



Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

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OCTOBER 2021

Internationalisation for all:
Belonging or not, that is the question



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Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all is the fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal. Leadership in and for higher education internationalisation has to, we therefore contend, be driven by a commitment to provide all students with equitable opportunities to engage in international activities and learning. We know from research that anything less will lead to internationalisation reproducing or even enhancing the social inequalities we currently observe in societies and institutions.

Universities today, must demonstrate and promote leadership that advances higher education institutions' (HEIs) social and moral responsibility and contributes to a more cohesive and inclusive society. Through their leadership, they can do this by enhancing intercultural understanding, civic engagement, and ethical awareness, as well as by ensuring equitable access to higher education. Readers may recognise in these lines the wording of the 2018 Paris Communiqué on the progress of the European Higher Education Area. The higher education sector has not been entirely stagnate in promoting these goals. Indeed, in Europe as well as elsewhere, HEIs are attempting to respond to these societal urgencies and to include equity in access along with student success as a priority in their strategies and policies. In this sense, we can observe an increasing institutional focus on curriculum internationalisation at home goals and activities, with a view to engaging all students in the internationalisation effort, regardless of their socio-economic background or ability to travel. By educating graduates who are locally minded and globally capable, HEIs aim to deliver a meaningful contribution to the societies they are a part of. These stated strategic intentions to create inclusive, international learning experiences for all are commendable. Critical questions remain, however. Are HEIs truly changing into inclusive, international communities of learning and teaching, which speak to all students and thus spark a sense of belonging to that community? What can we learn from their lived experiences of student belongingness? How is inclusivity manifested at all levels in the institution and for students in the day-to-day practices that are often taken for granted?

In this article we share some experiences of international, minority, and other non-traditional students to explore how inclusive our institutions actually are, and we explain how a student's sense of belonging can be a measure of an institution's inclusiveness.

Moreover, guiding questions for higher education internationalisation leaders to critically reflect on their implicit daily practices and procedures are offered with a focus on considering how these can enhance or hinder students' sense of belonging. The narratives are based on students' experiences within universities that we know.

BELONGINGNESS AS A MEASURE OF INCLUSIVITY: WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG

Belongingness and inclusivity can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Inclusivity in a higher education context refers to the extent to which the rich variety of voices, perspectives, and experiences of students is intentionally considered and is equally relevant for institutional decision-making. It's institutionally focused. Belongingness points to a student's sense of connection to one's own university, which among others is enhanced by a strong social support network and an appropriate balance between academic challenge and mentoring. It is relationship focused. According to substantive research in this area, a student's sense of belonging is positively associated with increased intercultural engagement and academic achievement. The narrative below illustrates how a student's agency and social initiative manifested opportunities for intercultural engagement, and created the conditions for belongingness and academic success.

Social support, intercultural engagement and academic achievement

"Becoming a member of the student rowing club was one of the best decisions when starting university abroad. Being part of a team was not only good for my physical health, but also for my emotional and mental health. I was lucky to get into the team because of my strength. And we connected! Most of my team members became my friends, and they helped me understand how things functioned at the university and in this country. We supported each other in our studies and helped each other to succeed."



However, student experiences of belongingness are not just a matter of their own individual agency. From the perspective of students, their sense of belonging within a university is primarily associated with their daily experiences with the curriculum in its broadest sense. Curriculum, as Leask (2015) operationalises the term, encompasses the formal, informal and hidden. To understand students' sense of belonging, we first need to consider two primary questions: How are students' experiences framed by the formal, informal and hidden curriculum? How are bias, prejudice, and inequality addressed in the curriculum, in the service functions, and in the culture of the institution? Empathic and honest, heart-felt answers to these types of questions have the potential to reveal how inclusive our institutions actually are. They can also reveal where we can do better. To illustrate simply, consider the following dialogue as this relates to the formal curriculum. In this interaction, the second lecturer demonstrates the importance of understanding an issue before expressing a judgement.

In the search of understanding

In a team meeting a lecturer muses about a specific student with a colleague saying: "My impression is that this programme is way over his head. He does not engage much and is not participating in the study abroad opportunity." His colleague replies: "I am not sure about the programme being over his head. I agree that he does not engage much, so I talked to him after class, and he explained that he is the carer for his father in his family and this responsibility is almost 24/7. I believe that he is bright student, who just needs appropriate help. I've directed him to support services and I am working with him to find other forms of international learning opportunities."

This example first illustrates the persistent and pervasive issue of deficit thinking, as this relates not only to the integration of international students into the local learning environment, but also to non-traditional or ethnic minority students; and second, how students are supported to access equal opportunity resources in universities. It also highlights how, in this context, students may experience stereotyping, profiling, and/or labelling because of their perceived socio-economic status, ethnic and or cultural background, as well as religious and/or sexual orientation or condition.

While most institutions espouse and/or promote cultural diversity as the latter situation demonstrates, further questions relating to students' experiences of an institution's approach to cultural diversity are illuminated. Within the context of the hidden curriculum, seemingly benign day-to-day and transactional interactions can signal unintended, yet exclusionary practices. For example, the next account highlights an often observed misunderstanding between what university staff intend to communicate, how this is interpreted and understood by students, and how such misunderstandings may lead to feelings of exclusion.

"We are here to help"

"The librarian told me I could ask for help any time; that the student helpers are there to support us, the incoming international students. I was so pleased with this offer. I felt that someone understood me and was paying attention to me. So, I felt really confused, and hurt, when he told me later that I was taking up too much of their time. He told me that I could of course ask for books and articles, but not discuss my personal difficulties/life anymore, as they are not there for that. And then, he referred me to the student welfare and mental health service. I feel so misunderstood and clumsy. I just miss my family. Now, I see the student helpers chatting with each other all the time. I do not understand."



These examples show that it is not only important to review the underlying assumptions and the daily practices in the formal and informal curriculum, we also need to consider the hidden dimensions, which are of critical importance for stimulating belongingness. The hidden curriculum and the dimensions comprising it are understood as the various unintended, implicit and tacit messages embedded in the institution on what is important, good and true and, more importantly, what is not. Consider the following example outlined below. It illustrates how a public, secular university unintentionally, yet paradoxically, contradicts its own institutional values of inclusivity and demonstrates how this dilemma can be reconciled.

Unintended messages of the hidden dimension

A student group from a religious background requested a place to pray at the university. The leadership of the university, a non-religious public institution, rejected the request, based on its values of openness and respect for all. They felt that by accommodating the students' religious needs, the university would risk losing its identity as a non-religious institution. By framing the dilemma as an either-or, the leadership not only excluded the students, it also undermined its own ethos of inclusivity. The message (unintended/hidden) to the students was that they did not belong. Later, after some controversy, the leadership reconsidered its decision and proposed a place of silence open to all students in need of a space for reflection or prayer. This solution reconciled the seemingly contradictory mission and values of the university with the students' religious need.

When the hidden curriculum is not appropriately addressed, it can lead to exclusion, and undermine the explicitly stated strategic aims on inclusivity and their associated policies. Moreover, the hidden curriculum may be concealed from educators and institutional leaders as well who are often unaware of the implicit messages they send to students.

Together, the three layers in the curriculum, affect a student's sense of belonging and reveal whether an institution has the potential to evolve into an inclusive social space where all students feel safe to engage and learn. This understanding points to the need for a comprehensive approach to internationalisation, in which a wide representation of constituents engage in a continuous dialogue on belonging and inclusivity that is interculturally framed, non-judgemental, and aimed at mutual understanding. Such a dialogue takes the students' lived experiences of belonging as its point of departure, and, crucially, as the benchmark and ultimate aim.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS: GUIDING AN INSTITUTION-WIDE INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

The purpose of the intercultural dialogue is to build social cohesion within an institution by creating space for different knowledge traditions, for diverging perspectives and experiences on international and global developments, and for mutual intercultural learning. We see such a dialogue essentially as a continuous process of organisational learning attuned to the evolving goals and needs of the diverse groups of students, and the developments in global and local contexts. The ethos of the intercultural dialogue is based on respect, integrity and equity, acknowledging the intrinsic value and contribution of each student, and allowing all to find a home at their institution. Moreover, the process has to ensure that the need for proximity to diversity, as a pre-condition for the dialogue, is balanced with opportunities for distance. Distance reflects the notion of downtime from the intercultural interaction and the need to reflect and work through the experiences that come forward in the intercultural dialogue. A balance between proximity and distance supports the co-creation of a common social space, which speaks to all students.

In summary, the following three questions can be helpful when exploring whether an institution's stated intent on inclusivity does in fact strengthen a student's sense of belonging and thus facilitates engagement in internationalisation:

- How are the cultural identities of all students recognised in the curriculum in its broadest sense?
- How are differences in students' perspectives and experiences acknowledged as valid and valuable contributions to enhance the inclusivity of an institution and enrich intercultural learning for all?



- How are the students' lived experiences of exclusion reconciled, leading to comprehensive institutional learning, and changes in higher education internationalisation practices?

CONCLUSION

In the introduction, we called for a commitment of leaders in higher education internationalisation to provide all students with equitable opportunities to engage in international activities and learning. We further argued that such a commitment has to be grounded in a praxis of critically reflecting on the underlying assumptions and practices in the formal, informal and hidden curriculum that hinder the development of HEIs as inclusive, international communities of learning and teaching. This calls for leadership capabilities of all involved in internationalisation, and the willingness to move beyond 'this is how we do things here' as the default position. Moreover, leaders have to champion an attitude of openness to continuously co-create new ways for collaborating that, as a priority, involve and benefit all students. Engaging in an intercultural dialogue within HEIs will support them in fulfilling their social responsibility and in contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive society. It is through this that higher education internationalisation will make a meaningful contribution to the societies that their institutions are inherently part of, which we contend is the key purpose of higher education internationalisation.

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.