something that standard gender-neutral toilets did not accommodate.

As a result, the team adopted a **strategic and inclusive solution** by designing single-occupancy toilet stalls equipped with mirrors. This approach ensured that individuals from different backgrounds could use the facilities comfortably while still maintaining the broader goal of inclusivity.

The key takeaway from this process was that taking the time to consult multiple stakeholders led to a more effective, widely accepted solution that balanced diverse needs.



▲▲▲ Case Study: Headscarves & School Partnerships

As part of an outreach programme, the university organises lessons in secondary schools to encourage access to higher education for students from diverse backgrounds. However, **some partner schools enforced policies prohibiting students from wearing headscarves, creating a conflict between the university's commitment to inclusion and the schools' regulations**. This sparked an internal debate within the university's diversity team on whether they should withdraw from partnerships with these schools as a form of protest or seek alternative solutions.

Rather than making an immediate decision to cut the ties with those schools, the team chose a long-term, strategic approach. They recognised that a sudden withdrawal could limit the programme's impact and reduce access to support for students who still benefited from it. Instead, they integrated the headscarf policy issue into broader institutional discussions on internships and work placements, where similar restrictions were becoming a growing concern.

To raise awareness, the **university publicly addressed the issue in an open letter to the media, acknowledging the conflict between inclusion efforts and school policies**. At the same time, they decided to continue engaging with these schools while developing a long-term strategy that could potentially lead to sustained partnerships in a structured and impactful way over the next few years.

This case demonstrates the balance between activism and institutional strategy. A consultative and measured approach allowed for stronger long-term solutions, ensuring that inclusion efforts remained effective without rushing into actions that could have unintended consequences.





▲▲▲ Case Study: Strengthening Inclusion Through Collaboration

Initially, the **Inclusion & Diversity office** operated independently, running its own projects with little collaboration across the university. Over time, however, it became evident that **working with other university departments** would significantly enhance the impact of inclusion efforts. As a result, new I&D initiatives are now **only implemented if they involve multiple university actors**, ensuring **broader institutional support and long-term sustainability**.

One example of this shift is the **Ambassadors Project for Student Inclusion**, which was developed in response to concerns that many students, particularly those from minority backgrounds, **struggled to feel a sense of belonging** at the university. This initiative employs **diverse student ambassadors** to serve as role models, providing **authentic insights into university life**. These ambassadors not only discuss the **positive aspects of student experiences** but also highlight **challenges**, such as being **a minority student** or **the only woman in a male-dominated faculty**. Additionally, they support **student recruitment efforts**, demonstrating that the university is welcoming and inclusive for all backgrounds.

A key factor in the success of this project was **collaboration with the university's Marketing & Communication Department**, which is responsible for student outreach and recruitment. Instead of keeping inclusion initiatives within the I&D office, this partnership helped **embed diversity efforts into the university's core communication strategies**, ensuring they reached a wider audience.

This example highlights the **importance of interdepartmental collaboration** in making inclusion initiatives more impactful. By working within **existing university structures**, such as marketing and recruitment offices, I&D efforts become **institutionalised rather than isolated projects**. Additionally, having **student role models** plays a crucial role in making the university feel more inclusive, particularly for **underrepresented students seeking a sense of belonging and representation**.



▲▲▲ Case Study: Addressing Accessibility for International Students

The university has long hosted **welcoming events for international students**, primarily focusing on **general orientation and social activities**. However, when the Inclusion Office **explicitly acknowledged and addressed specific student groups**, such as **students with disabilities, first-generation students, and queer students**, more students began reaching out for **targeted support**.

One particularly impactful case involved **an international student with a documented disability**. In their home country, they had access to **individual study arrangements**, but upon arrival at the university, they struggled with the **complex administrative process required to receive similar arrangements**. Unlike in their home institution, where arrangements were centrally managed, they were now required to **negotiate arrangements individually with each professor**, creating confusion and frustration. Without clear guidance, the student had almost **given up and planned to withdraw** after just one semester.

The presence of an **Inclusion Officer** proved crucial in providing **direct support and advocacy**, helping the student **navigate the bureaucratic system** and secure the necessary accommodations. This intervention **restored the student's confidence**, allowing them to continue their studies instead of dropping out.



This case underscored the need for **a more streamlined and standardised approach to study accommodations**, preventing students from having to **negotiate separately with each professor**. It also highlighted the **potential role of international alliances**—if **study accommodations were recognised across partner universities**, students could move between institutions without uncertainty about their rights. While such a system remains an aspirational goal, it represents an important **long-term vision for inclusion work**.



▲▲▲ Case Study: Name Change Policy and Its Impact on International Exchange Students

The university introduced a **policy allowing students to change their first name in the university system before legally updating their ID**. This initiative was designed to support **nonbinary students and students undergoing a gender transition**, ensuring that their **chosen name appeared on academic records** and was respected in daily interactions.

Once a name change is processed, all university documents, including transcripts and certificates, are issued under the chosen name. This applies to all students, regardless of nationality. However, the policy has had **unintended consequences, particularly for international exchange students**. When these students return to their home universities, a discrepancy may arise between the documents issued abroad and the legal name used in their home country. This mismatch can lead to **credit recognition and visa process complications** or even pose risks in less inclusive environments. Recognising this challenge, the Inclusion Officer began collaborating with other university offices to identify solutions that respect students' identities while maintaining clear and secure identity records. Options under discussion include **issuing documents that reference both legal and chosen names or developing systems that use identification numbers to ensure consistency across records**.

This case highlights the **importance of considering international students' unique needs** when designing inclusive policies and ensuring that well-intended measures do not inadvertently **create barriers for specific student groups**.





Case Study: Implementing a Scholarship for Equal Opportunities

In fall 2023, the university introduced a **scholarship programme aimed at promoting equal opportunities for international students**. The funding came from **a national agency**, but universities were given full autonomy in designing and administering the scholarship. Rather than managing it **solely through the International Office**, the initiative leveraged **university-wide networks to maximize impact**.

To ensure **broad accessibility**, the Inclusion Office collaborated with various university departments, including the **Office for Students with Disabilities, the Gender Equality Office, the Diversity Office, and the Anti-Discrimination Office**. These offices played a crucial role in **shaping the scholarship criteria and conducting outreach**, ensuring that the programme reached students **from a variety of backgrounds**.

A key element of the initiative was the **diverse selection committee**, which was structured to **ensure fair evaluation and multiple perspectives**. The committee included:

- The **Inclusion Officer**, representing international student concerns.
- A representative from the **Anti-Discrimination Office**.
- Two student workers who had **firsthand experience with the challenges faced by applicants**.
- **The Ombudsperson** (a professor in charge of protecting and advocating for students' rights towards the university administration) **for international students**, serving as a key point of contact for student concerns.

The broad collaboration made the **scholarship highly visible and accessible**, resulting in **many applications from diverse student backgrounds**. However, only **five scholarships could be awarded**, highlighting the **gap between student needs and available financial support**. Despite this, the **success of the initiative** was measured not just by the number of students funded, but also by the **inclusive and transparent process used to implement the programme**.

This case illustrates how **inclusion-focused initiatives are more effective when embedded within a university-wide network**. Cross-departmental collaboration ensures that **diverse student needs are considered**, and decision-making benefits from **multiple perspectives**. Additionally, the involvement of a **professor with less experience in inclusion work** demonstrated that such committees could **serve as learning spaces**, helping to increase **awareness of inclusion challenges within academic leadership**.





Onboarding an Inclusion Officer: Three Steps to Initiate the Process

After exploring different case studies that illustrate the realities and challenges of inclusion work in higher education, this chapter turns to the practical steps needed to initiate the process of establishing an Inclusion Officer role. Drawing from real-world experiences, it outlines three key steps that can help institutions move from intention to action. The following section offers guidance on how to lay a strong foundation for success, ensuring that the Inclusion Officer can work effectively to create lasting, systemic change.

1. Establish a Clear Institutional Vision First

Before hiring an Inclusion Officer, institutions must clearly define their **core values and vision for diversity and inclusion**. This vision should go beyond a **written statement** and be backed by **concrete strategies and resources** to ensure successful implementation. Inclusion must be **integrated into university structures and practices**, making the role meaningful rather than symbolic. This vision should be **explicitly documented** to provide a clear foundation for the role. Once the vision is set, the **Inclusion Officer can focus on implementation**, developing concrete practices and strategies to achieve institutional goals. The officer **should not be expected to define the institutional vision themselves**, but rather work within a **pre-established framework**.

Key questions to address:

- Why do we want to establish this role?
- Where do we want this role to lead?
- What impact do we expect from this position?

2. Integrate the Inclusion Officer into a Strong Institutional Network

The Inclusion Officer should not work in **isolation** but be **fully embedded** into the university's faculties, student networks, and administration. Effective onboarding requires **connecting the officer with key stakeholders**, ensuring they have the necessary **support, collaboration, and institutional backing** to drive change.

3. Make Inclusion a Shared Responsibility

While the Inclusion Officer **guides and coordinates efforts**, systemic change requires **commitment from the entire institution**. Diversity and inclusion must be recognised as **collective responsibilities**, engaging faculty, administration, students, and staff. Instead of being treated as **standalone projects**, inclusion efforts should be **woven into all aspects of university life**, including **teaching, research, student services, and policymaking**.



While **inclusion officers should contribute to shaping the broader institutional vision**, they should not be solely responsible for defining it. A **structured reporting and feedback process** should be in place to **track the impact of inclusion efforts** and identify **challenges that go beyond the Inclusion Officer's expertise**, such as bureaucratic or structural obstacles. Ultimately, **successful inclusion efforts require strong leadership commitment, a clear and intentional direction, and structured goals, rather than delegating responsibility without follow-through.**

Leadership's Role in Inclusion & Diversity Efforts

While university leadership often expresses a **willingness to support inclusion**, there is frequently **no clear vision** of why these efforts are pursued. In many cases, initiatives are driven by **external expectations** rather than a **genuine institutional commitment**. Without a strong sense of purpose, **a clearly defined "why" and "where do we want to go"**, inclusion efforts risk becoming **superficial** rather than intentional and impactful.

In **university alliances**, inclusion efforts can become **bureaucratic**, with responsibilities distributed **for the sake of balance rather than strategic direction**. As a result, **ownership of diversity initiatives may become unclear**, leading to **fragmented approaches** with limited long-term impact.

To ensure success, **leadership must provide a strategic vision** for inclusion, articulating **why it matters for the institution**. Rather than detailing every aspect of implementation, leaders should:

- **Define institutional priorities** for inclusion.
- **Provide inclusion officers with the autonomy** to develop and implement initiatives.

Making a Start Matters

As this document encourages higher education institutions to establish Inclusion Officer positions, it is important to **consider the scope and feasibility of such roles**. While the examples and practices outlined here show that there is more than enough work to justify a full-time position, or even a dedicated team, not every institution may have the resources to implement this immediately.

Nonetheless, making a start matters. Even a **part-time role, or assigning dedicated hours** to an existing staff member, can begin to make a difference. Creating space, however limited, for someone to focus on inclusion sends an important signal and lays the foundation for more structural work in the future.





Conclusion

The role of an Inclusion Officer can take many forms, either working independently or as part of a larger inclusion office. In all cases, to successfully implement the ECHE principles and support the international office in making incoming and outgoing internationalisation opportunities more inclusive, Inclusion Officers must collaborate with **a broad range of institutional stakeholders**. Most importantly, they must approach their work with **empathy and curiosity** toward students, which is essential for developing strategies, providing services, and meaningfully engaging, especially with students from minority and underrepresented groups. When higher education institutions (HEIs) establish these roles and offices, it is crucial to recognise the complexities of inclusion and diversity work. Institutions must be patient and set realistic goals.

This publication offers insights into the daily work of Inclusion Officers, illustrating the challenges they face and the impact they have on their professional environments. By creating more inclusive spaces, Inclusion Officers contribute to increasing the likelihood that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will feel a **stronger sense of belonging** and, in turn, take up international opportunities. We hope this publication will encourage HEIs to set up institutional offices and dedicated Inclusion Officer positions. For those who currently lack the resources to do so, the examples provided here can still offer valuable support to international relations staff, teachers, and administrative staff working with diverse student populations.





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