

Cultural Inclusivity of Higher Education in the EU. Are We Ready to Welcome a More Diverse Europe?

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Abstract. *Higher education institutions in European countries have been promoting cultural inclusivity, in the context of increasing diversity. This study introduces the concept of cultural inclusivity in higher education, its importance, and its link to multiculturalism, economic equality, and social cohesion. The objective of the study is establishing a comparative framework to analyze how EU-member states integrate cultural diversity into their higher education systems. It focuses on a 5-year period (the academic years between 2020 and 2024). The research tests two hypotheses: H1: Cultural inclusivity of HEIs in the EU is a multidimensional construct that includes representation of all four dimensions: policy comprehensiveness, accessibility, equity, and socio-cultural impact. H2: Higher education systems in EU-27 countries demonstrate measurable improvements in cultural inclusivity from 2020 to 2024. Research method is a mixed-method approach - thematic analysis of secondary data from key European Commission documents, Eurostat data and relevant scientific literature. Data analysis is completed in the following steps: first, examining the EU policies supporting cultural inclusivity in higher education (policy comprehensiveness). Second, investigating how higher education systems ensure access for diverse groups and whether equity is achieved in participation (accessibility). Third, checking for available teaching strategies or curriculum design which ensures the training of academic lecturers on how to handle cultural diversity (equity). Fourth, discussing the broader socio-cultural impact of these practices. Results show that H1 is confirmed and H2 is partially confirmed.*

Keywords: *higher education, cultural inclusivity, equity in education, internationalisation of higher education, education system, social cohesion.*

Introduction

Migration and globalization drive the increasing cultural diversity in the European Union. The last five years are characterized by an expansion of educational opportunities which has placed significant emphasis on the role of higher education systems in promoting cultural inclusivity. Underestimated by many in the past, at the moment well-managed cultural diversity is a cornerstone of social cohesion and equity. The author believes that cultural inclusivity in higher education ensures that students from diverse cultural backgrounds can access, participate in, and benefit equitably from educational opportunities. European Union (EU) member states are committed to creating inclusive education systems as part of their broader strategies for lifelong learning and social inclusion. These policies are outlined in EU frameworks such as the European Education Area (EEA) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2020).

The paper examines how higher education systems across the EU-27 member states address cultural inclusivity during the academic years from 2020 to 2024. The analysis is based in official policy documentation from the European Commission, statistical insights from Eurostat and the

¹ This publication was financed under project number 24-BM-01 “Researching the challenges and perspectives for Bulgarian organizations in the context of economic digitalization and internationalization”, carried out by the National Scientific Research Fund of Bulgaria and the University of Ruse.

newest scientific literature in educational management and leadership. The paper specifically explores the **policies, practices, and measurable outcomes related to inclusivity in higher education institutions**, analyzing how these systems respond to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. The paper has two main goals:

First, to define cultural inclusivity of higher education institutions according to most recent scientific literature and according to the official policy documentation from the European Commission, and statistical insights from Eurostat.

Second, to make recommendations to decision-makers in higher education how to improve the cultural inclusivity of their HEIs. By focusing on the EU-27, this study highlights the shared objectives and diverse approaches within the union, and offers a comprehensive understanding of inclusivity trends and challenges.

The analysis is structured around four core dimensions: a) *policy comprehensiveness* (policy frameworks and their implementation), b) *accessibility* (institutional practices supporting inclusivity), c) *equity* (including teaching practices and curriculum design), and d) *socio-cultural impact* (the outcomes of these efforts as reflected in participation rates, academic success, and social integration). The study utilizes a thematic analysis of secondary data to assess the effectiveness of these measures across different national contexts. Data analysis is based on academic studies, Eurostat data and key European Commission reports.

The study focuses on testing two main hypotheses: first, that cultural inclusivity of HEIs in the EU is a phenomenon with multiple dimensions, and, second, contemporary higher education systems in EU-27 countries show improvements in achieving cultural inclusivity from 2020 to 2024, as evidenced by increased participation, retention, and success rates among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

These hypotheses aim to address key aspects of the study: policy frameworks, accessibility, institutional practices, and the outcomes of inclusivity efforts. They provide a structured foundation for the research, enabling quantitative and qualitative analysis to test these assumptions.

Thus it aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on higher education inclusivity and recommend future policymaking and institutional strategies.

Literature review

Definitions of diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion (D&I or DEI, i.e. diversity, equity and inclusion) are fundamental concepts in contemporary European higher education. They shape the way institutions address representation of different cultures and needs, and tackle issues with equity, and belonging in their local academic and social environments. We observe that societies become increasingly interconnected globally. This leads to greater necessity for diverse and inclusive educational spaces. Diversity and inclusion are, above all, the necessary tools for creating true innovation in higher education.

There is a variety of definitions of these terms but their core meaning revolves around the idea of harmonious existence in the context of differences, e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, disability, age, and cultural background. Some scholars (Frawley et al., 2020) highlight that diversity extends beyond demographics. It includes the recognition and appreciation of diverse social identities, while striving to address prevalent inequities. The European University Association's INVITED Project (2019) describes diversity as

the main condition for excellence within European higher education, and emphasizes its role in stimulating creativity and long-term institutional growth.

Inclusion, in contrast, puts an emphasis on achieving active participation of diverse individuals in an environment where they feel valued, respected, and supported. This concept differs from diversity because it moves beyond merely accommodating “the Other”. Inclusion could be seen as a strategy with actions, i.e. a policy, where deliberate efforts are made by institutions to provide equitable opportunities for all. The main target of inclusion strategies should be people from marginalized groups, as they are more vulnerable to discrimination.

An example from European academic practice is presented in a study by the University of Pécs, Hungary. The local academic practice exemplifies this policy via offering a set of specific interventions for students with specific needs, such as those with disabilities or from minority backgrounds. The example shows institutional accountability is important in reducing barriers to meaningful participation of everyone. Therefore, it makes sense that inclusion has been strategically integrated into European policy frameworks, such as the European Education Area or the European Commission’s guidelines on equity in HEIs. Presence of such policies shows that inclusivity is an active process requiring constant efforts.

There is a symbiotic relationship between diversity and inclusion and it could be explained with the fact that each one focuses on separate outcomes: representation, meaningful participation and improved well-being of the people involved. European universities, especially those under initiatives such as Horizon Europe, have taken promising steps to align their strategies with D&I. For instance, the Gender Equality Plans under Horizon Europe incorporate both equity and diversity dimensions, demonstrating how these principles interact.

All participating sides should demonstrate well-developed cultural sensitivity if they want to achieve the desired levels of diversity and inclusion. Intercultural competence is the ongoing process of developing one’s ability to engage effectively with individuals from different cultures. According to Kruse et al. (2017), intercultural competence requires from the person to be self-reflective about their abilities and to be able to reduce their own unconscious biases. This is something that leads to improving the academic environment. Therefore, diverse and inclusive HEIs may become more equitable, innovative and socially cohesive. The diversity in socio-cultural backgrounds of people and the impulse to participate actively in the academic community, combined with high levels of intercultural competence, provide a good framework for solving inequities in academia.

Diversity and inclusion’s role in higher education

We need to ask the following question: how can diversity and inclusion (D&I) transform higher education? So far both practice and research show that institutions which embrace these principles do benefit from enriched learning environments, and achieve more innovation in research.

Benefits of diversity include more creativity and innovation, thus improving academic quality. This is demonstrated by Claeys-Kulik and Jørgensen (2019), who imply that universities with diverse academic staff and a large number of foreign students are better at finding solutions for complex societal and scientific issues. They do this with the help of interdisciplinary approaches in research, while engaging students of different countries. If the university has individuals from many cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, it creates *better opportunities for young people* to develop their critical thinking skills and to improve their intercultural competence.

From a pedagogical perspective, *inclusion helps in allowing all students* to have equitable access to academic resources, interpersonal support, and mentorship or job opportunities. Varga et

al.'s study (2021) emphasizes that inclusive teaching strategies—e.g. flexible learning pathways, culturally responsive pedagogy, and individualized student support—are efficient in addressing systemic barriers in the classroom. Their research highlights the role of micro-communities who provide personalized support to socially disadvantaged groups. On the other hand, diversity strengthens institutional resilience and adaptability. Some authors (Kruse, Rakha, and Calderone, 2017) claim that institutions which manage to integrate intercultural competence into their curricula are better equipped to address issues related to globalization. In summary, universities are capable of internationalization if they choose to introduce D&I strategies in the curricula.

Despite their strengths, D&I initiatives also have some challenges. The main issues faced by European universities (Claeys-Kulik and Jørgensen, 2019) are mostly in translating policy commitments into real action. Ensuring consistency of application is the other main problem. Varga et al. (2021) argue that increasing student diversity does not automatically lead to successful inclusion. Rather it leads to challenges such as cultural (self-)isolation, increased language barriers, or even discrimination. Possible solution may come via addressing both issues comprehensively.

Achieving such goals, according to Kruse et al. (2017) requires sustained institutional effort. Training programs for faculty and staff, while essential, often lack depth or continuity or are non-existent as a whole. Developing intercultural competence should be an ongoing process, experienced with critical self-reflection, and actual integration of diversity into all aspects of university life. However, resistance to change, limited funding or competing institutional priorities, often hinder these efforts. Therefore, to reach the benefits of diversity and inclusion HEIs need to adopt a holistic and a context-specific approach. Varga et al. (2021) suggest that the so-called “micro-level interventions” (mentoring programs and peer support networks) should be synchronized with “macro-level policy reforms”. The other important role is that of leadership, which models inclusive behaviours and, thus, inspires institutional change (Kruse et al., 2017).

As a whole, diversity and inclusion are integral to the mission of higher education - to offer opportunities for innovation, equitable access, and social impact. Even though the application of these initiatives reveals challenges, the issues can be solved with strategies translated into real actions.

Introducing a model of dimensions of cultural inclusivity in higher education

The literature on diversity and inclusion collected and reviewed by the author highlights four critical dimensions of cultural inclusivity in higher education: **policy comprehensiveness**, **accessibility**, **equity**, and **socio-cultural impact**. These dimensions represent how HEIs establish a diverse and inclusive environment. Thus, they are relevant to the research problem. The figure below presents an illustration of the model.

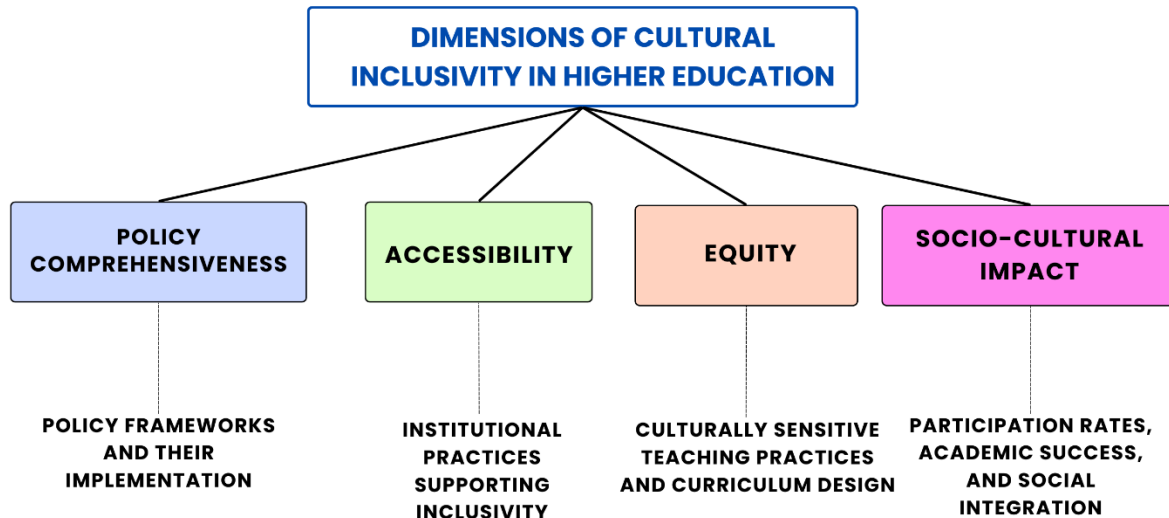


Figure 1. Illustration of the dimensions of cultural inclusivity in higher education.

Source: Author's own research.

Policy comprehensiveness includes *policy frameworks and their implementation*. According to Claeys-Kulik and Jørgensen (2019) such policies should be robust and clear in order to promote diversity and inclusion. Examples for such policies include creating and achieving diversity targets in student recruitment, funding allocations for underrepresented groups, and concrete measures to address systemic inequities. Current issues with this dimension in European universities are implementation gaps. This is represented by failure of strategic commitments to be translated into actionable changes. For example, the European Commission's initiatives, such as the *European Education Area* and its principles for equity, have set benchmarks for inclusivity. Their success on the other hand depends on consistent enforcement and monitoring at the institutional level, which at the moment is insufficient across Europe.

Accessibility is the second dimension and it represents *institutional practices supporting inclusivity*. Accessibility ensures that students from diverse backgrounds participate in higher education equitably. The dimension includes opportunities for flexible learning, access to language support programs, ensuring personalized support for specific students (e.g. from disadvantaged backgrounds), and culturally responsive mentorship. All of these are introduced with two main goals: to reduce the barriers for marginalized groups and to improve student retention (Varga et al., 2021). These practices are particularly effective when integrated into the university's operational and support systems.

Equity is the third dimension and it includes the presence of *culturally sensitive teaching practices and curriculum design*, which reflect diverse perspectives. Equitable teaching practices employ one major approach - the so called culturally responsive pedagogy. It addresses the unique needs of diverse students by incorporating their personal experiences into the learning process. Kruse et al. (2017) claim that embedding intercultural competence into the curriculum is essential in improving students' ability to engage with diverse perspectives. This makes education empowering for all learners. Other authors (Claeys-Kulik and Jørgensen, 2019) emphasize equity in resource allocation as a factor for reducing disparities in academic outcomes. Equity in resource allocation is a targeted funding measure for disadvantaged groups.

The last dimension is **socio-cultural impact**, which includes the *participation rates, academic success, and social integration* of learners. To prioritize inclusivity, in this case,

institutions must create environments where students feel a sense of belonging. For instance, Hungarian universities have helped socially disadvantaged students integrate into academic and social life through encouraging personalized support systems at the institution (Varga et al., 2021). Moreover, the European Commission's initiatives, such as Eurostat, emphasize monitoring participation and retention rates among marginalized groups. It is done through data monitoring. This allows institutions to identify the gaps between policy intention and policy realization.

Relevance to the Research Problem

The four-dimensional model is necessary to achieve the research goals. Analysis of dimensions will help in understanding developments in the last five academic years (2020-2024). This model aligns with the broader goals of the European Education Area – creating an inclusive, equitable, and cohesive higher education environment across the EU. Therefore, such approach ensures the holistic understanding of the problem. The author's goal is to find suggestions for proper evidence-based actions using the four-dimensional model.

Methodology

This study adopts a thematic analysis of secondary data to assess the effectiveness of cultural inclusivity measures in higher education institutions (HEIs) across EU-27 countries. The research evaluates the extent to which cultural inclusivity encompasses the four dimensions. It relies on academic studies, Eurostat data, and European Commission reports to test the hypotheses and derive meaningful insights into trends and variations in cultural inclusivity across different national contexts. The study employs mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative, to examine the cultural inclusivity in EU higher education.

a. Thematic analysis (qualitative method) is applied to qualitative data derived from European Commission policy documents, academic literature, and institutional reports. We chose thematic analysis because of its ability to uncover patterns and themes across diverse data sources. This is evidenced by similar research from Varga et al.'s (2021) and Kruse et al.'s (2017) who study the importance of multidimensional approaches in higher education, thus aligning the method with the hypotheses tested in this research. Data was collected from peer-reviewed articles and case studies focusing on cultural inclusivity in higher education, and from key documents (the European Education Area framework, the European Social Fund programs, and the Eurydice reports), which provide insights into EU-wide policies and strategies for equity and inclusion.

b. The quantitative method was analyzing, systematizing and summarizing available primary data from Eurostat (e.g. participation, retention, and success rates) to identify trends and patterns over the study period (2020–2024). Comparisons were drawn between countries to assess variations in cultural inclusivity measures and outcomes over the study period.

c. The research is structured to test two main hypotheses:

H1: Cultural inclusivity of HEIs in the EU is a multidimensional construct that includes representation of all four dimensions in the available qualitative and quantitative data: policy comprehensiveness, accessibility, equity, and socio-cultural impact.

H2: Higher education systems in EU-27 countries demonstrate measurable improvements in cultural inclusivity from 2020 to 2024, as evidenced by increased participation, retention, and success rates among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

d. Data analysis included the following steps: 1. qualitative and quantitative data organization; 2. thematic analysis to identify recurring themes through iterative review and comparison of emerging themes; 3. quantitative analysis of participation rates, retention rates and

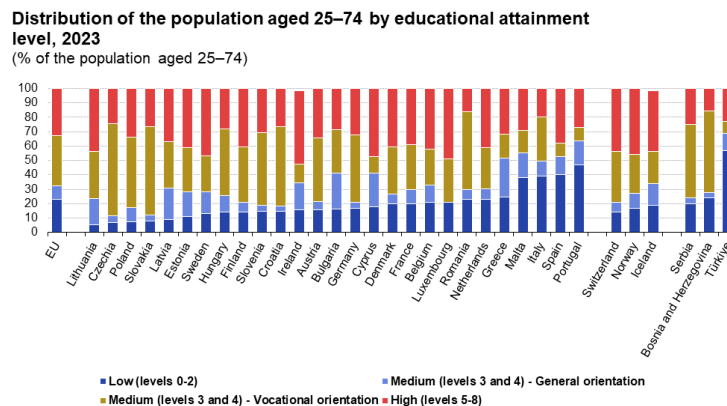
other data and drawing comparisons to assess variations in cultural inclusivity; 4. integration of findings to provide a holistic understanding of the research problem.

Results and discussions

a. Policy comprehensiveness

Policy comprehensiveness proved to be a critical dimension of cultural inclusivity within higher education institutions (HEIs). An analysis of key European Union (EU) policies and statistical data provides insight how effective these measures are across EU-27.

The Council Recommendation of 26 November 2018 advocates for the automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education qualifications, as well as the outcomes of learning periods abroad. This policy aims to facilitate student mobility and ensure that educational achievements are acknowledged across EU Member States without additional recognition procedures. Such a framework is instrumental in promoting inclusivity by removing barriers that historically hindered the free movement of students and academics within Europe. By standardizing recognition processes, the policy enhances access to diverse educational opportunities and fosters a more inclusive academic environment.



Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_ifs_9903)

eurostat

Figure 2. Distribution of the population by educational attainment level in 2023

Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Distribution_of_the_population_aged_25%E2%80%9374_by_educational_attainment_level_2023_\(%25_of_the_population_aged_25%E2%80%9374\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Distribution_of_the_population_aged_25%E2%80%9374_by_educational_attainment_level_2023_(%25_of_the_population_aged_25%E2%80%9374).png)

Educational attainment of non-EU citizens aged 25-34 years living in the EU in 2023, reached 35.5% compared to 38.8% of EU citizens residing in another EU country. 44.2% of nationals living in their own country attained tertiary education, which represents disparities in educational attainment among different demographic groups in EU. The lower levels of attainment among non-EU citizens suggest the existing policies might be inefficient.

In the context of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) European governance aims to enhance educational quality, equity, inclusion, and bring success for all. The effects of this strategic framework are yet to be seen because the effectiveness of this policy depends on its implementation at the national and HEI levels. If policy adoption and execution are inconsistent across Member States, then we might witness unsatisfactory educational outcomes among diverse students. The national education systems, the local socio-economic conditions, and also the

widespread institutional practices shape these outcomes significantly. Therefore, HEIs should be proactive in adopting and adapting the frameworks to their specific contexts.

b. Accessibility

Accessibility in the context of cultural inclusivity in higher education refers to the degree to which diverse student populations have equitable access to educational opportunities. Here we explore accessibility through data from Eurostat for the period between 2020 and 2023: educational attainment by foreign-born people and their descendants, participation rates among migrants, and inclusion of foreign-born populations. Data shows an increase in the tertiary education attainment rate for individuals aged 25–34 across the EU, rising from 40.5% in 2020 to 43.9% in 2023, reflecting expanded access to higher education only in EU-born populations. However, there are still barriers to the educational advancement of migrant populations.

Migrant integration statistics from Eurostat (2021) reveal that *foreign-born individuals consistently face barriers in accessing higher education*, which is related to language proficiency issues. Educational attainment depends on language ability. That's why host-country language proficiency and increased participation in higher education remain strongly correlated. The figures below (3 and 4) reveal that people with migration status have the highest percentage of ISCED 0-2 level education, and most Member States show poorer results in HEI integration of migrants in comparison to non-EU member Iceland.

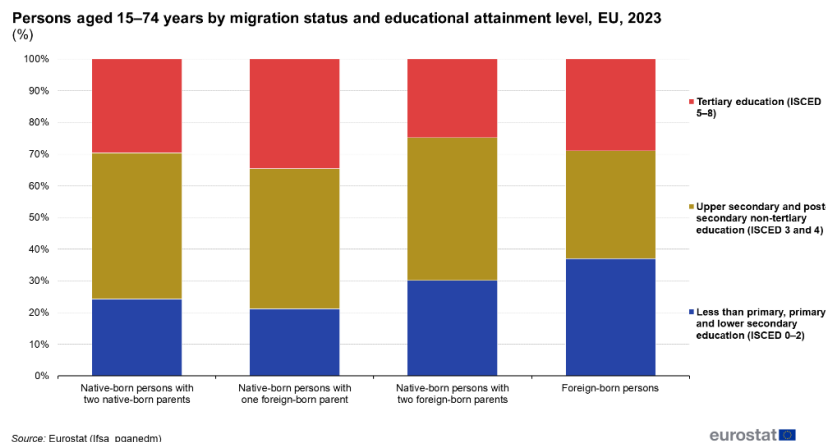


Figure 3. Distribution of foreign-born people and their descendants in relation to their educational attainment level in host country language in 2023

Source: Persons aged 15–74 years by migration status and educational attainment level, EU, 2023(%). Eurostat (lfsa_pganedm)

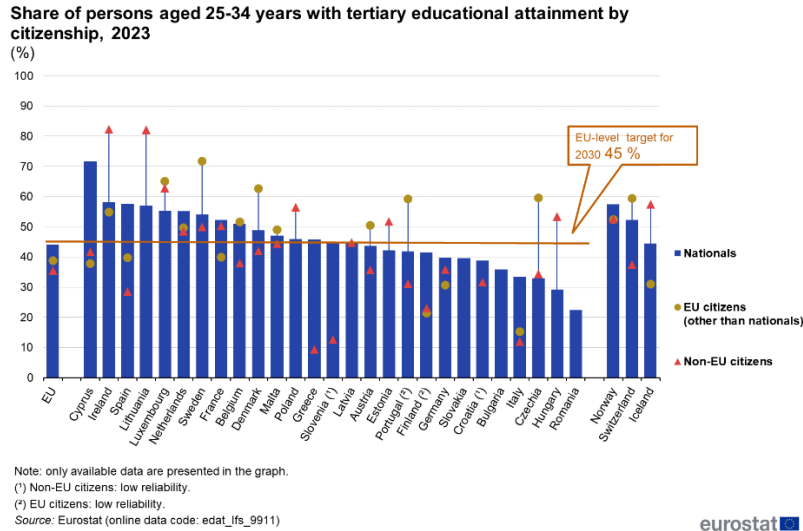


Figure 4. Share of persons aged 25-34 with tertiary educational attainment by citizenship in 2023

Source: https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSO_21LANG01.

In addition to linguistic barriers, the economic instability, legal status restrictions, and inadequate access to information about educational opportunities limit participation of non-EU citizens even further. Policies for financial support and counseling services for migrants vary widely across EU Member States. This leads to inconsistent accessibility. The disparities here suggest that while national and institutional policies exist to promote inclusivity, their implementation and effectiveness are uneven. To enhance accessibility, HEIs must expand language support, strengthen financial aid for disadvantaged groups, and improve data monitoring to track inclusivity efforts. While progress has been made, sustained efforts are needed to reduce disparities and ensure equal opportunities for all students across the EU. Overall, we can say there is measurable progress between 2020 and 2023, as evidenced by increasing participation and attainment rates. However, persistent disparities among migrants and foreign-born populations highlight the need for more targeted, consistent, and inclusive practices across Member States.

c. Equity

The equity dimension of cultural inclusivity in higher education institutions (HEIs) emphasizes ensuring fairness in access to and engagement with educational opportunities through inclusive teaching practices and curriculum design. This section analyzes how equity has been addressed in HEIs, synthesizing insights from key sources.

First, in terms of ensuring inclusive teaching practices in European universities, Kruse et al., (2017) say that these programs often face challenges - inconsistent implementation and limited institutional commitment. On the other hand, the European Commission (2022) highlights the importance of mentorship programs and preparatory courses designed to equip marginalized students (refugees and first-generation learners) with the tools to succeed in higher education. This shows that equitable inclusion remains unresolved yet. We can see that with the remaining disparities between institutions – when and whether to adopt such practices, there are varying levels of institutional readiness for change (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2019).

Second, curriculum design represents the degree of engagement in promoting equity through diverse perspectives in the educational content. Varga et al. (2021) emphasize a need to incorporate marginalized voices into curricula, citing the University of Pécs' efforts to integrate

Roma students' histories and experiences as a best practice. This shows another degree of insufficiency in this dimension. Institutional resistance to change, inadequate faculty training, and rigid accreditation systems often slow down the widespread adoption of inclusive curricula in European universities (Kruse et al., 2017; Claeys-Kulik and Jørgensen, 2019).

Third, we can conclude that equity-focused teaching practices and curricula have shown positive outcomes. According to Eurostat data (2022) institutions with targeted interventions report higher retention rates among marginalized students, including migrants and foreign-born individuals. Furthermore, programs emphasizing cultural competence achieve stronger student engagement and social cohesion, for example in interdisciplinary settings like health and science education (Kruse et al., 2017; Frawley et al., 2020). The biggest challenges remain inconsistent data collection and analysis of efforts (Varga et al., 2021).

The author recommends more flexibility in curriculum delivery and content to address this issue. Faculty development programmes focused on intercultural competence are essential here. Modular courses, part-time options, and stimulating lifelong learning with course content relevant to marginalized groups are shown to help non-traditional learners, such as working students and adults. These measures, as supported by monitoring systems to measure existent effectiveness, could be helpful in tackling the issue (European Commission, 2022).

d. Socio-cultural impact

The socio-cultural impact dimension evaluates how inclusive policies and practices influence participation rates, academic success, and social integration. Here we examine the outcomes from key sources to understand if there is any progress in achieving cultural inclusivity in European universities.

First, *participation rates* in higher education indicate inclusivity - while overall rates have improved across Europe, we still see disparities among marginalized groups. Eurostat data from 2020 to 2023 shows a steady increase in tertiary education participation for individuals aged 25–34, rising from 40.5% in 2020 to 43.9% in 2023. However, participation rates for non-EU migrants and foreign-born populations remain significantly lower than for native-born EU citizens. In 2023, the participation rate for non-EU-born individuals in this age group was approximately 28% lower than for their EU-born counterparts (Eurostat, 2022). Migrants and foreign-born populations face barriers such as language challenges, lack of financial support, and difficulty navigating institutional systems. Although targeted initiatives like scholarships and preparatory programs have aimed to bridge these gaps, structural inequalities persist. EU-level policies such as Erasmus+ have made progress in improving accessibility for underrepresented groups. However, they are limited in addressing the systemic challenges faced by these populations (European Commission, 2022).

Second, *academic success of affected learners*, as measured by retention rates, degree attainment, and overall performance, is the other critical aspect of cultural inclusivity. Retention rates for marginalized groups remain lower than those of native-born students. For instance, Eurostat data shows that between 2020 and 2023, retention rates for EU-born students averaged around 85%, while rates for non-EU-born students lagged by approximately 10%. The data highlights persistent challenges in supporting marginalized groups to complete their studies (Eurostat, 2022). Culturally responsive curricula and teaching practices have demonstrated positive effects on academic success, because some authors (Kruse, Rakha, and Calderone, 2017) claim that embedding cultural competence into teaching methodologies enhances the engagement, among underrepresented groups. Inclusive teaching practices help students feel valued and this leads to improving retention and academic outcomes. Despite these benefits, barriers such as insufficient

support structures, limited financial aid, and inconsistent faculty training continue to hinder academic success for many students (Varga et al., 2021).

Third, *social integration* shapes students' sense of belonging and overall well-being within higher education. If universities have fostered inclusive campus environments, young people from diverse origins experience much better social cohesion (Frawley, Russell, & Sherwood, 2020). Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen (2019) share that cultural centers and peer mentorships have shown success in creating inclusive communities. However, we still see challenges for migrants and foreign-born students, who often face social isolation due to language barriers and cultural differences. Eurostat's 2022 data on migrant integration reveals lower engagement levels in cultural and extracurricular activities among migrant students compared to native-born peers (Eurostat, 2022).

In conclusion, we can see there is considerable progress in building culturally inclusive HEIs across EU-27, however, there are significant gaps in certain areas that need intervention. In order to address these challenges HEIs could adopt several approaches. First, increase and enhance the outreach to marginalized groups; second, provide robust language support programmes and intercultural competence training; third, expanding the array of services to improve retention and academic success for diverse groups; fourth, investing more in cultural exchange programmes for migrants and foreign-born students.

f. Hypotheses evaluation Below is an evaluation of each hypothesis based on the analysis of data and discussions of the four dimensions.

Evaluation of first hypothesis (H1): *Cultural inclusivity of HEIs in the EU is a multidimensional construct that includes representation of all four dimensions: policy comprehensiveness, accessibility, equity, and socio-cultural impact.* The findings confirm **H1**, which means that cultural inclusivity in HEIs in the EU **does indeed function** as a multidimensional construct which encompasses the four dimensions. Dimensional function could be interpreted as all of the dimensions being interdependent. It is vital to note that for improved precision in future research, the dimensions should be quantified with sets of indicators.

Evaluation of second hypothesis (H2): *Higher education systems in EU-27 countries demonstrate measurable improvements in cultural inclusivity from 2020 to 2024, as evidenced by increased participation, retention, and success rates among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.* According to the findings, **H2** is partially confirmed. While we see some improvements in cultural inclusivity outcomes, progress is uneven across dimensions and demographic groups, and it reflects the challenges in applying EU policies.

Conclusion

In the context of dynamic changes in world political landscape, economic development and demographic challenges in EU, this paper provides a valuable analysis of a poignant issue – the cultural inclusivity of higher education institutions (HEIs) across the EU-27. Analysis was conceptualized around creating and testing a framework for cultural inclusivity of universities, including four critical dimensions: policy comprehensiveness, accessibility, equity, and socio-cultural impact. The author synthesized secondary data from Eurostat, European Commission reports, and relevant academic literature for academic years 2020 to 2024. The study evaluates the progress and challenges in the status quo of cultural inclusivity within HEIs.

The research managed to confirm the multidimensional nature of cultural inclusivity framework and test two hypotheses, of which the first was confirmed and the second was partially confirmed. Main findings include the following:

First, there are actionable policies like the European Education Area and Erasmus+, which provide foundational support for cultural inclusivity, however, there is also inconsistent implementation at the national and institutional levels, which requires stronger enforcement mechanisms.

Second, there are significant disparities in accessibility persisting among marginalized groups (migrants and non-EU-born students), therefore, to address this issue we need specific interventions for affected groups, such as language and intercultural competence training.

Third, in order to advance equity HEIs should implement culturally responsive teaching and inclusive curricula, and increase resources for faculty training and widespread implementation.

Fourth, the participation, retention, and social integration outcomes reveal persistent gaps in the socio-cultural impact, especially among groups who suffer social isolation.

Limitations of the study include reliance on secondary data and inconsistent data coverage for all studied dimensions.

The main contributions of the paper emphasize the necessity of adopting a holistic approach to cultural inclusivity in HEIs, where policy, accessibility, equity, and socio-cultural outcomes are interdependent. The paper contributes to the existing body of research through introducing a four-dimensional framework and providing an evidence-based evaluation of it. The author also offers actionable insights for policymakers and institutions alike. Its findings are particularly relevant for shaping the European Education Area's inclusivity goals and aligning institutional practices with broader societal objectives. The author suggests more attention on the socio-cultural impact of inclusivity can stimulate refinement of policies in the future and, hopefully, better real-life outcomes for affected groups and institutions.

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