InclUDE

InclUDE Recommendations for Inclusive and Accessible Higher Education

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Contents

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Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for more inclusive and accessible online teaching has grown. This demand is particularly noticeable at the level of higher education, following the experiences of online teaching in the pandemic.

In 2020, the abruptness of the closure of societies and the pressing need to transfer teaching materials and methodologies from classroom-based to online within a short timescale led higher education lecturers to focus on online teaching which suits the majority of their students. However, as our societies have moved back into relative normality, universities are being required to provide the support and resources which enable their educators to deliver accessible online teaching to everyone.

The use of blended or online learning is not without its challenges, especially when considering the additional accessibility or support needs of some students. In many cases, lecturers are willing to apply accessibility features or tools, but lack knowledge of what is available and how to apply it.

With the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in mind, the Inclusive University Digital Education (InclUDE) project was launched with the aim to promote the realisation of accessible and inclusive higher education opportunities for students with special educational needs. Funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, the project is a collaboration between the University of Wolverhampton (UK), Universität Klagenfurt (Austria), Université Rennes II (France) and European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (Belgium).

This set of recommendations has been developed though the lifetime of the project and builds on the lessons learnt from the project's study on the use of accessibility tools in Higher Education and interviews with lecturers, students, university staff and support service providers. Together, these recommendations aim to provide EU and national policy makers, universities and their staff, students, as well as education support service providers, with a clear path for the way forward for more inclusive and accessible digital education.

What does it mean to InclUDE?

An inclusive education is defined as a learning environment in which all barriers that could limit the participation and achievement of any learner are removed.[1] Inclusive education systems must embrace diversity, as well as recognise and accept the unique characteristics and talents of all students (and staff members). Disability is one of the main causes of exclusion; however, there are also other social, institutional, physical, and attitudinal barriers to inclusive education.[2]

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) form a key component of the education system. As a result, fully inclusive education systems cannot be realised without the realisation of inclusive Higher Education Institutions, including universities. While some higher education institutions are already on the path towards becoming more inclusive, many more require additional support to realise this ambition.

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[1] Source: http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/inclusive-education
[2] Source: http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/inclusive-education

The right request to make 'reasonable accommodations' is now a common practice in many education systems, as a method of including disadvantaged learners in mainstream education systems. Despite its use, it is recognised that when students have to request accommodations in advance, they are already being penalised or excluded to an extent, as students who do not require those same accommodations can simply turn up to any lecture without notice and be able to participate fully. To build a truly inclusive higher education system lecturers need to incorporate as many accessibility features as possible, without waiting for student requests. As a result, HEI are also required to provide the support and resources which enable their educators to deliver accessible online teaching.

Inclusive Digital University Education: State of Play

Between October and November 2021, the InclUDE project partner conducted a study into the state of play on the level of awareness lecturers, higher education professionals and university students have of accessibility tools for online learning. A total of 170 respondents completed the survey across Austria, Belgium, France and the UK. The survey responses provided a number of key messages including[3]:

- **Less than half of respondents use digital accessibility tools in their online work.**
  Of those surveyed, only 40% were using digital tools to promote the accessibility of online learning teaching. 29% of respondents reported not using accessibility tools as they were not needed, although these lecturers might have to consider the needs of future students and build their teaching methodologies on an inclusive foundation.

- **Many of those who were using digital tools, did so with the aim of making their learning resources and presentations more accessible generally.**
  Of those using digital tools, 57% of the respondents utilised these tools for making learning materials generally accessible, promoting the true inclusion of all learners, without the need to request reasonable accommodation.

- **Over half of respondents who reported not using digital tools said that they did not do so because they did not know enough about them.**
  In addition to the 31% of respondents who said they did not use accessibility tools as they did not know how to use them, many who did already use digital tools reported not being fully comfortable with their use, suggesting that HEI professionals and students require further training on these tools.

- **Informal training and prior personal use are the predominant way respondents knew about accessibility tools.**
  A lack of knowledge respondents gained from formal training suggests that universities must provide the appropriate training to their staff and students on how to use digital accessible tools.

InclUDE Project, *Use of accessibility tools in Higher Education,* 2022
https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/InclUDE_IO1_report_Final_EN.pdf

- **Universities should be more pro-active in encouraging the accessibility and inclusivity of online classes via their University Policy.**
  Only one respondent reported using digital tools due to the policy of their university, suggesting that universities could take a more proactive role and set the standard for the accessibility of their online teaching. This finding is a clear indicator of the pertinence of the InclUDE project and its role in supporting universities to develop more inclusive and accessible learning environments.

- **Not being able to find digital accessibility tools, and not knowing how to use them are two key barriers preventing the use of such tools in HEI.**

  This finding again highlights the relevance of the InclUDE project and the importance of the project's results. The InclUDE repository and guidelines will provide those working and studying in higher education institutions with easy access to and clear guidance on how to use digital tools.

Recommendations

Building on the findings of IncLUDE over the project lifetime, the partners proposed the following recommendations:

Recommendations for EU Policy Makers
- Work in co-operation with Member States to fully implement the Digital Education Action Plan.
- Promote the European Digital Education Hub amongst higher education institutions as a platform for sharing expertise, best practices and solutions for digital education across education and training sectors
- Contribute to the achievement of inclusive digital education opportunities via EU Funding Programmes including Erasmus+, ESF+ and InvestEU.

Recommendations for National Policy Makers
- Promote the implementation of universal design in all learning environments.
- Reform and develop the teacher training system to provide future teaching professionals with the knowledge and tools to implement inclusion and use digital tools in their classes.
- Ensure that education and support providers, learners and parents can fully access and know how to use technology hardware and digital infrastructure needed for communication and education.
- Implement awareness raising campaigns to highlight the capabilities and needs of persons with disabilities amongst education providers and the general public.

Recommendations for Universities
- Take a pro-active approach to inclusion and set the standard for inclusive online teaching within university policies and strategy.
- Regularly provide staff with formal training opportunities on how to use digital learning tools.
- Promote the use of the InclUDE resources by university staff.

- Ensure that lecturers have the appropriate level of support to be able to meet the differing educational needs of their students.
- Ensure that students and staff have access to the digital hardware needed to take part in online lessons.
- Ensure a high-quality internet connection is available throughout the university campus and in student accommodation provided by the university.
- Ensure open and continuous feedback from staff and students in the delivery of online and blended teaching methods.
- Have a clear and accessible way for students to contact University support departments to discuss their needs.

Recommendations for Lecturers

- Use the InclUDE resources for support in creating inclusive and accessible online teaching sessions.
- Transfer good practices among teachers, educators and other training professionals.
- Utilise open platform applications, which can be created with and by other teaching professionals, as a resource for the use of technology in education.
- Remain open to students expressing an education support need and cooperate with them and university staff to find solutions which fit the needs of the individual.

Recommendations for Students

- Use the InclUDE resources to access digital tools that can increase the accessibility of online teaching materials.
- If you already know accessibility features that work for you from your school education, make your lecturers aware.
- Get in touch with your University's support department to find out what access features they can offer.

Recommendations for Support Service Providers

- Use the InclUDE resources and share them with universities.
- Work with universities, students, their families and other stakeholders to provide community-based support to learners with disabilities.
- Facilitate the collaboration of universities, lecturers and learners to co-produce inclusive learning environments and education materials accessible to all students.

References:

InclUDE Project, 2022, *Use of accessibility tools in Higher Education,* [Accessed 08 August 2022].https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/InclUDE_IO1_report_Final_EN.pdf

UNESCO IIEP [3530] United Nations Children's Fund [1262], 2019. *On the road to inclusion: highlights from the UNICEF and IIEP Technical Round Tables on Disability-inclusive Education Sector Planning*. [online] Available at: http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/inclusive-education-planning-school-all [Accessed 25 January 2022].

About the InclUDE project and its partners

The InclUDE project aims to promote the realisation of accessible and inclusive higher education opportunities for students with special educational needs. To achieve this goal the project has three key aims:

- To provide an easy way to search and access free and open tools for online accessibility.
- To create a practical, step-by-step resource that guides lecturers through setting up online teaching sessions that are accessible to a wide range of students.
- To create guidelines of considerations that can help lecturers to make their teaching scheduling and practice more inclusive.

Project Partners:

The University of Wolverhampton is a large UK Higher Education Institution. The university aims to be a University of Opportunity – renowned for creativity and innovation – developing students and staff who are entrepreneurial, eminently employable and well connected within a research and professionally informed environment. The mission is to be an employer-focused university connected with local, national and global communities delivering opportunity and academic excellence.

The Universität Klagenfurt (AAU) is a young and innovative university, located at the intersection of three diverse cultures. Since it was founded in 1970, AAU has become firmly established as the leading institution of academic education in the Austrian province of Carinthia, and serves as an important hub for the acquisition, exchange and transfer of knowledge across the entire Alps-Adriatic Region.

UR2 is the leading Human and Social Sciences university in western France, with over 23,000 students – including 4,500 Master's students. Over 12% of the student body are international students, with a third coming from outside Europe. Internationalisation is a key word at UR2, which takes part in several higher education mobility programs in many European training and research projects.

The European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities, EASPD, is a non-profit NGO in the disability sector, that promotes the views of over 20,000 social services and their umbrella associations. They promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems