

Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

#ACATHINKS

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Introduction to the series



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Irina Ferencz (she/her) is the Director of the Academic Cooperation Association, having worked in international higher education since 2008. Irina has specific expertise in the area of international student and staff mobility in the European context (data collections, trends, policies), as well as in planning, monitoring and assessing internationalisation activities at institutional and national level. Irina is an avid advocate for international higher education, and is active in multiple professional fora. Currently, she is also a PhD candidate at Ghent University.

In the last few years, the field of international higher education has witnessed a growing emphasis on access and inclusion. As we step into the next seven-year European Union (EU) financial framework (2021-2027), it is clear that inclusion has advanced from being just one consideration of many broader ambitions, into a top priority for higher education policies and programmes at the EU and broader European Higher Education Area (EHEA) levels, as well as for many national and regional governments across Europe.

Following 2020's successful run of ACA's "Think Pieces" series on The World after COVID-19, exploring the consequences on the international higher education sector, ACA is launching a new series of reflections from thought leaders around Europe on the theme of inclusion in international higher education.

To set the stage for this ongoing series we are first briefly considering both inclusion and internationalisation within the context of higher education's history in Europe. Taking a moment to reflect back on the past yields several rich takeaways for those of us working on embedding inclusion within international higher education in the present day.

In the second part of this introductory piece, we reflect on present day realities and what this specific ACA series has to contribute in order to advance the strategic thinking, planning and hard work of implementation towards widening the inclusiveness of international higher education activities in Europe.



Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights is a new “ACA Think Pieces” series launched in March 2021. Each contribution in this series will explore the multi-faceted nature of inclusion from a different international education perspective, including, for example: concrete advice regarding developing strategic inclusion plans for inclusive higher education mobility, how to measure progress on inclusion-related goals, practical examples of data collection to enhance diversity, synergies of excellent inclusion practices from the Erasmus+ youth sector relevant for higher education, etc. Articles will be authored by expert colleagues in internationalisation of higher education and inclusion, and will be published electronically on ACA’s website towards the end of each month from March until the end of 2021.

LESSONS FROM EUROPEAN HISTORY ON INCLUSION & INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

The origins of exclusion – as the juxtaposition to inclusion – in European higher education can be traced back to a group of academics and students at Europe’s first university, established in 1088 – the Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna – who bristled against institutional regulations which they found to be exclusive of alternative ideas and methodologies. Tensions reached a boiling point in 1222 and a large group of students and staff left Bologna to found the University of Padua, an institution that strived to be more inclusive of diverse approaches to scholarship. This aspiration to inclusion was encapsulated by the founders in their chosen motto for the newly founded university: *Universa universis patavina libertas* [Paduan freedom is universal for all].

A scholar of history examining this period through a critical lens of inclusion might ask what the term “all” signified at the time. Women certainly were not understood to be part of the “all” in the 1200s – neither were students from poorer families nor students with disabilities, among others. International students, though, were a part of early university communities, even in those nascent years. Both the Universities of Bologna and Padua (as well as other European universities of the era) drew students from all around the continent.

Roughly 400 years later, the University of Padua again made history in the field of inclusion in higher education when it awarded Europe’s first recorded PhD to a woman, Elena Lucrezia Cornaro-Piscopia. Cornaro-Piscopia was born out of wedlock as the daughter of a poor peasant mother who served as a mistress of a local nobleman in Venice. She went to live in a convent at an early age where she devoted herself to the study of languages. She mastered fluency in seven languages and such was the quality and volume of her research output that she was consulted for her expertise by academics and leaders from across Europe, including the court of Louis XIV, the King of Poland and Pope Innocent XI. A group of academics at the University of Padua were so impressed by her academic contributions and her international influence that in 1678 they convinced the University to award Cornaro-Piscopia a doctorate. The decision to award her an academic degree was not unanimous. It was an uncomfortable and contested institutional decision and it is important to take note that University leaders had to push hard to break social taboos at the time. It would be roughly another two centuries before women began to be more widely accepted to enter European universities but because of Cornaro-Piscopia, no university or government could say it was without precedent to admit women to study. And indeed, the inscription “Unico exemplo” [without precedent] is engraved below the statue of Cornaro-Piscopia which the University of Padua erected in her honour.

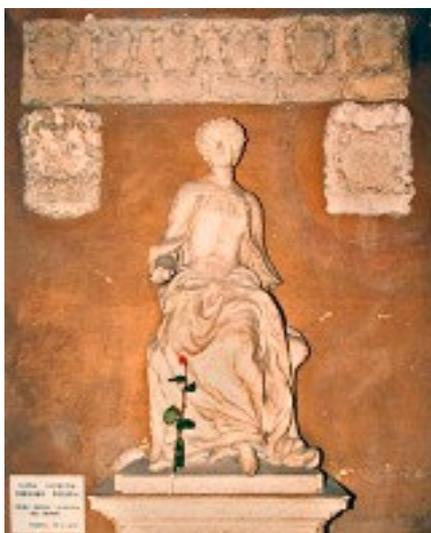


Image 1. Statue of Cornaro-Piscopia at the University of Padua



Image 2. Stained glass window commemorating the PhD conferring ceremony of Cornaro-Piscopia at Padua Cathedral installed at Vassar College (est. 1861), the first institution of higher education to grant degrees to women in the USA.

European higher education institutions have, from their very foundation, included and excluded staff and students based on a range of criteria. This is an essential contextual ingredient in the formation of the identity of the European higher education sector. While the meaning and full scope of higher education inclusion and internationalisation might have changed and broadened over time, the historical roots of the sector suggest that modern efforts to foster the inclusion of underrepresented groups at European higher education institutions cannot be fully addressed in silos (e.g. through parallel efforts, rather than joint strategic work of inclusion and diversity offices together with that of international relations offices). Indeed, a more intersectional approach is needed, which recognises the history of European higher education institutions fostering environments where some, but not all, international students could thrive.

In order to build a more inclusive future, higher education leaders and practitioners alike must take time to examine the past and present of European higher education through a critical prism which recognises that many voices – those of women and many others – were excluded for nearly a millennium. Higher education actors must devote resources not merely to programmatic initiatives to address the intersection of inclusions and internationalisation, but also to a complete analysis of higher education systems which have from the very beginning, excluded women, people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, people with disabilities, Roma peoples and people of different races and ethnicities. This exclusionary history of European higher education institutions underpins the persistent sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Black and anti-Asian realities that many students and staff report experiencing in our sector.

These selected historical breakthroughs of exclusion and inclusion at the Universities of Bologna and Padua offer those of us working to make international higher education more inclusive a few essential practical lessons:

1. To advance institutional inclusion, we must ask critical questions assessing if the current infrastructure of European higher education institutions is able to be reformed in fully inclusive ways or if the development of entirely new structures, which are universal in their design to allow inclusion for all, is needed.
2. Efforts to further embed inclusion within European higher education must intersect with internationalisation efforts in order to be successful – these two areas are not and have never been mutually exclusive in European higher education.
3. The life of Lucrezia Cornaro-Piscopia shows us that no progress can be made towards more inclusive higher education in Europe without breaking taboos, with institutions willing to dare and set new precedents.



The takeaway from this brief history lesson is a rich one: the challenge of establishing greater inclusion in international higher education is one we can only address with outside-the-box, intersectional thinking, which incorporates the voices of experts alongside voices of individuals and communities who have, for centuries, found international higher education to be both inhospitable and inaccessible. Thorough analysis of higher education systems and practices, informed by comprehensive self-reflective institutional data collection exercises, will be essential as a starting point for advancing towards modern-day inclusion objectives in the international higher education sector.

CONNECTING THE PAST WITH THE PRESENT – INCLUSION IN OUR DAYS AND TIMES

Fast-forwarding to a few centuries later – i.e. to our modern times – and particularly to the past few decades, we observe many sustained efforts on European, national and local stages to ensure that, first, access to higher education is improved, and secondly, that policy frameworks supporting institutional cooperation between higher education institutions, governments, national funding agencies and European bodies lead to the delivery of international opportunities which are increasingly more accessible. While the focus on increasing participation rates and widening access to higher education in Europe has been a constant policy and action concern for the last few decades (with the “social dimension” being set as a policy goal in the Bologna Process at the London Ministerial Conference in 2007, for example), the focus on inclusion in the internationalisation of higher education is more recent.

There is growing understanding in higher education that physical international mobility – a powerful and desirable life-changing experience – is only available to, and thus only benefits, a minority of students, very often of more privileged origins. While the Erasmus programme was founded with the vision of being an instrumental pillar of European higher education and European identity creation, it was evident for policy-makers and practitioners from the beginning that intentional development was needed to make physical mobility an accessible reality “for all”. A strengthening of the social inclusion objectives of the programme mid-through the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme period (as a response to both a wave of terrorist attacks in Europe and growing nationalism) revealed the importance of intercultural dialogue as a necessity, amongst others, to prevent radicalisation through more inclusive international education.

Consequently, there’s been a growing focus on inclusion in key European level policy documents, from the [2017 renewed EU agenda for higher education](#), via which the Commission committed to direct [Erasmus+](#) support to help higher education institutions (HEIs) develop and implement integrated institutional strategies for inclusion, to the [Commission’s proposal for the Erasmus + 2021-2027 programme, published in 2018](#), and which aimed to triple the beneficiaries of the programme, outlining inclusion as one of the programme’s horizontal priorities, and beyond. In the EU framework, the inclusion agenda was pushed significantly further by the European Parliament, which in the early stages of programme preparation and during inter-institutional negotiations insisted on the integration of a completely new chapter on Inclusion in the Erasmus+ programme regulation, calling, inter alia, for national level inclusion strategies and for indicators to monitor progress.

In 2019, a peer learning activity of the [ET2020 Working Group on Higher Education](#), showed that while social inclusion was high on the agenda in EU Member States, there were very few national strategies and comprehensive approaches with long-term policy commitments on social inclusion in higher education. The Working Group recommended that inclusion policies form part of a broader framework of cross-sectoral policies, including internationalisation. Indeed, a new EU-level strategy on inclusion, covering the field of higher education, is expected to be launched in the coming months.

Enhancing the social dimension of higher education has been also a central pillar of the Bologna Process, as reconfirmed by the 2018 [Paris Communiqué](#) and in even stronger language, by the 2020 [Rome Communiqué](#). The latter’s annexed *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA* expressly spell out, under [point 8](#), the key priorities for inclusive international mobility for the European Higher Education Area. These are the most well-defined policy guidelines produced to date within the Bologna Process regarding inclusive mobility and internationalisation.

In parallel to these recent European policy developments, several noteworthy transnational projects and initiatives have been launched in the past several years, setting the ground for further advancing the inclusion-related policies and practices. Among these [the MappED platform](#), [the EPFIME project \(Policy and Framework on Inclusive Mobility](#)



[across Europe](#)], and the [PLAR-4-SIMP project](#) are particularly noteworthy examples of best practice development regarding inclusion in international higher education. Also noteworthy is the foundation of the [Inclusive Mobility Alliance](#), which gathers 21 organisations with high expertise in higher education and youth mobility and disability and which put forward [17 recommendations](#) targeting EU, national and local level stakeholders and aimed at making the Erasmus+ programme more inclusive for all.

ACA's own sustained engagement with the topic of inclusion is equally a recent development, beginning in 2019 with [an event titled Internationalisation for all? Wider inclusion in the internationalisation of higher education](#) and the [ACA Reflection Paper of the same name](#). Both called for broadening the conversation about inclusion well beyond inclusive mobility to other internationalization activities, such as joint study programmes, strategic partnerships, internationalisation of the curriculum, transnational education, etc. and for developing holistic approaches in reaching out to the growing variety of underrepresented groups in international higher education activities, breaking down existing institutional and competence silos.

In March 2021, with the upcoming official launch of the next generation of EU programmes in higher education, we are now at a new crossroads, with high-reaching policy ambitions on inclusion and much work ahead for truly widening inclusion in EU programmes and in internationalisation activities more broadly. The launch of this new ACA Think Pieces series on the topic of inclusion and at this particular moment in time is not coincidental.

With this series, ACA intends to provide a frame of reference, inspiration and relevant examples for the monumental inclusion work ahead of our sector. Specifically, the series aims to add texture to the conversation about inclusion in internationalisation by arguing for an understanding of inclusion-related work as a comprehensive process of strategically planning, concretely designing and taking targeted measures to ensure that all participants can enjoy the full benefits of internationalisation activities. For European higher education institutions and related national organisations to comprehensively address inclusion and equity in our sector, resources must be earmarked for the design and delivery of systems which fully support the nuanced intersectional experiences of staff and students who have found it difficult to access and take full advantage of international learning opportunities.

In the coming months, the expert authors of the 2021 ACA "Think Pieces" series will provide candid insights on breaking institutional taboos, practical examples of how to design inclusive institutional internationalisation strategies, how to identify and track data of underrepresented demographic groups, and to implement inclusive communication techniques, among other enriching observations. Solutions to the complex web of challenges presented by the nuances of international higher education inclusion will only be fully realised with innovative and sustained cooperation between institutions and organisations operating in the academic field on local, national and European levels.

To assist colleagues in the international sector identify best practice resources to move towards nuanced solutions, ACA is delighted to spotlight leading voices of inclusion and internationalisation every month between now and the end of 2021. We look forward to learning alongside you from the expert contributors who will add their valuable and urgent perspectives on inclusion to this new "Think Piece" series!

The next article will be published at the end of April 2021 and will feature a reflection from our inspiring colleague Christina Bohle, the Head of the European Office at Philipps-Universität Marburg (Germany), on the topic of how higher education institutions can support better alignment between international offices and staff focused on inclusion matters. All of us here in the ACA secretariat in Brussels look forward with enthusiasm to the words and wisdom of our expert colleagues on a subject very central to our mission: inclusion in international higher education.