BREAKING IVORY WALLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND CREATING BELONGING

Stefania PAREDES FUENTES

Abstract

This chapter examines the persistent challenges to diversity and inclusion within universities. It argues that dismantling remaining "ivory walls" at universities necessitates fostering a culture of belonging that actively addresses social inequalities and empowers under-represented groups. The chapter explores how academics can contribute to this transformation. It offers practical strategies for creating inclusive communities through individual behaviours, and teaching practices. Additionally explains how universities can update their processes to support these changes. By emphasising both individual and systemic efforts, the chapter provides a starting point for building more equitable and inclusive academic environment. This, in turn, strengthens universities' ability to serve as true drivers of positive social change. However, this is contingent upon the engagement of the university leadership and the allocation of adequate resources.

Keywords: Diversity, inclusion, belonging, higher education, assessment, learning environments.

JEL Classification: I23, I24, J15, J16.

I. INTRODUCTION: EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Diversity and inclusion have become prominent themes in universities. This chapter explores the significance and importance of embracing diversity, creating inclusion, and the need to break down universities' *ivory walls,* making them spaces for all.

Universities have a rich history as gateways to knowledge and opportunity, serving as hubs for intellectual exchange and academic exploration. Diversity in some form has always played a pivotal role in their evolution. From their origins as gatherings of international students in pursuit of learning, universities like the University of Bologna[1] were founded as communities of scholars from different countries and backgrounds, who arrived at the city driven by a shared commitment to knowledge acquisition. In fact, the term "university" derives from the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium,* signifying a community of teachers and scholars.

Over centuries, universities have transformed from small-scale institutions catering to a select few –primarily affluent men– into dynamic entities welcoming students from different nationalities, backgrounds, genders, and ethnicities. Through strategies of *internationalisation* and *diversification,* universities can now offer multicultural environments. This, in turn, provides students the opportunity to develop skills beyond academic knowledge, such as cross-cultural communication and collaboration, essential for navigating today's interconnected world.

This chapter explores ideas for nurturing inclusive academic communities which represent the diversity of staff and students at universities today. The goal is to create a culture of belonging in which all members actively engage in addressing structural inequalities and contribute to break old style "ivory walls."

The ideas and practices presented in this chapter stem from my lived experience studying and working in UK academia, my expertise in promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion within my discipline–Economics–and in Social Sciences, and the broader literature. However, I do not propose a systematic review of the literature on diversity and inclusion, I mostly focus on the evidence available to explain the situation, and for the actionable points I present.

[1] Despite the University of Bologna be considered the oldest university in the world, there are records of institutions offering higher education before the foundation of the University of Bologna in 1088. For instance, the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco was founded as a mosque in 857 and converted into a madrasa, an educational institution, hence considered by some classifications to be the oldest institution of higher learning still in operation.

Before exploring strategies for achieving inclusivity, it is essential to understand the negative impact of a lack of diversity and inclusion on the whole university community (Section II) and we also need to clarify the meanings of these terms, understanding their relevance for all members of the academic community (Section III). The chapter introduces various ways in which us, as members of the academic community, can contribute through our own behaviours (Section IV), and our teaching practices (Section V) to create inclusive environments that foster belonging for all groups.

Whilst most of this chapter addresses our role as individual academics in contributing to break any ivory walls that make universities elitist institutions, these efforts cannot be disconnected from the university structure. Therefore, it proposes some considerations for universities processes and how to support the overall change in culture, with the strong caveat that, as an area of study, this still needs further development (Section VI). It is important to emphasise that this work is not possible without allocation of adequate resources by university management. Insufficient financial and human resources can have a counterproductive effect on achieving diversity goals, by creating competition and tension. Lack of resources make staff feel unsupported and undervalued, which can manifest in conflict, sense of injustice, and erosion of morale, in particular when individuals perceive unequal distributions for different roles.

Notwithstanding, the suggestions here represent an invitation to institutions to truly engage with the process and understand what steps to take to provide a safe, inclusive environment to all members in their communities, and truly contribute to make the society a better place.

II. BEYOND IVORY TOWERS: UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS FOR DIVERSITY IN ACADEMIA

Universities have long served as engines of knowledge creation and societal progress. Yet, persistent lack of diversity threatens to reinforce the perception of these institutions as “ivory towers”. This Section explores how under-representation hinders access, retention and progression in students and staff, and ultimately, the very knowledge production that underpins academic excellence. By examining the experiences of under-represented groups, we expose how a lack of diversity undermines not only staff and student well-being, but also the credibility and impact of academic research, ultimately eroding public trust in experts having a chilling effect on scientific advancement.

1. Awarding Gaps and Discrimination in Higher Education

Alongside the interest in offering multicultural environments in universities, there has been an increased recognition of the existence of significant " awarding gaps".[2] These gaps refer to the differences in outcomes by student groups. Awarding gaps cannot be solely attributed to students' capabilities, but they seem linked to demographic characteristics.

In the United Kingdom, a growing awareness exists regarding the disparities in degree attainment between White students and ethnic minority groups at university level. White students are more likely to be awarded higher grades than students from all other ethnicities, even after controlling for prior attainment. The gap narrowed from 13.2% in 2017/18 to 8.8% in 2020/2021 for *good degrees* (average final mark of 60% or above).[3] However, progress is less evident for first-class degrees (average final mark of 70% or above) in which the gap merely decreased from 10.2% in 2017/18 to 9.5% in 2020/21 and disaggregated data by ethnicity reveals a worsening gap for Black students from 16.9% to 19.3% (Universities UK, 2022; Office for Students, 2021; Cordiroli-McMaster, 2021).

Awarding gaps also exist based on socio-economic background. All else equal, students from deprived areas are more likely to drop-out, less likely to complete their degree and more likely graduate with lower degree classifications in the UK (Crawford, 2014).

The analysis of disaggregated data shows that awarding gaps vary by discipline and demonstrate significant intersectionality. For instance, in economics, the probability of a White male student achieving a first-class degree in 2020/2021 was 51%. This figure dropped to 30% for a Black student with otherwise similar characteristics (higher socio-economic background, similar pre-university features) and is only 22% for Black students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Paredes-Fuentes *et al.,* 2023).

Similar gaps exist for other characteristics. Revell and Nolan (2023) found awarding gaps for disability in medicine students in the UK: students with mental health conditions were five or ten times more likely to fail multiple exams, resit a year, and achieve lower degree outcomes and these effects were amplified when considering ethnicity.

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[2] Often called *attainment gap,* the term "awarding gaps" is preferred to emphasise this is an outcome of structural institutional factors, rather than students' individual characteristics. This also matters for the solutions to close these gaps. The latter suggests the need for institutional changes in their administrative and pedagogical practices, rather than focusing on students' behaviours.

[3] UK universities classify undergraduate honours degrees based on weighted averages of marks into First Class (70%+), Upper-Second Class (60-69%), Lower-Second Class (50-59%), and Third Class (40-49%), although institutions have autonomy on thresholds and degree regulations.

The literature highlights multiple and complex reasons for these awarding gaps. All students may face challenges like social isolation, low prior attainment, and unequal access to quality education, leading to disparities in preparedness. However, there are additional challenges linked to specific groups. Unconscious biases among academic staff can influence teaching and assessment practices, leading to unfair evaluations of students from under-represented backgrounds. Students from these groups tend to be subject to stereotyping, microaggressions, and unequal treatment by faculty and peers. Students from ethnic minorities may face cultural challenges and even racism and discrimination, to the extent that universities in the UK have been accused of being "oblivious to the scale of racial abuse on campus" (EHRC, 2019a; EHRC, 2019b). Additionally, curriculum content may not be equally accessible and may even alienate some students, depending on their cultural or social background.

Female students can also feel socially excluded and tend to report lower sense of belonging in male-dominated subjects (Thoman *et al.,* 2014; Matz *et al.,* 2017; Rainey *et al.,* 2018). Sexual violence and sexual harassment tend to be pervasive across university campuses (Coulter *et al.,* 2017; Coulter and Ranking, 2020). Students from LGBTQ+ groups are more likely to face bullying, harassment, and violence (Stonewall, 2019 for the UK; Allen *et al.,* 2020 for the US), and students from some religious groups experience feelings of isolation and exclusion as they feel treated less favourable (Stevenson, 2013 for the UK; Fosnacht and Broderick, 2020 for the US).

Experiences of discrimination and other forms of violence contribute to feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, and a lack of belonging. These ultimately impact academic engagement and success. Students with greater sense of belonging report greater enjoyment and motivation (Pedler *et al.,* 2021). Conversely, those facing discrimination experience negative impacts on confidence, persistence, and health (Smith *et al.,* 2016; Jackson *et al.,* 2020).

Awarding gaps are a complex issue, and these factors often interact and compound, requiring multiple interventions. These interventions should address systemic inequalities, promote inclusive practices, provide targeted support, and foster a culture of belonging.

2. It is not Just Students: Engaging with Staff and Local Communities

The issue of diversity and inclusion extends beyond students. Staff from under-represented groups also face discrimination, impacting their well-being and career prospects within academia.

In disciplines like economics, gender disparities are well documented. These include under-representation (Auriol *et al.,* 2019; Lundberg and Stearns, 2019), unequal pay and promotion opportunities (Ceci *et al.,* 2014; Ginther and Kahn, 2004, Corsi *et al.,* 2017; Bosquet *et al.,* 2019), and a hostile work environment (AEA, 2019; Boring, 2017; Hengel, 2017; Wu, 2018; Dupas *et al.,* 2020). The broader academic literature echoes these concerns, for example highlighting similar issues for women across disciplines (Todd and Bird, 2000; Lundine *et al.,* 2018; Tenbrunsel *et al.,* 2019; Sharma and Poole, 2018) and how sexual harassment is driving them out of academia (Morber and Vartan, 2023).

There is also evidence that universities fail to attract and retain academics from ethnic minorities, lower socio-economic backgrounds and generally under-represented groups across all disciplines which contributes to the perception of universities *as ivory towers.*

Discrimination at entry may be one explanation. Despite laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on protected characteristics such as sex, race, disability, experiments demonstrate that identically qualified job applicants receive different job offers depending on their demographic characteristics (Baert, 2018). Furthermore, findings show that academics from lower socio-economic backgrounds face barriers to promotion and progression (see UCU, 2022 for the UK; Kniffin, 2007 and Lee, 2017 for the US).

The Equality and Human Rights Commission Report (2019c) highlights how racial harassment is a common experience for staff (and students) from ethnic minority groups at universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. Universities have a responsibility to ensure equal opportunities for success by eliminating any form of discrimination and violence within their institutions.

This is a matter of social justice, but the lack of diversity among academic staff also hinders universities' potential to attract the most talented pupils from diverse groups, creating a feedback loop. One reason for this may be the absence of role models. Role models are figures who can "influence role aspirants' achievements, motivation, and goals, by acting as behavioural models, representation of the possible, and/or inspirations" (Morgenroth *et al.,* 2015). In male dominated fields such as STEM and economics, under-representation of women discourages young girls from pursuing them, despite evidence that girls who do choose these fields may outperform boys (Paredes-Fuentes *et al.,* 2023).

There is also another issue. Lack of diversity among students translate into lack of diversity in graduates and professionals. For instance, lack of diversity among economists working on policy issues can lead to *groupthink,* that is

when the lack of inclusion of a wide range of perspectives and experiences lead to suboptimal decisions, incomplete analysis of alternatives, and lack of consideration of consequences (we discuss this in Burnett and Paredes-Fuentes, 2023).

Breaking institutions' ivory walls therefore requires universities to broaden their engagement efforts to attract more students and staff from historically under-represented and under-recognised groups. Equitable access to higher education, regardless of background, should be a universities' prerogative. A diverse academic community better reflects the broader societal landscape. By actively promoting greater representation, universities can contribute to dismantling systematic inequalities, fostering cultural competence, and advancing human rights.[4]

3. Lack of Diversity Affects Knowledge Creation and Trust in Academia

Addressing these issues affecting specific groups is integral to the entire process of knowledge creation and dissemination. Knowledge is a product of human interpretation and experience, shaped by observation, inquiry, and analysis. As individuals, we interpret the world around us based on our lived experiences, leading us to formulate research questions, design experiments, and collect data. Consequently, the creation of knowledge is inherently intertwined with our backgrounds, drawing on the diverse perspectives and interpretations that we bring to the process.

Diversity also enhances the reach of the knowledge created within universities. To be effective, knowledge must be broadly communicated and made relevant to the society. Effective knowledge communication allows researchers to bridge the gap between academia and the public, informing public discourse, influencing policy decisions, and contributing to societal advancement. How we communicate and with whom we communicate are also interlinked with our individual characteristics. Hence, diversity contributes

[4] The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. While there are various relevant articles in this Declaration, I refer to Article 26:

"1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."

"2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

to ensure better communication and a greater connection between universities and societies.

Failure to actively engage with local communities can result in universities becoming insular ivory towers, disconnected from the concerns and aspirations of the communities they serve. This disconnection can ultimately lead to universities losing their role in society. Establishing trust and rapport with broader society is essential for fostering confidence in academic research and scholarship. In recent years, we have witnessed a decline in trust in academic experts across various domains, with worrying examples in medicine and economics. This distrust can be attributed to several factors, including systemic racism, discrimination, and unethical, culturally insensitive research processes.[5] The erosion of trust in academia can have profound repercussions on the future of research and development and public support for universities, highlighting the critical importance of embracing diversity within higher education institutions.

III. DEFINING THE PROBLEM: CLEAR LANGUAGE MATTERS

In pursuing our goal to tackle such complex issues, it is essential to clearly define what we are working on and what we want to achieve. This contributes to create more collaborations, engage others, and avoid misunderstandings. In my experience, a lack of clarity can lead to confusion and even conflict, particularly if individuals or groups perceive initiatives aimed at a more diverse and inclusive environment as punitive for them. Therefore, before embarking on such initiatives, it is key to establish a shared understanding of the fundamental concepts.

As we explore these topics and move along our journey, we must be prepared to dynamically adapt our language. Language evolves and the terminology used around diversity and inclusion may need to be reconsidered. Ongoing research and engagement with the communities we aim to serve will allow us to identify new issues, learn from mistakes, and deepen our understanding of these crucial concepts. For some, this causes frustration, but we should see the process of updating our language as a positive development, reflecting continuous learning and progress.

[5] Lack of trust on experts become relevant during major events in society. The ING-Economics Network 2019 Survey on "Public Understanding of Economics" shows lack of trust on economists was a characteristic of the "leaver" voters during the UK referendum on Brexit. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we observe an increase in vaccine hesitancy due to lack of trust on health systems and health professional (Bromme *et al.,* 2022; Tram *et al.,* 2022). In the UK, vaccine hesitancy was particularly diffused among minority communities, highlighting the importance of diversity in broadening communication channels (Razai *et al.,* 2021).

1. Diversity and Under-Representation in Higher Education

The Oxford English Dictionary defines diversity as "the quality, condition, or fact of being diverse or different; difference, dissimilarity; divergence." This definition captures the broad nature of diversity, encompassing a wide range of individual characteristics. Indeed, diversity is a multidimensional and dynamic concept, and its interpretation is contextual. In various settings, individuals bring their unique perspectives and experiences, enriching collective discourse and fostering innovation.

In higher education, diversity takes a more nuanced meaning, often referring to representation from all parts of the society. In this context, diversity is inexorably linked to addressing systemic inequalities that create barriers based on demographic characteristics such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disabilities, etc.

We should acknowledge that we are all inherently diverse. This diversity should be recognised and valued in the academic environment, as it contributes significantly to academic discourse. However, some groups in our communities face systematic barriers and inequalities and do not have the same level of opportunity. Individuals from marginalised and historically under-represented groups have been systematically affected by these challenges and these have hindered their opportunities to achieve their full potential and having their work recognised. Dismantling these barriers is essential not only to promote inclusivity, but also to foster a more equitable and just society.

Under-representation refers to a situation in which a particular group of people has a smaller presence or participation than its proportion in the general population, hence this concept is relative to each reality.

In England and Wales, for example, around 20% of the population belongs to an ethnic minority group[6] as a direct consequence of British colonisation, with a substantial proportion of the minority ethnic population being UK-born (Craig *et al.,* 2012). Some of these groups are under-represented in higher education and the workforce, with representation varying across disciplines. For instance, while Asian/Asian-British people make up 3.1% of the population, they represent 10% of economics students. On the other hand, despite women and girls comprising 51% of the population and being over-represented among university students overall (52%), they make up only ~30%

[6] According to the 2021 Census, 81.7% of the population in England and Wales identified as White (74.4% identified as White British) (Gov.uk, 2022). The remaining identified with one of the standardised list of 19 ethnic groups developed for the 2021 census, available: https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/

of economics students, highlighting the gender imbalances discussed in Section II. Similar under-representation exists for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ groups.

The reasons behind under-representation vary from general challenges in accessing and navigating the university environment, to more specific ones as lack of financial resources, family support or networks (particularly in the case of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds), cultural barriers, stereotypes, and lack of role models for female and students from ethnic minority groups. Understanding which groups are under-represented and the reason for under-representation is crucial for the design of initiatives and policies.

2. Inclusion: Beyond Representation

Alongside diversity, several other terms are used (and sometimes misused) in this context. A clear understanding of these, their distinctions, and their relevance is crucial for everyone within the university community.

In higher education, we should strive for more than mere numerical representation. We should create inclusive structures and institutions where all individuals feel valued and recognised. This necessitates dismantling systemic barriers that hinder success based on specific traits. It is not just about bringing more individuals from marginalised backgrounds; efforts should also focus on dismantling institutionalised obstacles that perpetuate inequality and impede equitable access to opportunities. This concept falls under the umbrella of "inclusion," which refers to the active process of valuing all individuals within a group, regardless of their background or personal characteristics.

Attracting larger representation does not guarantee inclusion. Some groups may even be over-represented in some contexts; however, this is not reflected in their progression and promotion. Even if economics attracts a consistently large proportion of students from some ethnic minority groups in the UK, these are still more likely to drop out their studies, and economists from ethnic minorities are less likely to be promoted to senior roles. Hence, efforts in attracting higher diversity must be matched with more inclusive environments to allow this diversity to thrive.

Removing barriers to participation and ensuring equitable access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making processes for all contributes to a culture of mutual respect. This, in turn, fosters collaboration, innovation, and collective well-being.

3. Belonging: A Fundamental Human Need

Ultimately, inclusion should aim to foster a *sense of belonging* among group members. *Belonging* is a fundamental human biological need that we all seek to fulfil. It involves the interaction of cognitive, social, and environmental factors that cultivate feelings of purpose. Belonging refers to the feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, systems, and individual and collective experiences. It may be just as important as food, shelter, and physical safety for promoting health and wellbeing (Allen *et al.,* 2021). Feeling like we belong fosters feelings of security, self-worth, and purpose while reducing isolation and loneliness.

When we feel we belong, we are more likely to feel motivated, engaged and invested in our activities. In an educational setting, students' sense of belonging is rooted in their experiences within the learning environment and is influenced by their social interactions with lecturers and peers (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). In a workplace setting, workers' sense of belonging matters for commitment and engagement with the institution. Feelings of exclusion lead to an immediate decline in an individual's performance, while feelings of belonging make employees less likely to leave and more likely to recommend their organisation as a good place to work (Carr *et al.,* 2019). This applies equally to university staff, both academic and professional. University staff wear multiple hats and go above and beyond the call of duty to provide a positive environment for students. The lack of recognition of these contributions significantly hinders the development of a sense of belonging for both staff and students.

4. Decolonisation: Bringing History into Knowledge Creation

"Decolonisation" is another term we may encountered when discussing diversity. While a detailed discussion of decolonising practices in education falls outside the scope of this chapter, a basic understanding may be useful. Decolonisation has become highly politicised term in some environments, leading to misunderstandings about its relevance to diversifying universities and fostering a sense of belonging. The explanation of this concept is intentionally longer as it requires more unpacking than others and will not be treated anywhere else in the chapter.

The concept of decolonisation is not new, in fact it emerged alongside the process of colonisation itself.[7] Colonialism involved dominating spaces and

[7] The explanation in this subsection is based on "How to Start Decolonising Social Sciences?" a co-creation project I led on during my tenure as Deputy Chair of the Education Committee at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Warwick, available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/decolonisingss/decolonising_social_sciences_workbook.pdf or on my personal webpage.

imposing ideologies, religion, believes, and knowledge on the colonised peoples. It established political hierarchies between colonisers and colonised, creating new power relations and a social order. Decolonisation, therefore, goes beyond specific political struggles or conflicts for independence. It aims to dismantle the power and social relations and structures created by colonialism and still persistent.

Decolonising education calls for increasing awareness of the historical and cultural context in which the knowledge we teach was created. Decolonising education does not aim to erase history or events that happened in the past –this is not possible– but rather to consider how current educational structures reflect the power dynamics established during colonialism. Applying this concept to education can indeed be very challenging even for committed academics. However, there are many examples of decolonial practices we can learn from.[8] As Morreira *et al.,* (2020) suggest, "there is no one single way of implementing decolonial thought and practice in the classroom, and this may well be recognised as a strength rather than a limitation." This openness can help us to overcome barriers and contribute to the project of decolonising higher education.

In the Western European context, decolonising education should go beyond simply including diverse voices in the curriculum, *e.g.,* by diversifying reading lists. It needs a critical examination of the entire curriculum and a questioning the centrality of *Eurocentric knowledge*. This necessitates a re-evaluation of the foundations of knowledge production and how it is linked to specific histories and cultures (Gopal, 2021).

Universities can take the lead in addressing this by re-examining what and how we know, how knowledge entered the curriculum, and what historical events impacted this process. This in turn can allow to incorporate diverse voices and perspectives and acknowledge and respect different ways of knowing. It can also contribute to understand the impact of that cultural background has on learning. By exposing students to a wider range of role models and knowledge systems, decolonising education fosters a more inclusive learning

[8] For an overview of the origins of the study of decolonisation, some short introductions are available: Jansen, J. and Osterhammel, J. (2017). *Decolonization: A Short History.* Princeton University Press; *Kennedy, D. (2016). Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Young, R. (2016) *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction.* Wiley-Blackwell.

For a review of the philosophical development of decolonial thought see Maldonado-Torres (2011, in Spanish). Este (2017) evaluates the relationship between methodology, power, imperialism, colonialism, and empire, and includes a brief history of the construction of "methodologies" during the Enlightenment period. Shahjahan *et al.* (2021) offer a review of decolonising curriculum and pedagogy initiatives. More examples are offered in Alvares and Faruqi (2012), Bhambra *et al.* (2018), Moghli and Kadiwal (2021).

environment, by addressing some historical inequalities and creating greater sense of belonging for some groups.

IV. MICRO-AFFIRMATIONS: YOUR ROLE AS A UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY MEMBER

We may not realise it, but in our daily lives, we may rely on and reproduce many stereotypes that contribute to the alienation of some groups. Students and staff from under-represented backgrounds are likely to be exposed to microaggressions, or subtle everyday invalidations or dismissals that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes towards these groups. These micro-aggressions reinforce stereotypes and have cumulative effect and can take a toll on a person's well-being and health. They cause emotional distress, reduce sense of belonging, and contribute to internalisation of negative beliefs about oneself and one's group (Nadal *et al.,* 2014). Even when unintentional, micro-aggressions are a form or discrimination and violence. We need to work on addressing these.

We can start by engaging with *micro-affirmations:* small gestures or statements that communicate respect, understanding, and inclusion for colleagues and students from under-represented groups. These substitute messages about deficit and exclusion by contributing to acknowledge and value identities and contributions. These highlight strengths, contributions and are often subtle but specific to a person's identity or experience. Some ideas:[9]

- *Setting Expectations*: Clearly outline respectful behaviour expectations in every meeting with colleagues. When teaching, outline this in your syllabus and reiterate them during the first class. Most universities have codes of conduct with consequences for disruptive or offensive behaviour. Make everybody aware of these.

- *Active listening*: Hearing what is being shared. Through eye contact, open body posture, asking qualifying questions to ensure understanding, demonstrating that we are listening to others' views and opinions.

- *Respecting Identities*: Recognise people's identities by pronouncing names correctly and using their preferred pronouns. Names are central to our identities, and correct pronunciation demonstrates respect. Mispronunciation can lead to feelings of isolation. In some

[9] Some of these are adapted from Powell *et al.* (2013).

cultures, names hold cultural significance. Respecting pronouns affirms an individual's gender identity and appropriate use of pronouns is associated with better mental health outcomes, including reduced depression and suicide risk (Russell *et al.,* 2018).

- *Proactive Pronunciation*: Take time to learn how to pronounce names beforehand.[10] Introduce yourself with your name and pronouns to create a comfortable environment for others to do the same. Remember: it is ok to ask. Do not allow fear or embarrassment to stop from engagement with this practice. The benefits of inclusivity outweigh any initial awkwardness.

- *Inclusive Language*: Be mindful of the language you use in your emails, communications, lectures, and teaching materials. Avoid gendered language or stereotypes about any group. When teaching, ensure your examples and case studies reflect the diversity of your student body without resorting to stereotypes.

- *Celebrating Diversity*: In your department, you can organise activities to recognise and celebrate the diversity of colleagues' backgrounds and experiences, decorating the building for various cultural celebrations, offering spaces to carry on cultural activities. For instance, in universities with Muslim communities, it is becoming more common to organise iftar fast breaking meals. I created a calendar of the main religious and cultural celebrations that my students may celebrate and prepare a slide in correspondence of these events to show in the classroom. This small gesture shows colleagues and students that their culture and values are recognised by the classroom community.

- *Recognising and validating experiences*: Expressing care about the effect of the event and demonstrating a willingness to think and act to create a path to move forward.

- *Affirming emotional reactions*: Verbal acknowledgement of experiences and feelings can help the conversation to focus on turning those feelings towards actions that will empower and heal.

1. Becoming an Ally and Active Bystander

Progress towards a more inclusive university requires everyone's participation. No matter how prepared we are, conflicts can happen. While

[10] For English speakers, https://www.pronouncenames.com can be useful, but there are many others.

under-represented groups experience the most significant barriers, the solutions should involve all of us. We need to educate ourselves on intervention strategies to address issues. We need to become *allies*.

An *ally* is someone from the dominant group who actively works to end discrimination and support marginalised groups (Washington and Evans, 2000). Allies often have greater credibility with their own in-group when advocating for anti-discriminatory practices as they are not seen as advocating for their own interest (Drury and Kaiser, 2014). By treating everyone with respect, allies help to counter exclusionary behaviour (Carr *et al.,* 2019). However, it is important to avoid narratives portraying marginalised groups as "needing help" to succeed. Allies should work collaboratively alongside these groups, not for them (Patton and Bondi, 2015).

To become an ally, we need to educate ourselves and understand how bias and privilege works. Many colleagues may struggle to recognise acts of discrimination. Therefore, a strategy to cultivate allies should involve open and honest dialogue about existing institutional initiatives, address any misconceptions, and highlight the benefits of creating a culture of belonging for everyone. We all share a fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, however, allyship is a journey, not a destination. Mistakes in this journey are inevitable; what matters is the commitment to learn, adapt, and keep moving forward.

Engaging with the micro-affirmations are one aspect of the ally's role. It is also important to become an *active bystander.* Active bystanders intervene when they witness discrimination or a potentially harmful situation. Active bystanders are guided by empathy and a sense of responsibility to intervene. We can adopt a "four Ds" framework for safe intervention:[11]

- *Direct*: If safe, directly confront the situation using "I" statements. For example, "I'm uncomfortable with what I just heard."
- *Distract*: When direct intervention is unsafe, create a diversion to shift the focus away from the target of the harassment.
- *Delegate*: Enlist someone else (or a group) to intervene *e.g.*, people in senior positions, security, etc.

[11] Adapted from "Breaking the Silence", a University of Cambridge campaign for preventing harassment and sexual misconduct https://www.breakingthesilence.cam.ac.uk/prevention-support/be-active-bystander#:~:text=How%20You%20Can%20Intervene%20Safely%3A,%2C%20distract%2C%20delegate%2C%20delay. This was also adopted by the diversity work of the Royal Economic Society in the campaign "Be the Change: The Role of Active Bystanders" https://res.org.uk/res-video-be-the-change-the-role-of-active-bystanders/

- *Delay*: Offer support to the person affected afterwards or, if safe, address the behaviour with the person responsible for the behaviour.

There are many situations in which we may need to apply this into academia: during meetings, seminars, causal conversations, and social events. Be aware of your surroundings and potential problems that may arise. This is not always easy, but the more of us are ready and prepare to become an active bystander, the easier it gets.

Resource yourself. Building peer support networks is vital when engaging with this work. Active networks of allies and bystanders foster a sense of community and provide a support system for addressing social injustices. Maintaining connections with under-represented groups is also crucial. The more we understand their challenges, the more likely we are to become effective allies and bystanders (Bennett *et al.,* 2014; Bennett *et al.,* 2017). Finally, universities need to improve reporting systems., which in many cases are not effective and are not trusted by the academic community. Negative experiences with reporting can lead to bystander inaction and decreased reporting rates (Nicksa, 2014; Meyer, 2008).

Above all, be patient and persistent. Creating a more inclusive culture takes time and sustained efforts; do not get discouraged by setbacks (they will happen) and keep advocating for change.

V. FOSTERING BELONGING: CREATING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

> "Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom". Bell Hooks (1994), *Teaching to Transgress*, p. 11

The call for more diversity in higher education demands the creation of inclusive learning environments where this diversity can thrive. These environments encompass both physical spaces (classrooms, buildings, cultural and sport venues, etc.) and virtual spaces (virtual learning environments, webpages) that directly influence student experiences and success.

Despite students entering with similar qualifications and prior knowledge, significant demographic awarding gaps persist. Discriminatory teaching practices, exclusionary attitudes from lectures and peers,

microaggressions, and the lack of safe spaces can all contribute to these disparities (Smith and Bath, 2006). Universities not always appreciate or understand the extent of these disparities, often justifying the gaps rather than actively addressing them (Mountford-Zimdars *et al.,* 2015).

While acknowledging the significance of the entire university experience, including extracurricular activities, supportive communities, and inclusive policies, this section prioritises areas where we, as educators, can exert the most immediate influence: teaching and assessments practices.

We also acknowledge that implementing these changes requires time and leadership support. Unfortunately, these changes are often left to the discretion of individual lecturers, rather than being integrated into systematic change. Many universities express a desire to implement change yet fail to allocate time in staff workloads to facilitate it and lack recognition processes to commend those who actively engage with it. This can be demoralising for staff and punitive for students who see only clustered progress. Hence, we hope this section serves to those who have some dedicated time and resources to engage with this and need ideas on how to start.

1. Inclusive Teaching Practices and the Learning Environment

Lecturers significantly influence the learning environment through their teaching methods, engagement strategies, and communication styles. We can choose to adopt some pedagogical strategies to contribute to creating non-discriminatory spaces that reduce inequalities. Here I present some ideas to promote some thinking and start the change.

1.1. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal design for learning (UDL) is a comprehensive framework for creating flexible learning environments that cater to the diverse student needs. Based on research in neuroscience and the nature of learning, UDL aims to remove barriers for students when engaging with the learning environment. It is built on three core principles:

1. *Multiple means of engagement*: This focuses on capturing and sustaining student interest and motivation by offering various ways for students to connect with the learning material.

2. *Multiple means of representation*: This focuses on presenting information in different ways to cater to various learning styles and abilities.

3. *Multiple means of action and expression*: This focuses on providing different ways for students to demonstrate their understanding and learning.

Each principle is underpinned by research into the neuroscience of why, what, and how people learn (CAST, 2018). UDL principles ensure all students, regardless of background, ability, or learning style, have equal opportunities to succeed. It keeps students engaged, motivated, and offers multiple pathways to understanding.

It should be clear by now that the way as we learn varies a lot. For instance, in the UK, it is estimated that 30-40% of the population are neurodiverse (adhdaware.org.uk). The concept of neurodiversity highlights the fact that people have different cognitive strengths and weaknesses. It acknowledges that there is no single "correct" way of thinking, learning, and behaving (Baumer and Freud, 2021). UDL aligns well with neurodiversity by proactively addressing learning differences and reducing the need for extensive individualisation in classrooms.

For example, creating predictable classroom routines and allowing wait time for responses can benefit neurodiverse students (Rentenback *et al.,* 2017). These strategies, along with fostering a welcoming and inclusive environment, empower students to learn and thrive.

1.2. Curriculum Differentiation: Recognising Diverse Student Experiences

Lecturers can create inclusive curricula by critically examining what we teach. The curriculum is our primary channel of communication with students, and for this to be effective, it needs to resonate with their diverse experiences.

Student interests significantly impact how they engage with learning materials. Connecting the curriculum to students' experiences help to build upon existing strengths and knowledge, fostering deeper engagement. To achieve this, we need to recognise the diversity of student backgrounds and knowledge. By recognising these differences, we empower students to leverage their strengths, address areas of challenge, and ultimately, take ownership of their learning journey (CAST, 2018).

Understanding each student's background in large classes can be challenging but classroom activities can help. For instance, in an introductory Macroeconomics course, I asked students to "Describe a specific macroeconomic variable that has impacted you the most and perhaps motivated you to study economics?" Technologies like Padlet (padlet.com) allow students, and me, to share responses either anonymously or with their names in a virtual board where everyone can see the diverse experiences represented. The range of responses is always fascinating, revealing the diverse experiences that brought students to economics, and allowing me to tailor examples in future classes and teaching approach to better connect with their backgrounds.

Surveys with targeted questions about student needs and access to resources can be another valuable tool. An example from the COVID-19 online teaching period demonstrates the value of this approach. By surveying students about internet access, technology, study spaces, financial concerns, and time constraints, I gained valuable insights into potential barriers to engagement. Based on the results, I provided a list of university support services and adjusted my teaching pace to offer alternative resources. While this survey addressed the COVID-19 challenges, it demonstrates the value of identifying student needs and challenges in any large diverse class.

We should also consider the examples that we use when teaching, and their impact on different group of students. For instance, research shows that girls are often less motivated by financial rewards and more driven by social and environmental issues (Crawford *et al.,* 2018). Hence, a curriculum solely focused on financial success might fail to engage a significant portion of the student body. We need to be careful to base our examples on traditional textbooks which may have their biases too. Stevenson and Zlotnick (2018) analysed leading economics textbooks and found that 75% of all mentioned individuals in examples were men. Economists, policymakers, and business leaders overwhelmingly portrayed as men, misrepresenting the gender distribution in these roles.

1.3. Embrace Reflexive Teaching Practice

Reflexive teaching involves self-reflection, observation, and improvement of our teaching practices. It contributes to informing what we are doing and the impact of our work on student learning. It includes questioning our underlying assumptions about teaching and learning, experimenting with new methods, and actively seeking out feedback to continuously adapt our approach to better support students.

Through examining and self-reflecting on our teaching, we can rethink our own teaching practices and how these can facilitate (or hinder) the creation of more inclusive teaching environments. This process requires honest observation of your words, actions, and decisions, considering how they impact students. Table 1 provides some questions to guide self-reflexive analysis.

TABLE 1

STARTING OUR SELF-REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS OF OUR OWN TEACHING

Macro-questions	*Follow-ups*
Was my lecture effective?	Why? Why not? How can it be improved?
What were my expectations?	What expectations I had on my own delivery? What expectations I had about the students in the classroom? What expectations I had on students' knowledge? What expectations I made about students who were not in the classroom? Were these expectations realistic? Did I make these expectations explicit to myself? Did I communicate these expectations to students
Which students were more engaged?	Do you feel students were comfortable asking questions? Which students asked most questions? Was there a group who never ask any question?
Did students struggle with the lecture?	Were students comfortable letting me know if they did not understand something? Which students were more comfortable in communicating their lack of understanding? How did I help those students struggling? Did I provide alternative opportunities to communicate lack of understanding?
If I were to do this lecture again, what would I change?	Who would benefit from these changes? How would these changes affect student engagement? How do these changes affect the interaction dynamics in the classroom?

Notes: These questions are adapted from Paredes-Fuentes *et al.* (2022).

Engaging with this process can help us identify unintentional biases that might be hidden in the choice of examples, language, or assumptions about student backgrounds and knowledge. Consider classroom interactions and student engagement to identify situations where students might feel excluded. Reflexive teaching encourages us to create strategies that promote respectful communication and ensure all students feel comfortable expressing themselves. By reflecting on the effectiveness of our teaching methods, we can experiment with new approaches that better engage a diverse student body. This ensures that all students feel welcome, valued, and empowered to learn. If you want to further explore this, Ashwin *et al.* (2020) offer a detailed guide on

developing a reflective approach in higher education and Sebolao (2019) shows how to use teaching portfolios for self-reflection.

2. The Importance of Inclusive Assessments

Assessments are arguably the primary way students engage with higher education. They significantly influence how students interact with the learning environment and instructors. Assessments deserve equal consideration as content and teaching methods as a vital component of teaching and learning. However, many academics lack expertise in pedagogy and often rely on traditional practices or personal experience when designing assessments. Limited time dedicated to assessment design, compared to content and delivery, further exacerbates the issue.

Assessments in higher education have indeed remained remarkably unchanged for decades and seem to adhere to consolidated academic conventions rather than their suitability for educational purposes (Bearman *et al.,* 2020). This is despite evidence that common high-stakes assessments, like closed-book final exams, contribute to achievement gaps for disadvantaged students (Madaus and Clarke, 2001; Jones, 2007; Heissel *et al.,* 2021).

For these reasons, assessments have become a central focus in my efforts to create inclusive learning environments. We all strive to create effective assessments that gauge student comprehension, skills, and subject proficiency. However, I argue that to be truly effective, assessments must also be inclusive. If assessments systematically penalise students due to design flaws, they fail to accurately measure learning and create barriers to demonstrating achievement.

Inclusive assessments are intentionally designed to be fair and equitable for all students. Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be applied to assessments as well. Accessibility and flexibility are at the core of UDL for assessments. Accessibility ensures all students can understand the assessment instructions. Techniques like avoiding jargon, maintaining consistent formatting, and using headings benefit all learners, especially those with reading difficulties or language barriers. Organising content logically and breaking it up can further aid students with cognitive or attention-related disabilities. Flexibility involves offering alternatives to minimise the impact of irrelevant factors on assessment performance. Engaging with this we should be able to decrease the need of individual accommodations.

In contrast, traditional assessments in higher education tend to be narrow in focus, primarily testing knowledge of a subject. While knowledge assessment

is important, this limited focus neglects the broader scope of assessments and the pedagogical reasons for assessing.

2.1. A Framework for Inclusive Assessment Design

In Paredes-Fuentes (2024), I present a framework for inclusive assessment design that uses an inquisitive approach, considering three key aspects: subject, students, and purpose. In addition to knowledge testing and engagement with learning outcomes, it is crucial to acknowledge that students' backgrounds and experiences significantly shape their interest, engagement, and overall approach to assessments. Each assessment should have a clear purpose beyond simply evaluating learning. A well-designed assessment plan incorporates a variety of assessments that foster engagement, nurture passion for the subject, help students scaffold knowledge, and bridge prior knowledge with new learning outcomes.

The framework recommends starting with questions about your current assessment design. While the framework is detailed in Paredes-Fuentes (2024), we can explore its application through two assessment examples:

> *Assessment 1 (Final Year Project – Psychology, 30%):* Write 750 words analysing how different schools of thought in psychology explain the rise of mental health issues among students.
>
> *Assessment 2 (Intermediate Economics, 10%):* Create a 3-min video explaining how an increase in interest rates affect mortgage rates for a general audience.

Understanding the context is crucial. Assessment 1 is part of a final year project on mental health in universities. It aims to prepare students for writing a policy report on the topic. Assessment 2, with a lower weighting, focuses on engagement and communication skills. For each assessment we can enquire on the who/what/when/how, etc that helps us understand its efficacy and effectiveness.

Who Are We Assessing?

Diversity in the classroom is key. Consider how backgrounds influence student responses. For example, in Assessment 1, international students might have different perspectives on mental health. Additionally, under-represented groups might be more impacted by the topic. For Assessment 2, consider the

target audience for the video. To avoid favouring some groups of students over others, we may want to present with two or more topics for students to choose from.

Which assumptions I am making about students?

We all have biases about "good answers." Reflect on your own experiences and how they might influence your expectations (see Section on *reflexive teaching*). For Assessment 1, you can ensure students understand what is a "policy report" and how they are used. This may seem obvious to us, but it is not necessarily the case for some 19-20 years old students. For Assessment 2, we can provide context: Who is making the video and why? Role-plays can clarify the task (*e.g.*, "the government aims to launch a campaign explaining interest rates to the public").

Why are we assessing?

Clearly communicate the purpose of each assessment. For Assessment 1, explain how it scaffolds the final project and how they should use this in their final submission. For Assessment 2, emphasise developing communication skills as a skill requested by employers. Understanding the "why" also helps establish marking criteria.

When does the assessment take place?

Consider assessment timing. For Assessment 1, we need enough time for feedback and reflection before the submission of the final project in order to be used as a scaffold. If the main aim of Assessment 2 is to promote engagement, it needs to occur during the term.

What are we assessing?

Both assessments can evaluate a broad range of skills. Assessment 1 can assess understanding of various schools of thought, information synthesis from multiple sources, and/or the use of reference lists. Assessment 2 can assess comprehension of interest rates and their economic impact, communication of complex concepts, and/or use of audio-visual communication tools. Whatever specific skill, or combination of skills, should be explicitly highlighted to students and be reflected in the marking criteria, otherwise we will not be able to fairly mark the assessment.

How does the assessment contribute to learning?

Completing assessments does not guarantee learning. We must make the connection explicit. Explicitly indicate how assessments links to learning outcomes of the module.

No matter the assessment you chose, there are some basic considerations that can be applied to all type of assessments:

- *Clear instructions:* Provide clear, concise, well-structured assessment instructions and criteria. Students should understand expectations, how the work connects to learning outcomes, and how it will be graded.

- *Accessibility:* While often not in the lecturer's control, alternative formats like larger print or audio recordings should be provided when needed. Students with disabilities might benefit from extended exam times, assistive technologies, or breaks. These may be established by university policies, and these should be communicated clearly to students.

- *Financial Accessibility:* Consider the financial implications of completing the assessment. For instance, if you are required to produce a printed version, how the cost of this affects the potential of students to complete the assessment? What are the resources available? When creating some outputs (videos, etc.), what resources are available to students? What could be the financial constraints?

- *Clear and Actionable Feedback:* Feedback does not need to be very long, but it must be constructive and provide a guide for future improvement. Sometimes we focus too much in justifying our mark, rather than explaining how to get to the next level.

Finally, remember that inclusive assessments are not about making things easier. The goal is to ensure assessment outcomes reflect student learning and engagement with the subject, not factors like disability, financial means, or irrelevant personal characteristics. If you have systematic awarding gaps in your assessments, it is likely that these factors are influencing your students' performance.

3. The Holistic Student Experience

As discussed earlier, the student experience extends beyond learning environments and assessments. Non-academic activities are an integral part of

university life, enriching it in various ways that contribute to diversity, inclusivity, and a rewarding experience. These activities foster both formal and informal networks among economics students, which can have long-term implications for their academic progression and overall outcomes. Additionally, such activities contribute to students' sense of belonging to the institution (Anh and Davies, 2020).

Universities can take several steps to create more inclusive environments beyond classrooms.[12] Some institutions have launched initiatives to:

- *Reconsider the alcohol-centric nature of many events*: Common in many Western universities, offering alternatives could involve a wider variety of activities with varying social atmospheres and at different times of the days.

- *Create spaces for different groups to network*: This might involve creating specific events or clubs for students from under-represented backgrounds or with shared interests. These spaces have shown to help by addressing feelings of isolation and provide spaces to discuss challenges, but also to propose solutions.

- *Promote understanding of cultural differences in social interaction*: This could involve workshops or discussions that explore how different cultures approach large group settings.

Furthermore, improving support services, reporting systems, and creating safe spaces are crucial. Financial inclusion also requires significant consideration in the current environment. These are only some ideas to start the conversation. Each university should study their own culture and how their environments include or exclude certain groups, and how these can be reconfigured to improve the overall experience.

Despite these efforts, students from under-represented groups may still face discrimination and violence. As lecturers, we can foster empathy by acknowledging that students may have experienced such situations in the past. We can provide a classroom environment that promotes healing from these experiences, rather than perpetuating suffering.

[12] We share some ideas for economics in "Economics for All: 7 Action Points to make Economics More Inclusive".

VI. UNIVERSITIES AS WORKPLACES: DIVERSITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG STAFF

A sense of belonging is not just crucial for students; it's equally important for university staff. Traditionally, academia has constructed a narrow image of the "ideal" academic: upper-middle class, male, and without caring responsibilities (Moreau and Campbell Galman, 2022). This stereotype creates pressure for staff from under-represented groups to suppress their identities to fit in. As discussed earlier, these groups are also more likely to face discrimination and have their contributions overlooked.

While extensive literature explores structural inequalities and diversity challenges within academia, research on effective strategies to foster inclusion and a sense of belonging is less developed. However, there is a growing body of research emerging in recent years. This Section explores some promising practices and invite universities to engage with this process at all levels.

1. What Works and What Does Not in the Workplace

A key challenge to understand "what works" on diversity and inclusion is that diversity itself is contextual. Efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging must consider the specific under-represented and marginalised groups within the institution and society.

A crucial first step for crafting effective strategies is gathering data to understand the challenges faced by under-represented groups and instances of under-recognition. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) offers guidelines for data collection in a UK context (CIPD, 2019).

Research demonstrates that diversity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives only succeed with strong leadership involvement at all levels (Green and Young, 2019). Management must set clear data-informed goals and actively promote these activities. They should acknowledge these efforts as core institutional functions and establish clear accountability mechanisms at every stage (Kalev *et al.,* 2006; Castilla, 2015; Richard *et al.,* 2013). Individual initiatives, without strong leadership, may be counterproductive and send unintended signals (Dover *et al.,* 2019).

What does not work? Research suggests that colourblind initiatives that attempt to separate race and ethnicity from issues rooted in structural racism are ineffective (Block, 2016; Portocarrero and Carter, 2022). Colour blindness avoids discussions of inequality and equity and ignores realities of

discrimination. Similarly, attempts to frame diversity too broadly as a response to backlash from high-status groups, suggesting their personal attributes contribute more to diversity than demographic characteristics, have little impact on reducing inequalities (Dover *et al.,* 2020). This approach risks falling back into colourblindness and neglecting to address structural inequalities.

The literature on mandatory diversity training is mixed, with some studies showing it to be less effective than voluntary training (Bezrukova *et al.,* 2016; Kalev *et al.,* 2006; Portocarrero and Carter, 2022). In academic contexts, evidence suggests interventions aiming to reduce implicit prejudice habits and empower people to break them may be more successful (Devine *et al.,* 2012; Devine *et al.,* 2017).

More recent efforts focus on creating a culture of belonging where all staff feel empowered to thrive. Kennedy and Jain-Link (2021) define workplace belonging as having four key aspects:

1. *Recognition of unique contributions:* Staff feel their individual strengths and perspectives are valued.

2. *Strong connections:* Strong relationships and a sense of community exist within the workplace.

3. *Support for daily work and development:* Staff receive support for their daily work and career growth.

4. *Pride of organisation's values and purposes:* Staff feel aligned with the institutions' values and mission.

To cultivate a truly inclusive environment, universities can strive for a culture of belonging in which all staff recognise the challenges faced by historically marginalised groups, and everybody understands their role in addressing these inequalities, while also seeing their efforts and contributions recognised. This fosters a sense of shared responsibility for addressing inequalities and working towards common goals. A culture of belonging can also help to the co-creation of solutions for challenges–including increasing diversity–faced by the institution.

Universities are large and complex structures. To seriously address structural inequalities and foster a culture of belonging for staff, these objectives need to be embedded in all practices at all levels. While listing all potential areas

is impossible, we can follow a staff member's journey through the academic system from recruitment to promotion. This allows us to consider how to embed inclusive practices at each stage, identify managerial responsibilities, accountability procedures, and recognition policies.

We can engage with successful practices from other institutions to draw inspiration, starting by actively revising current *hiring practices.* Bias can be embedded in recruitment materials through subjective terms like "culture fit" and unstated expectations for specific candidate characteristics. Research shows that using inclusive language and actively promoting diversity initiatives attracts a wider range of qualified applicants (Gaucher *et al.,* 2011; King *et al.,* 2012; Cunningham *et al.,* 2019; Phillips *et al.,* 2023).

Mentorship programmes are another well-established strategy, particularly when designed effectively. Mentors can significantly contribute to the professional and personal development of new staff, offering support, advocating for their growth, and providing valuable insights on navigating the university's complexities (Lunsford *et al.,* 2017). *Induction practices,* while less emphasised, offer a crucial opportunity to introduce new hires to the university's culture, processes, and resources. A well-designed induction programme can ensure new colleagues not only understand but also embrace the institution's values and become active contributors.

Finally, significant work is needed to address *promotion* practices in universities, particularly in the UK context where there are documented gaps in the pipeline from junior to senior positions. A narrow focus solely on research publications neglects the multifaceted contributions of academics which are needed for the successful running of the institutions: excellence in teaching, service to the university community, and contributions to university's strategy, including fostering diversity.

University managers must adopt a proactive approach to fostering a culture of belonging and equitable environments, moving beyond mere checkbox exercises. University leadership must set clear goals for middle managers, develop consultative actionable plans. It is crucial that staff understand how their individual contributions will be resourced, acknowledge, and integrated into the overall vision. Ambiguity in any of these aspects can lead to disagreements among staff members about the direction of the institution, potentially resulting in conflict and disputes over accountability. Leaders must be fully invested in the desired outcome: a future where universities are inclusive, there are no structural inequalities, have dismantled ivory walls, and are actively connected to local communities.

VII. THE ROAD AHEAD: TOGETHER WE CAN DISMANTLE IVORY TOWERS

Writing this chapter has filled me with hope. It has reminded me of the transformative power of education and the role we play in creating more inclusive academic environments. It reinforced my commitment to supporting students and colleagues on their academic journeys and create a true sense of belonging.

We must acknowledge the historical perception of universities as "ivory towers" –bastions of privilege, isolated from social concerns. Although modern universities are now positioned as a driver of social mobility and equality, the persistent realities of awarding gaps, limited diversity, and disconnection from local communities threaten to push them back towards that elitist image. We also should acknowledge the structural barriers and inequalities that affect some groups in our societies, and do not water down any efforts on addressing these as response to backlash.

To truly serve as a force for positive change, universities must ensure fair access, participation, and achievement for students and staff. Education should encompass not just narrow employability skills, but also personal development and cultural awareness, including educating staff and students about the experiences of historically marginalised and under-recognised groups in our communities. Dismantling these barriers requires a multi-pronged approach, with both systemic change and individual actions.

University management must lead the change. Simply making public pronouncements is insufficient. Leaders must acknowledge that creating an inclusive environment demands dedicated investment of time and resources. Ultimately, establishing a true sense of belonging hinges on cultivating a supportive community that promotes psychological safety, dismantles structural inequalities, and eliminates feelings of isolation. This requires establishing clear expectations for academic responsibilities as well as recognition schemes that value contributions beyond just research publications. Failure by management to address these issues can lead to conflict and resentment, undermining any goals of creating inclusive environments.

The challenges faced by academics themselves cannot be ignored. The "publish or perish" culture along with increasing workloads devalue the real contributions that academics make in supporting universities. University management must address these issues by prioritising staff well-being, addressing workload issues, and other concerns like casualisation and financial insecurity. Staff with low morale and limited resources struggles to foster inclusive

environments for others. Employment conditions for staff undoubtedly affect the quality of education students receive, highlighting the interconnectedness of the structural issues in academia.

Despite these challenges, I firmly believe that we can still take steps to foster more inclusive learning environments, particularly for students from under-represented backgrounds. The road ahead requires a collective effort, and by embracing individual responsibility, we can make this a more achievable goal. I hope this chapter provided inspiration to empowering academics and do not fall victims of the system, but resource ourselves to address challenges and contribute to a more inclusive academic environment.

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