

Toward Equity and Sustainability: Transforming Education for Inclusive and Egalitarian Learning Environments

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Abstract

Education is crucial in promoting social equity, reducing elitism, and combating anti-egalitarian practices. The elimination of such practices ensures that everyone has access to quality education and opportunities. The creation of an equitable educational environment is not merely a moral imperative but a core element in achieving sustainable development. This will only be effective if there is no gender discrimination or bias based on social backgrounds or socio-economic status. Social inequalities, especially in developing countries, often stem from rigid occupational hierarchies and limited capacity for economic growth. Social status and socio-economic strata have undermined egalitarian principles. Individuals are increasingly aware that, beyond the gender gap, disparities in opportunity and experience persist, particularly in the workplace. These factors influence individuals' academic potential and inclusion in colleges and higher education institutions. Teachers play a pivotal role not only in transmitting knowledge but also in educating students about egalitarian practices, including what to adopt and what to reject. Achieving solidarity and inclusion is challenging; it requires clearly defined pedagogical and ethical principles. As educators, we must first identify all forms of discrimination in the classroom including bias, stereotypes, and prejudice. This involves examining their social identity in relation to their students, which may eventually reveal the doctrines they are perpetuating.

Keywords: Egalitarianism, gender equality, social justice, sustainable development, transformative learning.

Introduction

The principles of egalitarianism serve as a route map to advocate justice and resilience among community members regardless of their gender identity, origin, or social background. Within this landscape, one of the important tenets that demands attention is gender equality. In the pursuit of egalitarianism in higher education, the need to deconstruct biases and differentiation that hinder equal opportunities among individuals is a primary concern. Education serves as an important space where societies worldwide struggle with anti-egalitarian tenets while intensely upholding equality. By examining the reshaping structures in the academic context and thriving

for equal representation and access to resources, higher education can become a forefront for genuine inclusivity and equality, where all learners prosper personally and academically with no limits. In a nutshell, accrediting our efforts to address how we carry implicit and explicit prejudices is pre-requisite to promote solidarity and integration in our classrooms. This may involve exploring how our social identity shapes the experiences of our learners; such an exploration detects which doctrine we are unintentionally adopting. Creating an inclusive education can also involve efforts to achieve a sustainable world. In order to implement the required change in education, sustainability principles could be central to the strategies of higher institutions including, curricula, campus life, and student-led clubs.

Sustainability in Education

The sustainability of education is considered a crucial factor that contributes to developing inclusivity in education. An inclusive environment fosters openness and accessibility in education for everyone, despite their individual learning needs. Inclusive education strengthens the didactic contract¹, emphasizing the mutual academic responsibility and collaboration between students and teachers. Teachers in tertiary and HE institutions play a central role in promoting sustainability in education. The skills and abilities they acquire in their lifespan, such as pedagogical flexibility, cultural competence, and professional development are fundamental to helping students face academic and workplace challenges fearlessly. In this context, developing self-regulated learning skills (SRL) is considered an essential element that empowers the process of inclusion in sustainable education by acknowledging that learners come from different backgrounds and learning paces; therefore, SRL equips students with the ability to reflect on their learning (Mezirow, 1997; Taranto, 2024). Moreover, research has shown that sustainability principles can be maintained and achieved only if they are effectively communicated in higher education institutions. This effectiveness is tied to three main reasons. First, students are enrolled in universities and colleges with higher numbers, and the number is steadily increasing. Second, the majority of students are young and at the critical age of late adolescence, where they are still in the process of developing their identity. Third, moving from home to campus is just a step to prepare themselves for the job market, and that's a turning point in their lives. As reported by Shutaleva et al. (2023),

The implementation of an inclusive form of education contributes to the formation of humane values among the younger generation, parents, and teachers. Pedagogy, based on the principles of humanity, recognizes individuals' autonomy, self-worth, and rights. Recognition of the value of each child, regardless of their cognitive, academic, and other achievements, is possible only under the condition of educating a socially active person. (p .04)

¹ A concept in educational theory based on the work of Brousseau Guy (1997). The didactic contract refers to the implicit or explicit rules that outline the responsibilities and expectations between the teacher and the learner. It involves the behaviors expected from both sides the learner and teacher.

Therefore, the exit profile of successful and motivated graduates stems from higher educational institutions that recruit skilled professionals who can address different cultural challenges and have an inclusive, affiliative mindset. Hence, HE graduates can adapt to the world's diversity, develop social skills, and be empathetic (Shutaleva et al., 2023). It is worth noting that the educational system should function not only as an institution, but also as a means of socio-cultural rehabilitation. The success of educational reform depends solely on a phased, developmental approach to inclusive practice and the continuous evolution of the system.

Egalitarian education

Why should equality be thought desirable? Equality after all means a leveling of differences; ... to treat people in such a way would be at best perverse and at worst immoral. The pursuit of equality seems to be impaled on a fork: either the ultimate end of the pursuit is not equality at all but some other value or values which have become confused in the popular mind with equality or our societies are aiming at a goal that cursory inspection reveals to be quite monstrous.

(Miller, 1982, p. 72)

Egalitarianism is an ideology or a philosophy based on the principle of equality. This thought puts strong emphasis on maintaining equal opportunities in politics, welfare, economic, social, and civil rights for all members of society, regardless of their background, origin, or history. This philosophical perspective ensures equal treatment across religion, race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic and, socio-political beliefs (Kempny & Michael, 2021; Laws, 2022; Bolton & Lewis, 2024). In contemporary society, egalitarianism has taken on a new perspective where income inequality is asserted too. As long as egalitarianism is raised, it is worth mentioning that it is not synonymous with feminism. While the latter abolishes the belief in gender discrimination, the former stresses equality among community members at different levels (Moss, 2009; Humphrey, 2001). This egalitarian philosophy has different forms; they are listed as follows:

- **Economic** Each individual should have access to wealth through entrepreneurship, investments, or companionship (this was one of the basics of Karl Marx's theory of Marxism. The limitations of this framework in society are seen through the lack of job opportunities, money supply or inflation.
- **Legal** All individuals are subject to the same law with no prioritization of certain individuals over others.
- **Moral** All individuals deserve human rights, respect and fairness.
- **Political** Each member of the community could participate in decision-making and are given the same social power concerning governmental authority.
- **Racial** it is a principle that reflects equal respect and acceptance among individuals regardless of their ethnicity or race.
- **Gender egalitarianism** this principle conveys equal treatment of men and women, this equality includes rights, responsibilities and gender roles. This philosophy does not believe in gender-specific roles, hence women's second shift is fostered.

Wealth inequality empowers those in positions of power to manipulate powerless groups. As per Grabb (1993), "*the control of thought, knowledge, information, and comparable resources in the creation of structured inequality between groups and individuals*" (p. 19) essentially maintains the inequitable distribution of rights and opportunities that some members of society experience (cited in Beauchamp-Pryor, 2007). Apart from the effects of inequality on unrelated ethical goals, an egalitarian theory has to prove that inequality is inherently harmful or unfair. Egalitarians are not required to disregard the fact that inequalities have a variety of unfavorable effects on people who do not support them. Egalitarians intend to highlight multiple justifications for opposing the inequalities existing in contemporary society to advance their political objectives.

However, identifying reasons why inequality is problematic beyond its effects on non-egalitarian moral concerns is the first difficulty for an egalitarian political theory. Identifying the specific types of inequality and the reasons behind them is the second challenge for egalitarian perspectives (Humphrey, 2001). Identifying the specific types of inequality and the reasons behind them is the second challenge for egalitarian spectrum. Egalitarians accept individual differences without complaint. Those who want everyone to be the same are not uniformitarians, and they do not care about inequality or diversity in matters that people find significant. As maintained by Hausman and Waldren (2011):

The fourth and last challenge arises from the fact that equality is not the only relevant moral consideration. If lessening inequalities would violate rights, make people worse off, or limit freedom, then the egalitarian must balance the demands of equality against these competing considerations. Equality must have some non-trivial weight, or else a position would scarcely count as egalitarian, but no plausible version of egalitarianism will weigh equality so heavily that other moral considerations count only as tie-breakers. (p. 571)

Furthermore, Hausman and Waldren (2011) have summarized four essential challenges covered in the egalitarian perspective:

An egalitarian theory needs to explain why inequality seems immoral or unfair, independent of its effects on moral issues unrelated to egalitarian issues.

It needs to be clear about which inequality is unacceptable and why, and also which ones are not.

It needs to be clear about what each person is responsible for and how much this responsibility explains inequality.

It should address how to weigh moral issues such as other factors against certain inequalities.

Inclusive higher education framework

Inclusivity plays an important role in the effectiveness of HE institutions. All individuals should be granted equal opportunities to excel academically and professionally, irrespective of their demographic characteristics or socio-economic circumstances. Nevertheless, the absence of understanding the significance of inclusivity regularly fails to meet the value of inclusivity. Therefore, HE institutions often fail to define and achieve inclusive education, as they lack the resources to effectively establish egalitarian practices.

As illustrated in the figure below, the inclusive higher education framework, introduced in Hubbard and Gawthorpe (2024) work, aims to create a more equitable learning environment by concentrating on core aspects as curriculum, evaluation, community belonging and pathways to success. It puts stress on certain systematic processes across the institution as it ensures equal access to digital and physical infrastructure. The proposed framework assesses both knowledge and skills, while supporting diversified and tailored learning experiences that incorporate inclusive language practices. Assessment practices are designed to be transparent and manageable, with an emphasis on providing positive feedback that boost student growth.

Additionally, the suggested model raises a sense of belonging through personalized and academic support, appreciating diversity, and creating culturally responsive and equitable learning environments. It also outlines clear academic expectations to empower students and ease their access to external networks and opportunities. This model closely aligns with egalitarian principles in higher education because it attempts to eliminate the barriers that may impede equal access and participation. In fact, egalitarianism, in essence, encompasses fairness and equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of their background. The framework effectively addresses this latter by promoting equal access to resources and personalized support to meet diverse needs. Therefore, the model in figure 1 reflects the fundamental values of egalitarianism where equity and inclusion are at the forefront. This alignment with sustainability is essential; inclusive frameworks not only promote social justice but also create adaptable environments for education.

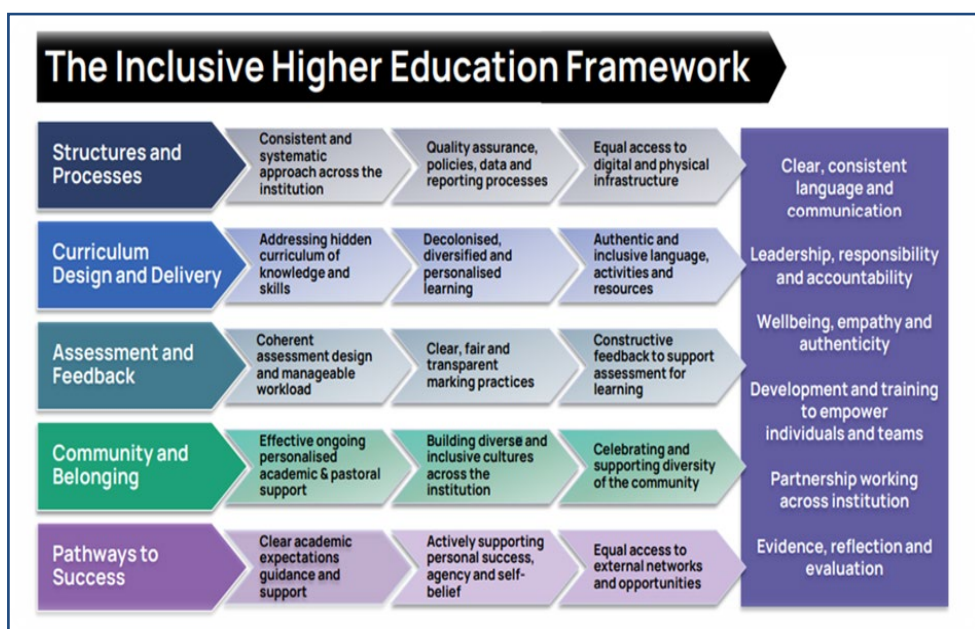


Figure 1 *The Framework of Inclusive Higher Education* (Katharine Hubbard and Paula Gawthorpe, 2024).

Empowering Education for Gender Equality

Education plays a pivotal role in enhancing gender equality. It is regarded as a powerful element to help transcend all forms of stereotypes and differentiation and empower women to achieve their full potential. Conventionally, girls' accessibility to education paves the way for them to become effective leaders in their communities; they may launch their businesses and make decisive decisions about their well-being (Benali, 2015; Bouguesri, 2020). In different parts of the world, girls are no longer facing imminent impediments to education. Nevertheless, in some regions, traditions and cultural practices undermine the value of women in comparison to men; consequently, they could not benefit from similar opportunities for education and employability. This latter will not only violate their human rights, but it also retards the progress of their nations and communities as a whole (Guedjali, 2022).

Gender stereotypes can be reinforced through the educational system, especially when limiting the opportunities and aspirations accessible to males and females. These preconceptions can be disproved, and gender equity can be promoted with the assistance of high-quality education that is inclusive and sensitive to the various needs of all students. The educational context as a social institution plays a pivotal role in ensuring gender equality through the creation of common opportunities and supportive environments for both girls and boys to thrive (Barry & Dandachli, 2020). Empowering women and girls to achieve their full potential is most effectively done through education.

Girls with higher levels of education are more likely to contribute to the development of the economy and access better-paying employment (Abdulkari et al., 2022). This results in a reduction in poverty rates and an increase in economic growth and employment. Beyond advocating for gender equality in all aspects of life, education has an effective role in preventing gender-based violence. Hence, educational institutions could decrease the risk of assault by teaching boys to respect boundaries, teaching both girls and boys about egalitarian practices, fostering healthy relationships, and enhancing communication skills. In addition to offering support services to students who have experienced abuse, school-based initiatives that tackle gender-based violence may also promote safer and more inclusive educational setting for all students. Empowering both genders through education contributes effectively to the broader goals of sustainability; it ensures that all members of society are equipped to participate in building equitable communities (Abdulkari et al., 2022).

Social Inequality Capitalisation

A society where class, race, and gender hierarchies restrict access to resources and rights in ways that affect their distribution is the basis of social inequality (Addi, 2004). It can take many forms, such as inequalities in wealth and income, unequal access to cultural and educational resources, and biased treatment by the legal and police departments, to name a few. Social stratification and social inequality are mutually exclusive.

All known societies have been characterized by inequalities of some kind, with the most privileged individuals or families enjoying a disproportionate share of power, prestige, and other valued resources. The task of contemporary stratification research is to describe the contours and distribution of inequality and to explain its

persistence despite modern egalitarian or anti-stratification values.
(Grusky, 2001, p. 3)

The existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for varying social ranks or strata within a group or community is what defines social inequality. This includes regular, organized patterns of unfair distribution of resources, opportunities, rewards, and responsibilities. For instance, racism is recognized as a situation in which resources and rights are not allocated properly. It is noteworthy to mention that the members of society are different, so equality is unlikely to be achieved. Some individuals are powerful, competent, or smarter than others; additionally, they may have different values and principles (Stewart et al., 1980).

Tracing equality among individuals who share significant differences may lead to the rejection of difference; hence, *"equality creates sameness and suppresses social diversity"* (Blackburn, 2008, p. 253). The correlation to this controversy is that difference precludes equality. For example, a form of inequality is reflected through gender segregation when women and men work in separate occupations. As claimed by Blackburn (2008):

Equality, which is not identity, requires that people (or whatever is being discussed) are different. There may be problems in achieving equality, but to claim difference makes equality impossible is a logical fallacy. While difference does not necessarily entail inequality, there is an important relation. (p. 253)

The concept of equality does not require sameness; it acknowledges and respects others' differences, values and needs. It is important to note that equality and equity are not alike, since the former entails giving all members of society, including genders, similar opportunities and resources, whereas equity stands for providing each individual with all they need according to their qualifications, potential and even gender. Unequivocally, the differences between people should exist before assuming any form of equality or inequality. This peculiar existence provides a potential basis for inequality, which can lead to the social creation of inequalities (Blackburn, 2008). Embracing diversity is an essential step to achieving equality. However, the counterpart argument could reveal that the community members' differences may promote inequality through the way they are perceived and interpreted within societal structures. Thus, genuine equality occurs when prejudices, biases, stereotypes, and social barriers are appropriately addressed (Vargas-Solar, 2022; Bouzida & Yassine, 2023).

Gender Equality and Societal Rules

Gender is a variable that could be used to divide a society based on certain social characteristics, including race, ethnicity, and age. These factors together form what is referred to as 'social hierarchy'. The gender system is a social construct that promotes inequality based on gender. The gender system is established and upheld through people's awareness. Gender awareness is developed through the expression and presentation of social and cultural attitudes, norms, and regulations. Those who violate these regulations often face social ostracism (Kandrichina et al., 2016). Conventionally, prevalent gender stereotypes and ideals shape one's gender identity, in which stereotypes are beliefs about the traits and abilities of men and women, usually based on societal norms and expectations. The aforementioned may lead to discriminatory

practices. Hence, gender roles refer to the learned and culturally constructed patterns of behaviors, tasks, and responsibilities that are considered appropriate for individuals based on their gender. These roles are not fixed and can vary across socio-cultural contexts. While societal structures can either promote gender equality or contribute to gender inequality, it is important to note that gender does not determine one's role in society (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008).

Societal Gender Equality

Gender inequality is a serious social injustice that predominantly affects women at different levels. Equal opportunities for men and women will bring positive change if gender equality and human rights are prioritized. Thus, it is important to reconsider and address discrimination to ensure equal distribution of economic, social, and political opportunities (Cook & Hegtvædt, 1983). Discrimination weakens and violates the rights, freedoms, and interests of individuals and citizens based on their ethnicity, religion, race, language, origin, property, official status, membership in public associations, or belonging to any social group. In the context of international relations, discrimination involves favoring citizens and organizations of a particular state with more rights and privileges than those afforded to citizens and organizations from other countries. Certain functions may cause differences in living conditions between genders, but these differences must not lead to discrimination or adversely impact the quality of life of either men or women. On the contrary, they should be properly taken into account, and that will lead to an equal distribution of socio-economic and political opportunities.

In stratified societies, social injustice against women is a form of gender inequality. Gender equality stands for the social evaluation of the parallelism between women and men. It incorporates the possession of equal status by genders by allocating them similar conditions and rights. The quality of life of men and women significantly diverges to some extent due to females' reproductive capabilities. As long as discrimination is raised, in the field of international relations, gender discrimination is sex-based prejudice, i.e., the practice by which one gender is favored over another. In patriarchal societies, women may encounter differences in treatment across various areas, including employment, rewards, politics, religious careers, and social policy. Furthermore, they may experience challenges such as inappropriate behavior or interpersonal conflicts in the workplace. The supremacy of patriarchal societal bonds and ways of thinking in communities may lead to misogyny and sexism², viewing women as having less value or standing compared to men.

Gender Equality in Higher Education

In higher education capitalization (He), men are advantaged at every stage of their academic careers (Reskin & Bielby, 2005). Statistically speaking, females outnumber males at entry into higher education (He). When progressing in the realm of academia, there is a significant gender imbalance in the ranking of senior positions; investigating leadership within higher education reveals not only the presence of discriminatory and exclusionary patterns in recruitment, selection, and promotion procedures, but it also

² *Belittling the role of women in society, underestimation of women's potential, taking into account only biological characteristics, division of society on the basis of sex, elimination of individual qualities and differences, overvaluation of the role of men (Kandrichina, 2016, p. 09)*

indicates that the majority of women perceive 'leadership' as unfavorable and culturally challenging, even though there is a stereotypical image of women pursuing higher positions and leadership roles. Leadership and mentoring programs for women in HE are important for women who are challenging the traditional roles and social norms. Women in academia can be subjected to higher expectations that they provide nurture and service to others as a part of their academic role than their male colleagues. (Mott, 2022, p. 9)

This perception reflects the cultural expectations of communities regarding women in senior positions, where women are perceived as caregivers and expected to hold house responsibilities, belittling their role in the academic context. When women attempt to break these barriers to immerse themselves in a traditionally male-dominated environment, many viewpoints may arise between acceptance and refusal. However, perpetuating gender equity in leadership is a step to build a sustainable academic culture. Females' resilience and perseverance to transcend this challenge break stereotype and contribute to the sustainable transformation of academic institutions (Taranto, 2024).

The figure below outlines two complementary approaches to address gender inequalities in higher education (HE). They are categorized as: "*The right thing to do*" and "*the smart thing to do*". Addressing gender inequality is introduced as an ethical obligation, stressing that gender differences are pervasive in HE and, if left unaddressed, they contribute to wider social inequality. On the other hand, reducing gender inequality is a strategic advantage, as it boosts competitiveness and diversity. In fact, HE institutions are ideal settings for catalysing major shifts by challenging the gender inequalities via social norms and educational practices. These arguments stress the moral and practical importance of advancing gender equality within HE systems.

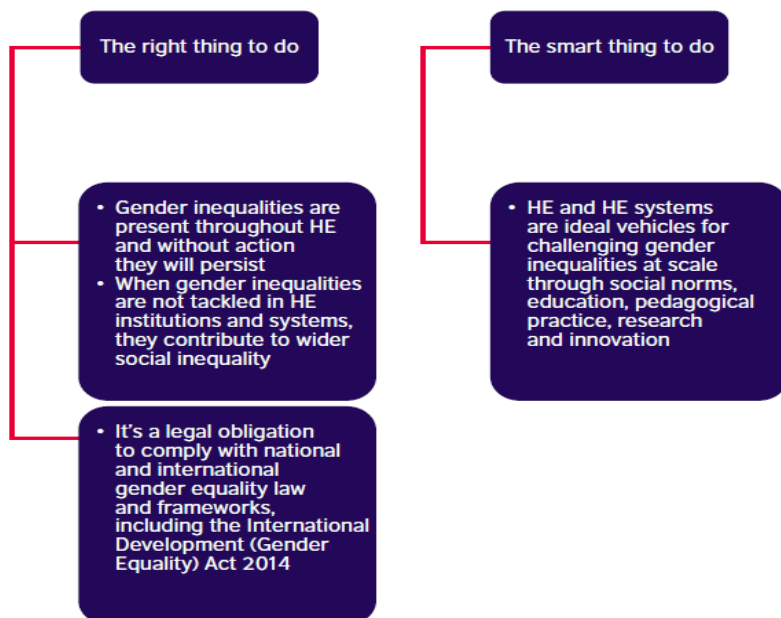


Figure 2 Advancing Gender Equality in Higher Education (HE)

Helen Mott (2022, p. 17)

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are seen as catalysts in addressing sustainability within educational settings (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021), and as ‘changing agents’ for future generations’ thinking and social change (Caner, Demirel, & Okten, 2019). HE system development where principles for gender equality are trained and designed, and where the voices of women are heard and valued, are some of the most powerful tools available to society for expediting gender equality and empowering women. By challenging rigid gender norms and actively promoting gender equality, we take crucial steps towards achieving the full spectrum of equal rights for all individuals (Mott, 2022).

HE, along with its institutions, policies, regulations, and practices, has an impact on the overall social and cultural norms; its intervention will either eradicate inequality or embrace it. Its effective function enables individuals from varied backgrounds to reflect on their experiences and assumptions, and understand how their identities contribute to build resilient communities. As Mezirow (1997) has explained, *“we can become critically reflective of the assumptions we or others make when we learn to solve problems instrumentally or when we are involved in communicative learning”* (p. 07).

This transformative potential of higher education resembles with transformative theory, which stresses the role of critical reflection and dialogue in reconsidering our former beliefs. As illustrated in the figure above, the power of HE system surpasses academic objectives to shape cultural attitudes and economic landscapes and foster egalitarian practices in establishments. To reinforce equality within HE context, a cohesive strategy should be adopted. Each facet plays an important role in re-shaping the higher education realm to ensure equality and opportunities for all. From admissions policies to curriculum design and workforce opportunities, these contribute collectively to making learners prosper in their learning environments.

We change the way we see the world when we critically reflect on the assumptions that shape our morals, beliefs, and perspectives. According to transformation theory, moral values gain legitimacy through open, reflective dialogue among stakeholders. Values like truth, justice, and freedom are considered universal because they generally lead to better outcomes than their opposing principles (Mezirow, 1997).

Given this context, we put forward the following recommendations:

- Set long-term objectives that explicitly incorporate autonomy and critical thinking.

- Encourage students to relate socio-cultural concepts to personal experiences through collaborative learning.

- Train educators in sustainable teaching practices and curriculum design.

- Treat all students, teachers and administrative staff fairly.

- Incentivize sustainability research and innovation among students and administrative staff

- Encourage projects that suggest real solutions to social, economic, and environmental issues.

- Promote student participation in decision-making through dedicated platforms.

- Prioritize gender mainstreaming and strengthen inclusive leadership.

- Create an inclusive learning environment that welcomes all individuals.

- Guarantee equal access to educational opportunities, allowing every employee and student to reach their potential.

- Equip students to identify and confront injustice and discrimination.

Adopt non-discriminatory policies and educational content that respect all identities and backgrounds
Expand access to higher education for marginalized groups and meet their specific needs.
Provide psychological support and well-being services within higher education institutions.
Promote gender equality through representation in all fields.
Encourage financial independence and work life balance for both genders;
Recognize social inequalities and encourage shared responsibility between genders.
Uphold women's rights as integral to human rights.
Increase student involvement in workshops and training days on egalitarianism and sustainability.
Establish interdisciplinary hubs for sustainability and social justice within higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The inclusion of egalitarian principles in higher education entails the adoption of a comprehensive framework that prioritizes equal treatment for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds. This framework reinforces the values of diversity, sustainability, and inclusion. Sustainability, in this context, refers to the creation of an enduring educational ecosystem where diversity and inclusion are not only short-term goals but are deeply rooted in the long-term growth of students and educators within higher education institutions. A key aspect of this approach involves fostering an environment that promotes intercultural awareness, ethno-relativity, and mutual respect. An integral component of such inclusion involves enriching the curriculum with egalitarian perspectives, ensuring that younger generations are prepared for a diverse, sustainable society. Equitable institutional support stands as a pillar where guidance and assistance are offered to meet the different needs of students and support the sustainability of an inclusive educational system. This framework improves equality and equity too by addressing the challenges that students face in different contexts. Incorporating egalitarian perspectives into the curricula is considered a positive step to address the diverse needs of students. In fact, the integration of sustainability into educational frameworks ensures that egalitarian reforms are not merely transformative but durable, with the aim to equip future generations with inclusive values amid evolving global challenges. Future research should examine the long term impact of egalitarian frameworks on students' behavior and investigate how inclusivity reshapes the academic and social experiences of learners in higher education. The practical implications of this work include adopting a holistic approach to egalitarianism that informs educational practices and contributes to more supportive, resilient learning environments.

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