

EDITORIAL

MAKING INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY PROMOTION A CENTRAL STRATEGY IN UNIVERSITIES

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This volume of the European Journal for University Lifelong Learning (EJULL) hosts a selection of papers that address, from different perspectives, the topic of the SMILE¹ Symposium, organised by **eucen** with the project consortium, and followed by the 2023 **eucen** Autumn Seminar: How universities are (or should be) addressing diversity and inclusion? and which the role that lifelong learning (LLL) plays in this context.

Are higher education institutions (HEIs), in particular, able to meet the challenges posed by an increasingly diverse world characterised by “shared inhabitance” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3)? That is, a world of people with extremely diversified biographical paths based on their gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ethnic heritage, migratory background, and cultural identity.

Following Patricia Hill Collins' foundational statement on the paradigm of intersectionality, according to which “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins, 2000, p. 18), there is a high risk that diversity is not understood as offering endless opportunities for learning and openness, but rather as a driver in the accumulation of inequalities.

Universities are therefore called upon to invest increasingly in the interaction between their three missions: guaranteeing fairer access to excellent educational offerings, producing innovative research aimed at more equitable human development, and expressing their social responsibility connected to public engagement.

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) can play a pivotal role in this call by helping universities make equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into “core values in contemporary society” (Paschoud, El Amoud & Weait, 2023, p. 2). It can serve as a vehicle for inclusion and diversity, especially through continuing professional development and expanding university staff awareness of the challenges and barriers faced by learners from marginalised groups;

¹ The SMILE Project (Social Meaning Impact through LLL Universities in Europe) has been a three-year project (2021-2023) coordinated by **eucen** and co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (Erasmus + KA3 Social Inclusion and Common Values 621433- EPP-1-2020-1-BE- EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN), aimed to promote inclusive learning by developing, testing and implementing innovative tools that improve the way higher education institutions deal with diversity and social inclusion <https://smile.eucen.eu>

at the same time, it helps foster sensitivity in university staff towards the structural inequalities and hidden curricula that exist within their own institutions.

This triple mandate appears well represented by the following essays, each of which presents inspiring and concrete solutions based on existing projects and initiatives in their respective professional and institutional higher education contexts. The overview of these internal diversity and inclusion arrangements fuels a stimulating debate on potential best practices from which to draw inspiration in order to address three blocks of inequity in particular:

- a) **Gender inequality** in higher education, which is evident in the low number of women in leadership positions, especially because career progression in academia is often related to research leadership, and men are three times more likely than women to attain top positions in research-oriented institutions;
- b) **Migrant background**, given that refugee and migrant students are underrepresented in higher education due to lower access and participation and high attainment rates, leading to unemployment and a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion;
- c) **Low socioeconomic status**, which still makes students' opportunities, educational attainment, and future social mobility – in terms of employment, occupation, and income – strictly dependent on those of their parents in all EU countries, though to varying degrees.

The debate on the policies for promoting gender equality and combating any form of discrimination between the careers of men and women in academia starts off with the introductory conceptual research paper by *Ester Cois*. She critically reflects on the self-reflective effort undertaken by European universities due to the obligation to align their diversity policies with the EU guidelines, starting with the mandatory adoption of a gender equality plan. The paper argues how the availability of scientifically valid tools for self-assessment, training, and the definition of a sustainable strategic action plan constitutes valuable support in this process. In particular, the author highlights the positive impact linked, in the specific case of the University of Cagliari (Italy), to the above-mentioned European Erasmus+ project SMILE, by developing, testing, and implementing a set of innovative tools that improve the way HEIs deal with diversity in the field of inclusive learning.

The essay by *Róisín Shanahan, Neill Wylie and Allison Kenneally* describes the evolving landscape of gender equality promotion in European Higher Education from the perspective of South East Technological University (SETU), which has been leading the way over the past years in Ireland. It details SETU's innovative practices in response to the Irish National Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions 2019, showing how HEIs should play a crucial role not only in imparting knowledge and skills to students but also in shaping their attitudes, behaviours, and values. By fostering a supportive, proactive university culture, especially based on several initiatives aimed at tackling sexual violence and harassment, SETU suggests insights for other HEIs, addressing not just immediate concerns within their communities, but also nurturing a culture of LLL.

Allison Kenneally proposes another innovative practice in the following paper, which critically evaluates a pioneering and highly collaborative cross-sector approach to sustainably embedding inclusive programmes related to gender identity and expression in Irish HEIs, using SETU's example as a starting point. In more general terms, the author discusses the role of universities as activists in this space, working collaboratively "beyond the binary" paradigm to achieve truly inclusive gender equality on university campuses across Ireland.

The research paper by *Fausta Scardigno, Marianna Colosimo, Amelia Manuti and Serafina Pastore* shifts the focus to LLL and Higher Education (HE) policies for the inclusion of refugees and students with migrant backgrounds. The authors reflect upon how, over the last years, permanent learning and previously acquired skills enhancement have become highly

significant priorities in the EU society. This framework is especially strategic with respect to refugee international students' access to HE, as confirmed by a growing demand expressed by this vulnerable target market to validate and recognise their learning credentials and previously acquired *soft skills*, regardless from where these were gained. In this sense, the so-called "third mission" should be aimed at implementing actions for strengthening the right to LLL, interpreted as a "right of the person," in order to promote feasible paths towards cultural inclusion in the local context.

The last innovative practice article by *Martina Rauseo* and *Nadia Bregoli* deals with the third pillar of inequality in access to tertiary education, low socioeconomic status, with specific reference to removing financial barriers to continuing education for disadvantaged groups. The authors illustrate the contents and methods of the continuing education courses provided by the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), aimed specifically at helping already qualified and experienced professionals maintain their competitiveness in the changing labour market and avoid the risk of exclusion. The authors present the steps taken towards the solution of several potential criticalities, like the limits of the self-funding system for continuing education that – due to the necessity to offer courses at market price – could become inaccessible for lower income individuals. One of the positive actions, among the set of initiatives shared in the paper, is the search for alternative funding sources to make SUPSI's continuing education courses more inclusive by covering the needs of specific disadvantaged groups.

The volume closes with an inspirational and informative conversation between Matthew Weait, *Director of the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford (UK)* and Lilian Nwanze-Akobo, *co-Director of the Higher Diploma in Further Education Programme at Maynooth University (IE)*. Their dialogue is focused on three main issues, proposed by *Ester Cois, President of the National Conference of Equality Bodies of Italian Universities*: 1) The need for an intersectional approach to counteract the risk that different inequality factors are treated in watertight compartments in university continuous education; 2) The controversial impact of so-called "tokenism", as a potential effect of a superficial adoption of inclusive policies; 3) The need to provide specific programmes for staff development in order to sustainably promote equity and diversity in the framework of ULLL.

References

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