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EDITORIAL
MAKING INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY PROMOTION A CENTRAL STRATEGY IN UNIVERSITIES

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This volume of the European Journal for University Lifelong Learning (EJULL) hosts a selection of papers that address, from different perspectives, the topic of the SMILE\(^1\) Symposium, organised by eucen with the project consortium, and followed by the 2023 eucen Autumn Seminar: How universities are (or should be) addressing diversity and inclusion? and which the role that lifelong learning (LLL) plays in this context.

Are higher education institutions (HEIs), in particular, able to meet the challenges posed by an increasingly diverse world characterised by “shared inhabitance” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3)? That is, a world of people with extremely diversified biographical paths based on their gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ethnic heritage, migratory background, and cultural identity.

Following Patricia Hill Collins’ foundational statement on the paradigm of intersectionality, according to which “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins, 2000, p. 18), there is a high risk that diversity is not understood as offering endless opportunities for learning and openness, but rather as a driver in the accumulation of inequalities.

Universities are therefore called upon to invest increasingly in the interaction between their three missions: guaranteeing fairer access to excellent educational offerings, producing innovative research aimed at more equitable human development, and expressing their social responsibility connected to public engagement.

University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) can play a pivotal role in this call by helping universities make equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into “core values in contemporary society” (Paschoud, El Amoud & Weait, 2023, p. 2). It can serve as a vehicle for inclusion and diversity, especially through continuing professional development and expanding university staff awareness of the challenges and barriers faced by learners from marginalised groups;

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\(^1\) The SMILE Project (Social Meaning Impact through LLL Universities in Europe) has been a three-year project (2021-2023) coordinated by eucen and co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union (Erasmus + KA3 Social Inclusion and Common Values 621433- EPP-1-2020-1-BE- EPPKA3-IP1-SOC-IN), aimed to promote inclusive learning by developing, testing and implementing innovative tools that improve the way higher education institutions deal with diversity and social inclusion https://smile.eucen.eu
at the same time, it helps foster sensitivity in university staff towards the structural inequalities and hidden curricula that exist within their own institutions.

This triple mandate appears well represented by the following essays, each of which presents inspiring and concrete solutions based on existing projects and initiatives in their respective professional and institutional higher education contexts. The overview of these internal diversity and inclusion arrangements fuels a stimulating debate on potential best practices from which to draw inspiration in order to address three blocks of inequity in particular:

a) **Gender inequality** in higher education, which is evident in the low number of women in leadership positions, especially because career progression in academia is often related to research leadership, and men are three times more likely than women to attain top positions in research-oriented institutions;

b) **Migrant background**, given that refugee and migrant students are underrepresented in higher education due to lower access and participation and high attainment rates, leading to unemployment and a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion;

c) **Low socioeconomic status**, which still makes students’ opportunities, educational attainment, and future social mobility – in terms of employment, occupation, and income – strictly dependent on those of their parents in all EU countries, though to varying degrees.

The debate on the policies for promoting gender equality and combating any form of discrimination between the careers of men and women in academia starts off with the introductory conceptual research paper by *Ester Cois*. She critically reflects on the self-reflective effort undertaken by European universities due to the obligation to align their diversity policies with the EU guidelines, starting with the mandatory adoption of a gender equality plan. The paper argues how the availability of scientifically valid tools for self-assessment, training, and the definition of a sustainable strategic action plan constitutes valuable support in this process. In particular, the author highlights the positive impact linked, in the specific case of the University of Cagliari (Italy), to the above-mentioned European Erasmus+ project SMILE, by developing, testing, and implementing a set of innovative tools that improve the way HEIs deal with diversity in the field of inclusive learning.

The essay by *Róisín Shanahan, Neill Wylie* and *Allison Kenneally* describes the evolving landscape of gender equality promotion in European Higher Education from the perspective of South East Technological University (SETU), which has been leading the way over the past years in Ireland. It details SETU’s innovative practices in response to the Irish National Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions 2019, showing how HEIs should play a crucial role not only in imparting knowledge and skills to students but also in shaping their attitudes, behaviours, and values. By fostering a supportive, proactive university culture, especially based on several initiatives aimed at tackling sexual violence and harassment, SETU suggests insights for other HEIs, addressing not just immediate concerns within their communities, but also nurturing a culture of LLL.

*Allison Kenneally* proposes another innovative practice in the following paper, which critically evaluates a pioneering and highly collaborative cross-sector approach to sustainably embedding inclusive programmes related to gender identity and expression in Irish HEIs, using SETU’s example as a starting point. In more general terms, the author discusses the role of universities as activists in this space, working collaboratively “beyond the binary” paradigm to achieve truly inclusive gender equality on university campuses across Ireland.

The research paper by *Fausta Scardigno, Marianna Colosimo, Amelia Manuti* and *Serafina Pastore* shifts the focus to LLL and Higher Education (HE) policies for the inclusion of refugees and students with migrant backgrounds. The authors reflect upon how, over the last years, permanent learning and previously acquired skills enhancement have become highly
significant priorities in the EU society. This framework is especially strategic with respect to refugee international students’ access to HE, as confirmed by a growing demand expressed by this vulnerable target market to validate and recognise their learning credentials and previously acquired soft skills, regardless from where these were gained. In this sense, the so-called “third mission” should be aimed at implementing actions for strengthening the right to LLL, interpreted as a “right of the person,” in order to promote feasible paths towards cultural inclusion in the local context.

The last innovative practice article by Martina Rauseo and Nadia Bregoli deals with the third pillar of inequality in access to tertiary education, low socioeconomic status, with specific reference to removing financial barriers to continuing education for disadvantaged groups. The authors illustrate the contents and methods of the continuing education courses provided by the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), aimed specifically at helping already qualified and experienced professionals maintain their competitiveness in the changing labour market and avoid the risk of exclusion. The authors present the steps taken towards the solution of several potential criticalities, like the limits of the self-funding system for continuing education that – due to the necessity to offer courses at market price – could become inaccessible for lower income individuals. One of the positive actions, among the set of initiatives shared in the paper, is the search for alternative funding sources to make SUPSI’s continuing education courses more inclusive by covering the needs of specific disadvantaged groups.

The volume closes with an inspirational and informative conversation between Matthew Weait, Director of the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford (UK) and Lilian Nwanze-Akobo, co-Director of the Higher Diploma in Further Education Programme at Maynooth University (IE). Their dialogue is focused on three main issues, proposed by Ester Cois, President of the National Conference of Equality Bodies of Italian Universities: 1) The need for an intersectional approach to counteract the risk that different inequality factors are treated in watertight compartments in university continuous education; 2) The controversial impact of so-called “tokenism”, as a potential effect of a superficial adoption of inclusive policies; 3) The need to provide specific programmes for staff development in order to sustainably promote equity and diversity in the framework of ULLL.

References


ACADEMIA IN THE MIRROR: METHODS AND TOOLS FOR PROMOTING ACADEMIC REFLEXIVITY IN THE UNIVERSITY POLICIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY. THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN ERASMUS+ PROJECT SMILE (SOCIAL MEANING IMPACT THROUGH LLL UNIVERSITIES IN EUROPE).

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Keywords: Inclusive policies, reflexivity, equity and diversity, gender equality, academia

ABSTRACT

The objective of aligning their policies for the promotion of gender equality and diversity with the European guidelines, starting with the adoption of a gender equality plan, is engaging higher education institutions (HEIs) in a self-reflective effort to identify their current critical issues and key areas to improve through positive actions. The availability of scientifically valid tools for self-assessment, training and the definition of a sustainable strategic action plan constitutes valuable support in this process. This paper aims to highlight the positive impact linked, in general, and in the specific case of the University of Cagliari (Italy), to the European Erasmus+ project SMILE (Social Meaning Impact through LLL Universities in Europe), by developing, testing and implementing a set of innovative tools that improve the way HEIs deal with diversity in the field of inclusive learning.

THE TRIGGER POINT: AN “INDUCED” DIVERSITY AND GENDER EQUALITY PROMOTION

Within the general framework of adapting to the European Commission’s directives with an operational architecture and policies against all forms of discrimination and (horizontal and vertical) gender-based segregation, HEIs have been called to urgently rethink their strategic plans. This urgency began with the recommendation to adopt a Gender Equality Plan by 2022. This recommendation was codified in the General Annexes to Horizon Europe 2021-2022 work programme¹ as an essential requirement for all public bodies, universities and research organisations from Member States and Associated Countries wishing to submit applications for funding calls with deadlines in that year and onwards (European Commission, 2021a).

Although this shift in orientation is broadly welcomed, the process of "induced" and accelerated adaptation has often not allowed adequate time for shared reflection by both top governing bodies and the populations that make up the university community (Cellini et al., 2022). In other words, teaching and research staff, technical administrative staff, students and others associated with universities have often lagged behind in generating sufficient awareness of the relevance of the issues of promoting diversity and social inclusion. This hinders the ability to initiate a cultural and organisational change at a structural level that could be sustainable and continuous, and not just superficial. Although progress has been made in widening diversity in many European universities, substantial inequalities persist in terms of measurable outcomes from higher education, where a student’s race and ethnicity, in particular, has been found to negatively affect their degree outcomes (Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). Moreover, the impact of gender on female students is still evident. This can be seen not so much from a performance perspective in terms of success and speed in obtaining a degree, but rather in available opportunities to use these qualifications to access and achieve stable positions as researchers in an academic career, especially in leadership roles on equal terms with their male colleagues (Cois et al., 2023; Naldini and Poggio, 2023).

This scenario is demonstrated very effectively in Italy, where 6 out of 10 graduates are women. On average, girls have better academic performance: they graduate with a higher grade (103.9 vs 102.1 out of 110), a higher percentage finish their studies on time (60.2% vs 55.7%), and they participate more frequently in educational experiences, whether curricular internships (61.4% vs 52.1%), study periods abroad (11.6% vs 10.9%) or work experiences before graduating (66.0% vs 64.0%) (AlmaLaurea, 2022). When they decide to undertake an academic path, however, their proportion decreases drastically as they move from the almost equal first phase of recruitment as precarious researchers (50.13%), to that of tenure-track assistant professors (46.77%) and associate professors (38.41%) up to the top position of full professors, where they represent just 23.74% of staff, even less than the European average of 26.18% (European Commission, 2021b).

This stubborn persistence of the so-called “glass ceiling” in the Italian academic sector requires an equally strong commitment to the implementation of inclusive policies in HEIs. Furthermore, gender biases continue to significantly mark even the entry phases in this career, so much so as to make it necessary to resort to the metaphor of the “glass door” (Picardi, 2019). In their fight against gender asymmetries, HEIs cannot ignore an intersectional approach (Showunmi, 2020), which considers the cumulative effect of different factors of potential inequality on individual biographies, both in the practice of the right to education and in career prospects in the academic field. In this perspective, the possibility of counting on scientifically valid tools – devised through documented expertise in the field of education and scientific research at an academic level – constitutes valuable support for self-reflection on ways of addressing and enabling diversity in terms of organisational wellbeing. Accessing this kind of expert knowledge also gives a comparative advantage over the competition in the HEIs market in terms of accountability, ranking, and attractiveness for researchers and students.

This paper aims to highlight the support provided by such an opportunity in the specific case of the University of Cagliari-UniCa (Italy) in the ‘anything-but-linear’ translation of the general strategic objective of promoting diversity (addressed in its Gender Equality Plan since June 2020) into concrete practices for structural and sustainable institutional change. This opportunity has been represented, from the end of 2020 to 2023, by the participation of UniCa in the European Erasmus+ project SMILE (Social Meaning Impact through LLL Universities in Europe), within the KA3 “Social Inclusion and Common Values Program” (621433-EPP-1-2020-1-BE-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN)\(^2\).

\(^2\) https://smile.eucen.eu/
AN EFFECTIVE TOOLBOX FOR CULTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL GENDER-SENSITIVE CHANGE

The SMILE project was coordinated by EUCEN (a multidisciplinary association for university lifelong learning in Europe), and developed by a large network of partners from all over Europe\(^3\). Throughout its almost three years of life, SMILE’s objective has been to respond to HEIs’ growing need for reflexivity and know-how in the field of inclusive learning, by developing, testing and implementing innovative tools that improve the way they deal with diversity and social inclusion.

The project focused, in particular, on three main areas of potential disadvantage in higher education, as the “pillar” of gender equality (with a specific emphasis on the dimension of women and leadership within HEIs) works closely with two other factors that uphold intersectional inequality: migrant background and low socioeconomic status. In this sense, the objective of refining methods and techniques for diversity management in order to address the need for equal access to leadership positions works in close connection with the search for practicable solutions to another double issue: reduced HE access, participation and attainment in 1st or 2nd generation immigrants and in learners of lower socioeconomic status. The strategy developed by this project aimed to adequately train the university staff (both academic and non-academic) in relation to these three dimensions, involving both students and alumni concurrently.

To make this strategy applicable in any HEI, the SMILE project has produced and made freely available three main tools, which have been tested throughout its life cycle, first and foremost by the partner universities. They gradually refined their structure and contents up to the final version, now translated into all the main European languages. In this process, the feedback collected thanks to the involvement of numerous academic and non-academic stakeholders was crucial, with the aim of harvesting the expertise of civil society organisations and individuals and including their experiences in the SMILE tools.

The first tool is a Diversity Audit Model, which appears useful in supporting universities in self-reflecting and assessing how they are addressing and enabling diversity and social inclusion, identifying the obstacles, existing models, strategies for implementation, etc. This tool (and the related user guide) has been tested and continuously improved through a peer audit process that involved a total of 20 universities, both in the consortium and external institutions (Hörr et al., 2023).

The second tool is composed of a set of three continuous professional development (CDP) courses, one for each SMILE pillar, that is targeted at university staff, both academic and non-academic. This set has been developed and tested through a bottom-up approach (involving role models, representatives of indirect beneficiaries, NGOs and community groups), with the aim of giving voice to the extensive experience of professionals, volunteers, and parents, as well as to current and potential learners (Borg et al., 2023; Barbieri et al., 2023; Lappalainen et al., 2023).

The third tool is a set of policy recommendations based on the perspectives and experiences collected during the project to serve as a guide to support universities in fulfilling their commitment to diversity and social inclusion. It specifically provides an action plan targeted

\(^3\) The SMILE Consortium, coordinated by eucen (BE), includes the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz (DE), the Maynooth University (IE), the University of Turku (FI), the University of Malta (MT), the University of Cagliari (IT), the Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iaşi (RO), the Fundación Solidaritat at Universitat de Barcelona (ES), Notus (ES), the European Students’ Union (BE) and the Solidar Foundation (BE).
to three different and complementary categories of stakeholders: HEI top management, national and local policymakers, and civil society organisations (Royo et al., 2022).

One of the most distinctive strengths of these tools is the fact that they are standardised on a European scale and, therefore, methodologically reliable for comparative purposes from a lifelong learning perspective. At the same time, they are also flexible enough to adapt to the peculiarities of national and local contexts against which the transformative impact of the HEIs’ performances can be measured, in terms of social justice and inclusiveness.

As a partner of the SMILE project, UniCa has been able to benefit from both elements. On the one hand, it took advantage of constant comparison with other European universities for the purposes of researching good practices but also of sharing the resistance and critical issues encountered in testing the tools with each other’s staff. On the other hand, it could extend its strategic purposes beyond the strictly academic perimeter, interacting with other relevant stakeholders and institutions at local, regional, and national levels within the scope of its public engagement function.

A CASE-GROUNDED ANALYSIS: THE IMPACT OF THE SMILE TOOLS ON SELF-REFLEXIVITY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAGLIARI

The contribution of UniCa in the development of the SMILE tools and their subsequent adoption generated an impact in encouraging self-reflection regarding the effectiveness of its policies for gender equality and, more generally, for the promotion of diversity. First of all, the need for constant self-observation throughout the three-year duration of the project improved the knowledge of the current situation and helped finally shed light on its features and grey areas. At the same time, it also contributed to noticing the signs of change, the barely perceptible yet promising progress, and perhaps even another image that is still being defined: that of an achievable improvement from the point of view of a more equal, diverse, and balanced educational and research environment.

Specifically, UniCa tested one of the first versions of the SMILE Diversity Audit Model in June 2022 using focus groups involving both top governance and representatives of teaching and research staff, technical-administrative staff and students. The tool was then subsequently tested in a more advanced version, in March 2023, in two other Italian universities, the University of Sassari and the University of Trento, following the same participatory technique of peer consultation. On all three occasions, UniCa collected valuable feedback both for the improvement of the tool itself, in its formal articulation and its substantial contents, and with respect to the effectiveness of its impact on the implementation of better policies for inclusion and promotion of equity and diversity. The self-reflective aspect of the SMILE Diversity Audit Model has been informative and allowed a diagnosis of both the critical issues to be solved and the promising strengths to focus on within its organisational architecture. At the same time, it proved to be a relevant opportunity to raise widespread awareness about persistent biases and inequalities from an intersectional perspective among all the populations who work and study at the university. It also solicited a collective and bottom-up reflection about the paths to be taken in the immediate and medium term. In a nutshell, the experimental application of the Diversity Audit Model has made it possible to refine three main policy directions already included by UniCa among the actions of its Gender Equality Plan and Plan for Positive Actions. The first has been the updating of the regulation for activation and management of “Alias Careers” for people in gender transition, which was approved by the Academic Senate in September 2023 and became fully operational in January 2024. The new regulation has been extended not only to students but also to teaching and technical-administrative staff, with a view to a more complete investment in organisational well-being. The regulation will also apply to non-binary people, without the preliminary obligation to
obtain a medical certification of their condition, according to principles of self-determination and balance between equal treatment and promotion of diversity. The second impact has been a more intersectional definition of the statute of the first Interdisciplinary Center for Studies and Research on Gender Issues at UniCa, called CEING. This new equality body was formally established in June 2023 and will operate fully in 2024, in order to correspond to the European recommendation for the integration of the gender dimension in all research and teaching activities, in any disciplinary field, on the basis of the cumulative and combined nature of this factor with other potential parameters of even epistemic inequality, like socio-economic status and migratory background. The third action facilitated by the Diversity Audit Model tool concerns the upcoming introduction of a “trusted advisor,” a confidential expert figure that will guarantee all those who study and work at the university the right to be protected from any act or form of discriminatory behaviour, especially of a sexual or morally harassing nature.

As regards the second innovative tool developed by the SMILE project, i.e., the set of continuous professional development courses mentioned above, UniCa first contributed to defining and then, between September and October 2022, specifically testing the course dedicated to the pillar “Women in leadership in HEIs,” entitled “The Glass Ceiling ain’t broken.” The self-reflective opportunity, in this case, was expressed through its training effect. In fact, the combination of the foundational theoretical contents on the relationship between gender and power, on the one hand, and the concrete experiences of the participants in the CPD course, on the other, made it possible to provide effective interpretative keys to recognise the deep roots of inequality also at play within academic organisational culture. Regardless of the focus – be it the horizontal and vertical segregation between men and women, or the implicit and explicit sexism experienced on a daily basis in educational and professional careers, or the intersectionality crossing the whole range of gender identities – in all cases, the recurrence of practices, constraints and obstacles revealed by the participants demonstrated that they should no longer be confined to just personal and individual occurrences. Instead, the well-established structural mechanisms in which they operate need to be questioned. Many suggestive metaphors describe this scenario of institutionalised gender-based inequalities, ranging from the ceilings to the door to an entire glass labyrinth, not to mention the so-called “sticky floor” (Shambaugh, 2007), which tends to slow down female career progression, and the “leaky pipeline,” which reveals the significant exit of women from the academic market under conditions of persistent precariousness or impossible work-family balance (Gaiaschi, 2022). In terms of concrete practices, the impact of this tool has so far led to three main results at UniCa. The first has been the inclusion, since April 2023, in the syllabus of a specific inter-doctoral course for all PhD students of every disciplinary field, entitled "Gender equality in the academic context and research: Policy tools and strategies," specifically to train younger researchers from the beginning in these academic policy issues. The second impact concerned its use as a leverage for the proposal of a mentoring program for newly hired researchers and those in the early stages of their career. The last effect has been a proposal for its inclusion, from January 2024, as part of the training and capacity-building activities envisaged by the European Universities' alliance EDUC-European Digital UniverCity, which includes UniCa as a partner.

The third and final tool provided by the SMILE Project, i.e., a template for a policy action plan, accompanied by a set of strategic recommendations, was presented and discussed at UniCa in May 2023, within the Guarantee Committee for equal opportunity, employee wellbeing, and non-discrimination in the workplace (CUG). In this case, the self-reflective framework took on an operational and projective meaning. In fact, it aimed to configure the image that UniCa would like to embody in the near future as an outcome of its commitment to dealing with all forms of discrimination and promoting a broadly inclusive approach. Its relevance will include not only an improvement of UniCa’s reputational capital and accountability, but above all, will work as a source of best practices that can serve as a
benchmark on a regional, national, and international scale. From this perspective, the effectiveness of the tool was tested on at least two occasions: a) as inspirational guidelines for the drafting of UniCa's successful application for the European Commission Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R) Award, which is addressed to the institutions which make progress in aligning their human resources policies to the 40 principles of the EU Charter & Code, based on a customised action plan/HR strategy; b) as food for thought in a series of workshop activities provided from November 2023 onwards in favour of the Third Sector Forum of Sardinia Region, which includes the main civil society associations that operate in the field of promoting diversity and combating all sorts of inequalities affecting substantive citizenship.

CONCLUSIONS: FIVE ACADEMIC MYTHS AND SYNDROMES THAT NEED TO BE DEBUNKED

Closely connected to its current placement in the strategic path for improving equity and diversity policies, the potential scope of the tools developed during the SMILE project extend beyond the specific experience of UniCa. This scope also intercepts a more theoretical and general self-reflective process that is taking place in contemporary HEIs (O'Connor and White, 2021).

The participatory nature and the transformative rationale underlying the three tools, in fact, question five "myths" and "syndromes" that need to be debunked once and for all in the way academia, as a social world (Strauss, 1982) and a hierarchical institution, tends to think of and reproduce itself.

As regards the persistent under-representation of women in top positions, the first enduring myth is that of the eternal "first woman ever" (to reach a prestigious role, to gain a leadership assignment, to be awarded an eminent prize). Not infrequently, this lonely woman in power remains a unique case that becomes even more isolated as she advances, rather than the pioneer of a process of rebalancing the gender gap (Anzivino et al., 2023). In Italy, the first woman president of the National Research Council and the first Prime Minister have recently been appointed; in the whole country, there are only 13 female rectors out of 85 universities and, in general, we still talk about the first women who became Nobel Prize winners in STEM fields and so on. In 2024, it should be time to move from the asymptotic unreachability of a heroic female "role model" to the operational practice of gender mainstreaming, also and especially in HEIs. The synergistic chain defined by the three SMILE tools constitutes valid support for moving from the usual "celebration of the exception" to the "normality of the rule" of gender symmetry in the academic field. In fact, the diagnosis of internal critical issues provided by the audit diversity tool finds an effective gender-balancing strategy thanks to the awareness-raising and capacity-building mechanisms activated by the CPD courses, and to the adoption of a corresponding operational set of policies. In particular, a meaningful impact could be derived from the comparison of the personal and professional biographies of female PhD students and early-stage researchers and those of full professors. This is the focus of the CPD course on the promotion of gender equity, which introduces a mentoring mechanism fully aligned with the principle of "learning through experience" underlying the university lifelong learning approach.

The second myth that the application of SMILE tools can challenge is the trade-off between merit and positive actions, especially in relation to the fight against gender inequalities in academic career progression and retention. As argued well by Addis (2008, p. 201), "Excellence is not a variable given in nature, which only needs to be measured, and who the excellent men and women are depends on the relationships between the sexes in the scientific community and in society. It is possible to work to change the judges, and above all to adopt different selection criteria and different parameters." Being able to count on valid
tools, like those offered by SMILE, can help fight effectively the reproduction of inequalities in an environment strongly marked by a different speed and percentage of success in achieving top positions, (also) due to the social expectations on which moral gender careers are nourished. These practices, in turn, can undermine the belief in a dichotomy between achieving equity and excellence. Consider, for instance, the ambiguous use of bibliometrics in evaluations (Bhalla, 2019). As stated by the National Conference of the Italian Universities Equal Opportunities Bodies during the annual meeting at the Polytechnic University of Milan in December 2020, “while on the one hand bibliometrics seem to reduce the discretion of the evaluators and therefore also the distortions due to gender stereotypes or discrimination, on the other hand, the choice of indicators to use is never neutral, and can lead to direct or indirect discrimination: for example, there are obvious differences in age (think of the h-index), number of authors, topic (think of mainstream versus frontier and interdisciplinary research), but also less obvious a priori differences based on gender, in particular on the number of publications and the consequent number of citations” (Counipar, 2021, p. 112). In Italy, these differences are reflected, for example, in the indicators of the National Scientific Habilitation (ASN) and the Research Quality Assessment (VQR), showing how the repeated application of criteria that favour even small gender differences can lead over time to strong distortions (Montorsi, 2021). A valid strategy for deconstructing this myth can derive from the introduction of tools for recognising and combatting unconscious gender-based biases in evaluation mechanisms in the academic field. In this sense, the SMILE CPD courses offer training tools to bring out deep-seated gender stereotypes and prejudices. In addition, the SMILE action plan proposes specific measures for the production of gender-sensitive guidelines for selective commissions in all recruitment and career promotion phases. The impact of more balanced evaluation mechanisms acts in the long term, from a lifelong learning perspective, because it implements renewed self-motivation, especially in early and middle-stage female researchers, preventing them from losing interest in their careers over time, and protecting their confidence in the connection between work commitment and the achievement of corresponding improved results, on a personal and professional level. Renewing evaluation mechanisms in a gender-sensitive way also means preventing women’s academic work from losing its spark of creativity and critical thinking, which motivated its choice in the first place, and becoming routine, mindlessly tied to the same boring tasks day after day.

The third myth that is weakened by the intersectional philosophy underlying the SMILE tools is the axiomatic socio-biological foundation of gender inequalities. According to this approach, the rigid distinction between gender roles would not be the result of a consolidated social construction, made of persistent stereotypes and prejudices, but would correspond to a “natural” complementarity of the duties attributed to males and females. This was demonstrated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic emergency, when the lockdown at home would have represented a sort of inevitable return to nature in the asymmetric distribution of family care tasks and work obligations between women and men, even within the academic sector (Filandri and Pasqua, 2021). Especially in the presence of dependent children, this sort of binary re-essentialisation between the functions required of mothers and fathers, although labelled in public discourse as a temporary emergency management strategy, has translated into a medium-term widening of the gender gap in academic careers. In fact, there is a disproportionate rise for women compared to men in the dilemma of choosing between investing time in scientific production or in social reproduction tasks, even more so when work and private spaces and times have ended up colliding and overlapping (Abdellatif and Gatto, 2020). What in Italy has been defined as “smart-working” – meaning remote work – has not proven to be so smart for women and has often been a Trojan horse for reproducing traditional gendered functions. Among the now widely documented consequences, women recorded a smaller proportion of research projects and scientific publications in the pandemic period than before (Vincent-Lamarre et al., 2020), with a relevant impact in terms of their performance evaluation. Understanding the conventional nature of this unequal distribution of tasks between men and women, which the application of
SMILE tools aims to provide, constitutes a safeguard to counter the risk of slipping into yet another gender-based automatism in the next possible crisis. In particular, the recommendations that accompany the SMILE action plan appear very useful. They aim to improve university policies for work-life balance and for the continuous updating of the professional skills of all teaching and technical-administrative staff, on the basis of a repository of well-documented good practices. Furthermore, having a solid organisational structure in terms of gender equity in all career positions not only generates institutional resilience with respect to the uncertainties of the academic labour market, but also tends to produce, particularly for women, a perception of greater job security on a personal level. This counteracts the pressure to stay ahead throughout their careers. An example might be the guarantee of training and research experiences abroad, which a female researcher does not have to give up due to the absence of institutional support, in case she has family responsibility. After all, the HE lifelong learning approach is based exactly on the permanent development of professional skills, precisely to keep up with the changing times and leave no one behind, as often otherwise happens due to the so-called "sticky floor" (Shambaugh, 2007), which slows down or blocks women's careers in academia.

The collaboration between many HEIs that led to the development of the SMILE tools, in view of their adaptability to different national academic contexts, contrasts with a fourth not infrequent attitude: the so-called "ivory tower syndrome." It is a false belief that each university constitutes a world apart (Fisher and Kinsey, 2014), a sort of citadel impenetrable by the local network of public and private actors, governed from the top down according to abstract logics that are detached from the ordinary socioeconomic and cultural context (Lipinsky and Wroblewski, 2021). The involvement of other stakeholders, in addition to HEI top management (and in particular national and local policymakers and civil society organisations), recommended by the SMILE project for the definition of an action plan, aims to free academic institutions from the risk of isolation, offering the chance to relate to the surroundings while maintaining a national and international scope. In this sense, SMILE tools constitute, for any university, an opportunity to access coherent guidelines and collect "best practices" on a European scale. This assists in defining valuable benchmarks and adopting effective indicators to measure their progress in promoting gender equity, with a comparative and networking – rather than just competitive – aptitude, as recommended by a lifelong learning approach. At the same time, these tools are meant to promote a participatory approach in the definition, implementation, and evaluation of inclusive policies, engaging all the populations that make up the university social body: teaching and research staff, technical-administrative staff, and students.

Finally, the self-reflection process stimulated by the SMILE project counteracts a fifth rather widespread trend: the so-called "box ticking syndrome”, i.e., the risk of limiting one's apparent institutional commitment to a formal fulfilment of mandatory obligations (Lombardo et al., 2012). In fact, the availability of concrete tools could be of great support to overcome bureaucratic ritualism and start a sustainable political strategy for gender equity and diversity. First, this can allow any university to evaluate and measure ex-ante its fallacies in a self-critical and transparent way, for example, through the SMILE diversity audit tool, and invest on this basis dedicated financial, human, and infrastructural resources to implement truly inclusive policies. Secondly, it also means enabling HEIs to evaluate ex-post the actual impact of their strategic plans, embracing a long-term perspective due to a structurally innovative change. In this sense, the lifelong learning approach fully affects not only the individual professional biographies involved in the academic field, but the entire institutional mission of universities and constitutes an explicit political choice. After all, what good is knowledge if not to take a position?
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Academia in the mirror: methods and tools for promoting academic reflexivity in the university policies for gender equality. The case of the European Erasmus+ project SMILE

Cois, E.
UNDERSTANDING AND EMBEDDING DIVERSITY IN AN IRISH UNIVERSITY

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Keywords: Equality, diversity, inclusion, micro-credentials, sexual violence

ABSTRACT

This short practice paper describes the evolving landscape of gender equality in European higher education from the perspective of South East Technological University (SETU) in Ireland. It addresses the challenges and opportunities in promoting gender equality. In particular, it details SETU’s response to the Irish National Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) 2019, highlighting initiatives undertaken to embed gender equality at the university. Higher education institutions play a crucial role not only in imparting knowledge and skills to students but also in shaping their attitudes, behaviours and values. By implementing initiatives focused on gender equality, respect and consent, HEIs are not just addressing immediate concerns within their communities but also nurturing a culture of lifelong learning. This paper also discusses SETU’s involvement in several initiatives aimed at tackling sexual violence and harassment, thus further enhancing gender equality across SETU and demonstrating its effectiveness in fostering a supportive, proactive university culture. Finally, it suggests insights for other higher education institutions, advancing ways to incorporate these learnings into broader educational and policy frameworks to enhance gender equality and support women in leadership roles in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is now a key policy and practice consideration for most European universities, particularly now with the inclusion of a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) as a mandatory requirement for Horizon Europe research funding. Research has shown that sexual harassment can serve as an equaliser against women in power (McLaughlin et al., 2012) and, more recently, that having women in leadership positions contributes towards a reduction in employees’ experiences of sexual violence and harassment (SVH) in general (Au et al., 2022). In their research, Au et al. (2022) added to the debate regarding the merits of board gender diversity by considering its impact on the incidence of SVH, which they identified as possibly the most important remaining barrier to gender equality. They investigated whether board gender diversity contributes to a reduction in workplace sexual harassment, or whether firms engage in “fem-power washing,” that is, the successful, but false, use of gender-equality corporate social responsibility policies for corporate branding. The authors found that firms with gender-diverse boards experience less SVH. They also found that an increase of one female director was associated with a 20.71% decrease in SVH. Finally, the study indicated that the that firms led by female CEOs and firms with a
higher percentage of female executives also experience decreases in SVH. This demonstrates that greater female representation at senior levels constitutes one of the most effective factors in tackling SVH.

Evidence suggests that many students enter university with limited knowledge about consent and sex due to secondary schools having ineffective sex education programmes (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). This can negatively impact the student experience, the impact of teaching, learning and research and the culture of respect and consent in the university. Having poor knowledge of sexual matters and consent can lead to students relying on misinformation and misconceptions and can increase the likelihood of non-consensual and coercive sexual behaviour (Grubb & Turner, 2012), which can lead to students experiencing anxiety, shame or confusion, which can have a deleterious effect on mental health (Miller & Byers, 2010). SETU has sought to address these issues by developing and implementing evidence-based training programmes, policies and awareness campaigns including micro-credentials geared towards fostering gender equality, respect and consent, whilst also promoting women in leadership. These all pose a significant challenge for higher education institutions (HEIs). Addressing these issues also has a positive long-term impact on the students themselves and their impact on the wider workplace upon graduation. Consequently, the knowledge and skills acquired from these programmes will contribute towards greater organisational wellbeing in workplaces into the future.

By implementing initiatives focused on gender equality, respect and consent, SETU is not only addressing immediate concerns within their communities but also nurturing a culture of lifelong learning, which not only supports knowledge acquisition, skill development and attitude and behaviour formation, but also contributes significantly to personal and professional development and social responsibility. Additionally, SETU acknowledges that gender equality, diversity and inclusion strengthen higher education communities and the quality, relevance and impact of teaching, learning and research. To this end, SETU has a comprehensive Gender Equality Action Plan (2022 – 2026) (GEAP) in place, with several focused collaborative initiatives aimed at understanding and embedding gender diversity and equality by tackling issues pertaining to SVH in our university.

This paper details several initiatives implemented by SETU in response to Irish research and data gathered from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Staff and Student Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Violence Survey 2021, the Active Consent and Union of Students Irish Sexual Experiences Survey 2020, and the National Framework for Consent in HEIs 2020 (National Framework). This paper discusses how these initiatives have been implemented, their impact and how they might be transferrable to other Irish and European HEIs. Finally, it touches upon the impact and sustainability of these initiatives.

INITIATIVES EMBEDDED IN SETU

Sexual violence and harassment among university students is becoming increasingly prevalent, and universities are under mounting pressure to revise their sexual consent policies (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). It is essential that universities implement safe learning environments on campus, as many aspects of university life make students, especially females in their first year, vulnerable to sexual assault (Cranney, 2015; Krebs et al., 2009). Securing a safe environment for all staff and students is paramount, and SETU has introduced several initiatives to achieve this and to embed diversity. The next section details their implementation and transferability.
Implementation and transferability

Much research exists on the topic of consent. Muehlenhard et al. (2016) conducted research on the three meanings of consent, Block (2004) examined express, implied or inferred consent and Burrow, Hannon, and Hall (1998) explored the perceptions of verbal and nonverbal consent. This research has helped to inform initiatives in Ireland which have been implemented in HEIs nationally. In response to research conducted, SETU has developed a comprehensive Action Plan to Tackle SVH (2023 – 2026) with detailed outcomes, actions, timeframes, responsibilities and success indicators. Its aim is to ensure that the National Framework has a long-lasting impact and for Ireland to take a leading role in confronting SVH. In order to implement the framework, SETU delivers training, raises awareness, campaigns, encourages reporting and develops policies and initiatives which are elaborated upon below.

To assist in this work, an anonymous report and support tool, SpeakOut, was launched in 2021. The aim of this tool is to collect data to assist universities in their implementation of educational and policy initiatives and to signpost staff and students to the support services available. The data collected in this tool is completely anonymous and assists SETU in understanding the experiences of students and staff. It specifies issues of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment and discrimination occurring within SETU, enabling a dedicated committee to respond to this behaviour.

Since 2019, consent training has been delivered to all first-year students across the university. However, over time, it became evident that staff members also required training as well as a space for discussion and awareness around this difficult and sometimes contentious issue. To address this need, specific bespoke SVH training has been developed, piloted, evaluated and adapted by SETU. This training is now delivered as part of the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) element for new staff inductions and included in the university’s GEAP. SETU also offers disclosure training to staff which is delivered by experts from a local rape and sexual abuse centre.

Additionally, SETU supports women at the university to engage with the Advance HE Aurora Women Only Leadership Programme and also encourages mentorship to strive towards gender balance in senior roles and to provide women the opportunity to demonstrate their value and achieve their full potential within their professional careers. This programme will continue to be offered annually to women in SETU.

Several of the initiatives undertaken in SETU are transferrable across other Irish and European universities. For example, the development of the bespoke Tackling SVH training, which is now offered as part of induction and ongoing staff training and development, is a first in the Irish sector, and provides a template for other universities to use to implement a similar initiative. Collaborating with local rape crisis and abuse centres offers universities the opportunity to provide expert trauma-informed support and training to staff and students. Women in Leadership programmes such as Aurora are offered globally by Advance HE and can be an excellent means of addressing gender imbalances at universities by providing women with the opportunity to fulfil their leadership potential.

Harnessing the agility of micro-credentials

Micro-credentials provide learning opportunities which offer flexible, short and accessible ways to rapidly upskill and re-skill, thus making them an effective vehicle for disseminating important information to staff and students. The Bystander Intervention Programme (adapted by SETU from University College Cork) was rolled out across SETU in the form of an engaging and instructionally designed fully online micro-credential and has been shared widely across the Irish university sector. The micro-credential was developed to tackle
issues of sexual and relationship violence by educating and empowering the university community to support the development of a visible, pro-social institutional culture which fosters a culture of positivity and support. The Bystander Intervention programme, led by Professor Louise Crowley, University College Cork, highlights the danger of normalising abusive behaviour and cultivates an understanding of a bystander’s capacity to intervene. Table 1 below details the topics covered in the micro-credential.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Key Topics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Bystander</td>
<td>• The Bystander &quot;Golden Rule&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Who is a Bystander?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Stages of Bystander Intervention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Prevalence and impact of sexual violence, harassment and intimate</td>
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<td>partner violence among young adults</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Examples of how we can alter behaviour</td>
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<td>• Support services</td>
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<td>Social Norms</td>
<td>• Understanding social norms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Harmful behaviour can be normalised through unexamined social norms.</td>
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<td>• Lad culture and complicit men</td>
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<td>Sexual Violence</td>
<td>• Prevalence of sexual violence</td>
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<td>• Rape myths</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Impact of sexual violence</td>
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<td>• How to support somebody who has experienced sexual violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship Violence</td>
<td>• Understanding and identifying relationship violence behaviours</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Prevalence of relationship violence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• It is a gendered form of violence; women experience it at higher rates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and more violently</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Intimate partner violence can have long term impact on victims, with</td>
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<td></td>
<td>post-separation abuse continuing even when the relationship is over.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Victims of intimate partner violence require a trauma-informed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>response. If supporting a friend, please ensure that specialist</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>support services are contacted for advice and safety plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bystander Intervention</td>
<td>• Stages of intervention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Intervention opportunities and strategies</td>
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<td>• Intervention skills</td>
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Table 1: Bystander Intervention Micro-credential

The term 'micro-credential' has recently emerged in the education lexicon to recognise and communicate achievement in a variety of learning disciplines, covering both formal and informal learning contexts. The Covid-19 pandemic has provided the momentum for the rapid implementation of micro-credentials by governments across Europe (Wheelahan &
Moodie, 2021). Furthermore, global government organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD are increasingly turning their attention to the implementation of micro-credentials (Kato, Galan-Muros & Weko, 2020; Chakroun & Keevy, 2018). At present, within Europe, micro-credentials are being offered primarily at both the European university alliance level, such as those being offered by the European Consortium of Innovative Universities, and the national alliance level, such as the ‘Microcreds’ initiative developed by the Irish University Alliance.

In response to policy at a European level, SETU’s first strategic plan, Connecting for Impact (2023-2028) specifies the importance of micro-credentials and the role they will play in the university going forward. This will include the development of a university wide micro-credentials policy which will further support the development and rollout of micro-credentials across several disciplines as shown in Table 1.

Students and staff are enrolled in separate cohorts on the course to ensure their data and contributions do not cross over. Participants must complete all quizzes to enable progression to subsequent units. The course has been designed to address multiple levels of learning under Bloom’s Taxonomy: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. For example, as can be seen in table 2, each unit begins with basic concepts of bystander intervention (remembering, understanding), before moving towards applying these concepts in simulated scenarios and encouraging learners to reflect upon their own intervention strategies. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was also factored into the design of the course by ensuring the content is accessible and engaging to all learners. This is achieved by providing materials in various formats such as video, audio and text. Offering multiple means of engagement was factored into the design via interactive elements and discussions via Padlet, and multiple means of expression was incorporated by providing various ways to demonstrate understanding.

**IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

The implementation of SETU’s GEEP and the Action Plan for Tackling Sexual Violence & Harassment (TSVH) has resulted in considerable change at the university, and SETU has now succeeded in gender balance on key decision-making bodies across the university, gender balance on the university executive team and the wider management team, and on interview panels.

The various initiatives delivered in the university have had a fundamental impact on the culture at SETU. A testament to this is the fact that it now has 10 women and 9 men on the executive management team. To date, 290 staff members have participated in the bespoke SVH training and 70 staff have participated in the disclosure training. Twenty female staff have completed the Aurora Leadership programme and more than 8,000 students have participated in active consent training.

The Bystander Intervention Programme also shows promising feedback from students and staff. Since its launch in February 2023, approximately 195 participants have taken the online programme and data reveals that 76% of students feel this training should be compulsory while 83% feel they now have skills to intervene. SETU has implemented new structures, resources and supports with dedicated funding to ensure that its inclusive gender equality work is embedded into the university in a sustainable manner. The provision of online training programmes via Active Consent and Bystander Intervention ensures sustainability and allows the university to scale up programme delivery. SETU also recently partnered with its local city and county council to secure an additional €150,000 in funding to roll out a ‘Consent Matters’ programme to local second level schools and community groups across the region which will further tackle SVH in its region.
A culture of lifelong learning has underpinned the implementation of these initiatives at SETU. This work has supported knowledge acquisition, skill development and the positive growth of attitudes and behaviours. Additionally, it has contributed significantly to personal and professional development and a sense of social responsibility. This is detailed below.

Initiatives such as evidence-based training programs, policies and awareness campaigns, including micro-credentials, serve as opportunities for students to acquire knowledge about gender equality, respect and consent. This knowledge extends beyond the classroom and becomes part of students’ lifelong learning journey. Through these initiatives, students can cultivate skills including critical thinking, communication and ethical decision-making which are not only relevant during their time at university but also continue to be valuable throughout their lives and careers. By fostering a culture of respect, inclusivity and gender equality, HEIs influence students’ attitudes and behaviours. Students learn to recognise and challenge harmful gender norms, promoting a mindset of continual learning and growth beyond graduation. Furthermore, focusing on subjects such as SVH can have a positive impact on the personal and professional development of students by equipping them with the skills to navigate complex social dynamics, advocate for themselves and others, and contribute positively to diverse workplaces and communities throughout their lives. Part of the role of HEIs in contributing to society is that they can instil a sense of social responsibility and the importance of actively promoting equality and justice in students. By engaging in initiatives that address societal challenges, such as gender inequality and gender-based violence, students learn the value of lifelong engagement with issues of gender equality and social justice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed the evolving landscape of gender equality in SETU, focusing on the implementation of the Irish Framework for Consent in Higher Education (2019) as well as opportunities and challenges inherent in adopting measures to promote equality in the university. In collaboration with our Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, bespoke training has been developed and rolled out across SETU. Additionally, this paper detailed the collaborative development of a micro-credential on bystander intervention, with data indicating strong approval from participants. The implementation of SETU’s GEAP (2022 – 2026) and the Action Plan to TSVH (2023 – 2026) has resulted in a cultural shift and considerable change in the university in terms of policy development, cross university educational and awareness initiatives and gender balance on key decision-making bodies and SETU’s Executive Management Team. Finally, SETU has implemented new structures, supports and resources to ensure that its inclusive gender equality work is sustainable. Several of the initiatives undertaken in SETU are transferrable across other Irish and European universities. For example, the development of the bespoke Tackling SVH training, which is now offered as part of induction and ongoing staff training and development, is a first in the Irish sector, and provides a template for other universities to use to implement a similar initiative. Collaborating with local support services offers universities the opportunity to provide expert trauma-informed support and training to staff and students. Women in Leadership programmes are offered globally and can be an excellent means of addressing gender imbalances at universities by providing women with the opportunity to fulfil their leadership potential. In order to implement these initiatives, it is necessary to have appropriate organisational structures in place in the university, along with human and financial resources. The work of SETU, as described above, contributes in a significant way to the promotion and protection of human rights and the achievement of social justice, both at the university and beyond. By investing in enhancing the human capital of its students and staff, SETU is working to ensure that not only are its campuses safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces, but that the wider regions it serves also benefit.
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Understanding and embedding Diversity in an Irish university
Shanahan, R., Wylie, N., & Kenneally, A.
MOVING BEYOND THE BINARY: COLLABORATING TO EMBED SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE GENDER EQUALITY IN THE IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

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Keywords: Gender equality, transgender, non-binary

ABSTRACT

This innovative practice paper critically reviews and evaluates a pioneering and highly collaborative cross-sector approach to sustainably embedding best practice in relation to gender identity and expression in Irish HEIs, which South East Technological University (SETU) has been leading over the past number of years. This work could indeed be categorised as an example of universities as activists in this space, working collaboratively to achieve truly inclusive gender equality on university campuses across Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

The missions of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are generally well known, with teaching, research and engagement being key established pillars of activity. In recent years, however, attention has been given to what is now sometimes referred to as the fourth, or indeed, the fifth mission of universities, which sees universities focus increasingly on addressing major social justice issues and challenges such as climate change, gender equality, racial inequity, gender-based violence etc.

This paper presents and critiques an innovative and highly collaborative cross-sector approach to embedding best practice in relation to inclusive gender equality in Irish higher education, focusing on an effort by partner HEIs in Ireland to move beyond the traditional binary approach to gender equality. The project could indeed be categorised as an example of universities as activists in this space, working collaboratively to promote social justice and foster a culture of continuous and lifelong learning for students and staff alike. Gender equality, including gender identity and expression work, is integral to university lifelong learning as it supports the creation of inclusive, supportive and dynamic educational environments. The link between gender identity and expression training and university lifelong learning is multifaceted, encompassing institutional policies, educational practices and community engagement. This will be explored in further detail below.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part briefly examines the policy background and context of gender identity and expression work in Irish HEIs. The second part of the paper describes and evaluates the innovative collaborative project led by SETU in the Irish Higher Education (HE) system, which aimed to embed inclusive gender identity, expression and diversity training and best practice into Irish HEIs. This project, which began in 2020, aimed
to combat stereotyping and unconscious bias in relation to gender identity minority groups and invoke inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community in the widest sense. It also aimed to benefit other HEIs by developing and sharing resources and best practice in this area with all other HEIs in the Irish sector and others internationally.

Also critical to the work was the need to ensure that the lived experiences of the trans and non-binary community remained a central focus. As such, ShoutOut, an Irish charity committed to improving life for LGBTQ+ people by sharing personal stories and running educational programmes, was invited to join the project as a partner. This innovative collaborative approach was key to the success of the project.

GENDER IDENTITY, EXPRESSION AND DIVERSITY IN IRISH HEIs

Within Irish HEIs, the need for an intersectional approach to gender equality that moves beyond a traditional binary one is generally well acknowledged. The Athena Swan Ireland Principles and Charter, which was developed in consultation with the Irish HE sector, and with which all Irish HEIs engage, specifically includes transgender1 and non-binary2 people within its remit. Signatory HEIs are committed to “fostering collective understanding that individuals have the right to determine and affirm their gender, and to implementing inclusive and effective policies and practices that are cognisant of the lived experiences and needs of trans and non-binary people” (Advance HE, 2021).

For many Irish HEIs, work on a more inclusive and broader concept of gender equality began over the course of the past ten years, and has evolved since in a largely collaborative fashion across the sector. Research indicates that gender diverse people make up approximately 1% of the population in Ireland. Ceatha et al. (2023), found that just over 1% of Irish 17- to 18-year-olds surveyed identify as gender minority youth (1.1%), with 0.7% identifying as transgender and 0.5% describing their gender as other.

We also know that in Ireland, minority groups such as LGBTQ+ respondents, ethnic minorities and respondents with a disability are more likely to endure acts of bullying at work within HEIs when compared to majority groups (Dublin City University, 2022). Recent research (HEA, 2022) has also shown that LGBTQ+ students have a particularly high level of exposure to sexual violence and harassment. Research from the UK has found that transgender and non-binary students also face difficulties navigating ‘spaces of anxiety’ (especially regarding bathroom provision), potentially negative consequences of expressing identity, a lack of education in peers regarding transgender and non-binary issues, exposure to transphobic abuse and dead-naming3 and erasure in the classroom and within university systems.

THE GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION PROJECT

In order to tackle some of the challenges faced by transgender and non-binary staff and students at Irish HEIs, South East Technological University in Ireland, along with partners from Technological University of the Shannon, Mary Immaculate College, University of Galway and Carlow College, designed and implemented an ambitious and pioneering project to combat stereotyping and unconscious bias in relation to gender identity minority groups and invoke inclusion for the LGBTQ+ community in the widest sense. It also aimed to benefit other HEIs by developing and sharing resources and best practice in this area with all other HEIs in the Irish sector and others internationally.

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1 Those who experience a gender identity/expression that differs from their sex assigned at birth (Hughto et al., 2015). Transgender individuals often describe their gender identity as being within the male/female binary.
2 Non-binary individuals may describe their gender identity as being somewhere between or outside of the male/female binary (Matsuno & Budge, 2017).
3 Calling a person by the wrong or an inappropriate name. This may also be referred to as ‘misnaming.’ (McBride et al., 2020)
national project across their HEIs, aiming to tackle gender inequality and support LGBTQ+ inclusion through the development of a sustainable Gender Identity & Expression training programme for staff. The project was funded by the HEA’s Gender Equality Enhancement Fund and consisted of two key phases.

The first phase involved the development, piloting and roll out of a bespoke training programme on Gender Identity and Expression for staff within the partner HEIs. The programme was developed by the partners, with key input from ShoutOut, and was piloted with 128 staff. (General Staff (n.81), Senior Leaders (n.19), HR Teams (n.28)). Training took place online using Zoom, and Menti was used to encourage participant feedback, which was then used to create an iterative process of updating and improving the training materials and methodologies. The project steering group attended every pilot session and also conducted a full debrief after each one. The ‘final’ training programme was then rolled out across the participating HEIs with an additional 621 registrations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number Registered Pilot</th>
<th>Number Registered Full Roll Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic &amp; PMSS</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Number and Category of Registrations in Gender Identity and Expression Training Programme

Anonymous feedback on the programme was gathered both after the initial pilot and then after the rollout of the final training programme.

Findings from pilot (n.77)
The majority strongly agreed that the training was comprehensive (n.40), easy to understand (n.49), engaging (n.48) and interesting (n.53). All reported that the training was relevant to their work (n.77). Qualitative feedback was broadly complimentary of the delivery method, the relaxed nature of the presentation and the use of lived experience as well as being clear and informative.

Findings from wider rollout (n.230)
The majority strongly agreed that the training was comprehensive (n.148), easy to understand (n.151), engaging (n.143) and interesting (n.170).
Moving beyond the binary: collaborating to embed sustainable and inclusive gender equality in the Irish Higher Education sector

Kenneally, A.

Table 2: Participant Feedback from Rollout of Gender Identity & Expression Training Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training was</th>
<th>Comprehensive</th>
<th>Easy to understand</th>
<th>Engaging</th>
<th>Interesting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of qualitative feedback, this was largely positive, with feedback on the informative nature of the sessions and the strength of delivery. One participant commented:

“I've done a lot of work on gender equality and it was refreshing to have a workshop that wasn't confined to the binary (I often joke that it’s extra hard to get academia/research to understand that gender is a spectrum when they have only recently discovered that women exist.)”

BUILDING UPON LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Seizing the opportunity to build upon the learning from the project and to bring the project to scale, the project steering group successfully attained additional funding, which allowed the partners to engage in a number of further actions, including the rollout of more training across the partner HEIs. The partners also developed and ran a bespoke ‘train the trainer’ session to train others working within the HEIs to deliver the programme ‘in house’ to make it more sustainable. The partner HEIs established a new national higher education Gender Identity & Expression Champions Network – this was one of the key outputs of this phase and saw the partners establish a national network, which aims to provide information, supports and further opportunities to collaborate and share best practice in this space amongst Irish HEIs. Finally, the partners agreed to work to develop an online version of the gender identity and expression training programme. The partners are now at the end phase of developing this training programme for staff and students, which can be placed on HEIs’ virtual learning platforms. This will allow for greater scale and reach of the programme offering, opening it up to students as well as staff at HEIs. The programme will also be shared with others across the sector who wish to use it.

FURTHER IMPACT

In addition to the training, national network and online programme development, the project acted as a catalyst for many unplanned but related initiatives in the partner HEIs. These included increased use by staff of pronouns in their Zoom/teams names and email signatures as a visible display of allyship, and the inclusion of an optional pronoun field in standardised email signatures in one of the partner HEIs. There was also increased staff support for LGBTQ+ & Allies networks and the launch of new LGBTQ+ networks at partner HEIs. Most of the partners developed new gender identity and expression policies and procedures to support students and staff during the lifetime of the project. There was also an
increase in staff engaging with and supporting LGBTQ+ related events, greater support for and implementation of new name change practices for transgender/non-binary students and staff and greater awareness and use of gender inclusive language in HEI policies, surveys, forms etc.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This project has been running for approximately four years and is currently wrapping up. It has been a marathon rather than a sprint and has presented the partners with both opportunities and challenges along the way. Key opportunities which arose for the partners during the project included the opportunity to demonstrate inclusive leadership and visible support for the LGBTQ+ communities, particularly trans and non-binary students and staff at our HEIs. The project has allowed HEIs to empower staff to be more confident in their own knowledge and understanding of gender identity and expression. The collaborative approach meant that those undertaking work in this area had a support network and expertise upon which to build and grow, and the opportunity to learn from the lived experience of others in this space. This was absolutely invaluable, particularly when challenges arose.

As regards those challenges, we have seen an increase in the expression of polarising views on transgender on non-binary people, particularly on social media, and also in mainstream media outlets. Misinformation and attempts to divide, create fear and incite hatred of transgender and non-binary people are unfortunately all too common. The increasing prevalence of transphobia should be a huge concern for all in society, and is not something with which the partner HEIs had to contend with to any real extent at the beginning of this project. It did, however, became more prominent in the media as the project progressed, and continues to be something of which people engaging in work in this space must be mindful. Taking active steps to ensure self-care, taking care of those delivering training, developing policies and actively supporting transgender and non-binary communities in our HEIs is increasingly necessary. Taking care of our transgender and non-binary students and staff in this context, and particularly if and when localised or national issues flare up, is critical. Working collectively with other HEIs and taking a collective approach to work in this area has considerably strengthened the reach and impact of the work of the project, and also gives greater legitimacy to the work itself.

A very small minority have cited a perceived tension between academic freedom on one hand, and the rights of our transgender and non-binary students and colleagues, on the other, as a potential issue. This echoes a wider debate on the perceived tension between the right to freedom of expression and the right to equality itself. It is interesting that these perceived tensions rarely, if ever, come to the fore when discussing other grounds for equality (e.g., race equality, disability), and reinforces the view that there is a huge amount of work still to be done in both our HEIs and society at large to create a truly welcoming, safe, supportive and equal space for transgender and non-binary people.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION

Now, perhaps more than ever, our HEIs must take active and meaningful steps to ensure inclusion and true equality for our transgender and non-binary colleagues and students. Real and sustainable change towards greater understanding and inclusion is achievable, but demands a concerted effort by HEI leaders and their staff and student communities. Visible leadership and commitment from senior staff in HEIs is critical and can set the tone for the rest of the university community. Continued support for staff and student LGBTQ+ networks
and initiatives from the university and its leadership is also key. Higher education institutions need to ensure that they develop and implement inclusive policies and practices to ensure that transgender and non-binary staff and students have the necessary supports in place to facilitate name changes, transitions, etc., and that there is a public statement committing the university to being a place free of discrimination and harassment for transgender and non-binary people. Continued rollout of training for staff and students is also key to achieving change, and has been the most impactful measure of all in this project.

Individuals working within HEIs can, of course, also make significant contributions to change in this area themselves. Taking responsibility for their own unconscious biases, awareness and education in this space is critical. Many staff who have completed the training offered as part of this project are now visible allies of the transgender and non-binary communities in their own HEIs. This has in turn encouraged other colleagues to learn more and confront their own biases/lack of knowledge in this area, and has led to many ‘water cooler’ conversations on the issues involved. Active involvement of student unions and other student advocacy groups, who continue to campaign for and support change, is also a welcome catalyst for further developments.

Finally, it is clear that further investment in research into the experiences of transgender and non-binary staff and students in our HEIs is needed, as is a broader and more inclusive approach to data capture both at a systemic and institutional level, which moves beyond the current binary approach.

CONCLUSION

The project partners are hopeful that the positive impacts of this project will continue to be felt across our HEIs well into the future. A key strength of this project was its collaborative approach – both with other HEIs and with ShoutOut. It would not have been possible to develop and roll out credible and impactful training without the voices and lived experiences of transgender and non-binary people which ShoutOut were able to bring, nor would it have been possible to achieve reach and scale across the sector without the collaboration between the five HEIs themselves. Unfortunately, as discussed above, equality work which focuses on transgender and/or non-binary people, is becoming increasingly contentious and divisive, if not within the HEIs themselves, then certainly on social and other media. Higher education institutions need to be strong to withstand potential backlash that may arise from enacting change in this area, and this is where the power in collective action/collaboration can really be felt. By working together and learning from each other, HEIs have the opportunity to not only make real and positive changes to the lives of their transgender and non-binary staff and students, but also to show leadership to others across society on this critical issue.

Embedding this training into our universities has enhanced both personal and professional development of our staff and has helped support diverse student and staff populations. This not only benefits individual learners but also enriches the academic community and society as a whole. Embedding this training into university lifelong learning programmes would allow learners to benefit from engaging with educational materials which prepare them to understand and engage with gender diversity throughout their lives, and would also help ensure that gender diverse learners are respected and supported, fostering safe, inclusive and welcoming academic spaces conducive to continuous learning and development. This would not only benefit individual learners, but also enrich the academic community and society as a whole.
As the Second Glion Declaration (2009) suggests, it is in our universities that “the leaders of each new generation are nurtured; it is there that boundaries to our existing knowledge are explored and crossed; it is there that unfettered thinking can thrive and unconstrained intellectual partnerships can be created. It is there, within each new class, within each new generation, that the future is forged.” HEIs surely now have a unique role to play in shaping how we as a society can embrace and include transgender and non-binary people across our communities, combat division and create a better future for all.

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LIFELONG LEARNING AND HIGHER EDUCATION SERVING FOR THE INCLUSION OF REFUGEES AND STUDENTS WITH MIGRATORY BACKGROUNDS

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Keywords: Refugees, lifelong learning, tertiary education, formal education, soft skills

ABSTRACT

In recent years, permanent learning and the enhancement of previously acquired skills have become highly significant priorities within EU society. This significance has received further attention and become strategic as potential integration tool with respect to refugee international students’ access to Higher Education (HE). This is supported by a growing demand expressed by this vulnerable target group to validate and recognise their learning credentials and previously acquired soft skills, regardless from where these were gained. Consequently, universities through their commitment to the third mission enables HEIs to engage and carry out actions addressed to strengthen the right to Lifelong Learning (LLL), meant as a “right of the person.”

This paper explores the topic of inequality in access to tertiary education with specific reference to refugee international students, in particular, the acknowledgement and validation of previously acquired learning. The paper addresses these as a challenge to promote flexible actions and paths that might facilitate cultural inclusion in the local context.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND RECOGNITION OF “CONTINUUM IN EDUCATION”

In recent decades, the demand for inclusion in higher education paths expressed by students with a migratory background has clearly increased, helping to map out the necessary changes that institutions need, in practice, to ensure adherence to the principles of equity, human dignity, active citizenship, personal self-attainment and social inclusion (Maruyama, 2020; Oliver, 2020; Thomas & Arday, 2021).

This proves relevant at the European level, considering that the main needs expressed by the target group of refugees relate to the “the possibility of benefiting from educational opportunities and programmes that promote the integration of formal and non-formal-informal education, while at the same time enhancing the experiences gained in these contexts and the skills acquired over the years, in order to ensure greater employment opportunities” (Colosimo and Scardigno, 2021a, p. 1216). This issue of non-formal and informal learning has already been the subject of attention in the European Policy Agenda of the European
Commission in 2001 and also led to the approval by CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) of the European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2015), which focus on the valorisation of skills and competences acquired in any formal, non-formal and informal learning context (Colosimo and Scardigno, 2021a).

Assuming that education is a key long-term factor in preventing and reversing inequalities and promoting equal opportunities, inclusion and social mobility, assessment practices play a vital role in breaking inequality patterns and creating a fair and inclusive learning environment (Bakker and Korte, 2023).

The constant equity gaps, however, present compelling evidence that Italian higher education institutions are not meeting the goal of correlating assessment results to educational equity. Despite the pressing need of inclusive pedagogies, the ongoing research shows that in the present context of higher education, students do not have equitable assessment experiences. As reported by the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2023), “the fragmented nature of validation services, across different institutions and complex financing arrangements involving European, national, regional, local and individual funding, makes the tracing of the funding allocated to validation and its cost not easy (p. 29).” More specifically, Ilona Murphy1 (2019), as reported in the essay by Colosimo and Scardigno (2021a), highlighted in her research the non-uniformity of the different systems and approaches of validation of non-formal and informal learning processes spread across Europe. This research demonstrated that only a few countries such as Austria, Belgium and Germany “stand out as examples of good practice in the conclusion of systematic validation agreements, aimed at recognising the skills and competences possessed by migrant and refugee subjects, acquired through different forms of learning (p. 1219),” while in countries such as Greece, Italy and Switzerland, initiatives on the subject are still not very widespread and need to be consolidated.

These issues were also explored in the recent essay by Pastore et al. (2023), which reflected on what actions are expected to be designed and implemented by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to ensure a culturally responsive and equitable education for all, with particular attention to socially and culturally disadvantaged groups such as refugees and those with a migration background.

Although the European Union has defined a common framework and developed a common policy, there are still many differences between the several initiatives taken, both in policy and practice, to help facilitate integration and inclusion. As pointed out by Castles (2004), a gap between rhetoric and action aroused and persists. Sometimes these differences are substantial among European countries. The framework is not coherent and cohesive (Andersson and Osman, 2008; Berg, Grüttnner and Streitwieser, 2021; Sandberg and Andersson, 2011; Tibajev and Hellgren, 2019). If, on the one hand, there are consistent signs of progress in the definition of achievable aims, on the other hand, there are some unresolved assessment dilemmas (e.g., who is responsible for the recognition? Which criteria must be considered in this assessment process?). Considering the impact of the recognition of migrants’ and refugees’ learning on expanding practices in the context of HE, these processes must be considered with caution.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention of 1997, signed and ratified by almost all European countries, assumes that “Each party shall take all feasible and reasonable steps within the framework of its education system and in conformity with its constitutional, legal, and regulatory provisions to develop procedures designed to assess fairly and expeditiously

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1 European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, promoted by the European Commission and CEDEFOP
whether refugees, displaced persons, and persons in a refugee-like situation fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, to further higher education programmes or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications obtained in one of the Parties cannot be proven through documentary evidence” (Article VII, p. 9).

A possible starting point for reconstructing a useful theory to observe the “continuum in education” (Merico and Scardigno, 2023) between formal, non-formal and informal learning includes the distinction between contexts where the teaching-learning-educational process occur and the degree of standardisation that this process can assume. According to theories that ascribe to the hybrid approach (Hofstein and Rosenfeld, 1996), the distinction between formal, non-formal and informal makes sense when referring to organisational contexts:

- formal for educational institutions (school, HE system);
- non-formal for other external education and training organisations (but offering structured programmes);
- informal for learning that takes place in unorganised and unstructured contexts (everyday life, leisure, learning from experience).

The distinction between contexts and methods allows one to observe that within every organisational context, multiple teaching-learning experience might co-exist with different degrees of standardisation. The literature review presented by Fallik, Rosenfeld and Eylon (2013) (Table 1) helps to identify the variables that come into play in the formal-informal “continuum” of the teaching-learning-educational process. Specifically, the authors classified the most relevant variables into four key dimensions: organisational, cognitive, emotional-affective and socio-environmental.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Formal</th>
<th>Informal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time and space</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>Outside the classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Longer</td>
<td>Shorter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-student relations</td>
<td>More hierarchical</td>
<td>Less hierarchical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Formal judgements</td>
<td>Mutual feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main purpose</td>
<td>Training for a job</td>
<td>Participation in a learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and growth experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Objectives</td>
<td>Intellectual skills, disciplinary skills</td>
<td>Life skills, soft skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Formal-informal continuum variables: organisational dimension

Despite the fact that the literature on the topic is increasingly interested in permanent education and its recognition practices, “limited is sound scientific evidence that these practices have a positive effect on target groups of individuals” (Pastore et al., 2023, p. 2). Young migrants willing to obtain formal recognition of prior learning encounter great difficulties doing so, probably in part due to the fact that there is not a shared European view about recognition practices, therefore “students with a migrant background continue to face barriers when trying to access higher education” (Pastore et al., 2023, p. 2). At a European level, although there is “a common framework and common policy developed, there are many differences between the several initiatives taken, in policy and practice, to facilitate integration and inclusion” (Pastore et al., 2023, p. 5), especially for refugees.

Therefore, the acknowledgement and validation of non-formal and informal learning is among the priorities brought about by the Global Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2023. In line with this evidence, research and practice at the European level have greatly contributed to defining practices and procedures aimed at showing the pivotal role of these dimensions of learning significantly implied in LLL (Scardigno, Manuti and Pastore, 2019).

THE ITALIAN FRAMEWORK: THE FINALISED RECOGNITION

In view of the above, UNESCO’s global strategy to validate learning modalities and outcomes could be fundamental to enhancing the capital of knowledge owed by individuals, thus recalling the priorities highlighted by the European Commission in 2023 defined as the “European Year of Skills.”

Moreover, according to the last report published by the UNHCR in October 2023 on occasion of the 30th anniversary of the DAFI Programme - (UNHCR, 2023a), the percentage of refugee people who had access to higher education increased in 2023 at a global level ranging to 7%.

This good news is not sufficient, however, to meet the goal posed by the ‘Agenda 2030’ that posed the same percentage up to 15% (UNHCR, 2023a). Then “this figure is significantly lower than the percentage of refugee enrolment in primary education (68%) and secondary education (34%)” (UNESCO, 2022; Marchegiani et al., p. 11).

Together with the European Agenda “the Incheon declaration for Education 2030 (UNESCO, 2015), and its Education 2030 Framework for action, HE plays a crucial role in addressing inclusivity and diversity” (Marchegiani et al., p. 10). This is one of the key priorities of the right of access to lifelong education for all target groups, with particular attention to the most vulnerable.

This bitter evidence is further supported by the fact that an increasing number of refugee people requests the recognition of formal and non-formal education acquired in their country of origin. This emergent need is crucial for these youth to further progress in their academic careers and to enter the labour market. At the origin of these needs, we find the emergent demand for recognition and validation of the vast cultural capital brought about by people with a migratory background and, especially, by refugees.

Within the Italian context, this right for permanent learning was mentioned in the National Repertoire of formal education and learning established by the Legislative Decree 13/2013. Subsequently, in January 2021 the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies published the official guidelines to apply this new law, which regulates the national system for skills certification.

This right has been recognised since the promulgation of article 22 of the Geneva Convention, according to which the signatory nations agreed to allow refugee people the “recognition of their formal learning, (through diplomas, formal academic education acquired abroad) with a treatment like that warranted in similar conditions to foreign people in general” (UNHCR, 2023b).

Within the process of enhancement and recognition of these credentials, universities play an important role in determining integration and participation in the academic and social lives of refugees and people with a migratory background. This is also in accordance with the April 1997 Convention on the recognition of formal certification acquired within higher education in Europe (also called The Lisbon Convention), whose internal ratification from Italy has been made concrete through law 148/2002, as recognised by the Council of Europe on the 8th of October 2010.

Lifelong learning and Higher Education serving for the inclusion of refugees and students with migratory backgrounds
Scardigno, F., Colosimo, M., Manuti, A., & Pastore, S.
Thanks to this law, Italy has, for the first time, used the notion of “finalised recognition” instead of equivalence in the process of recognition of formal certifications acquired abroad (art. 9), thus recalling article III.2, where the methodology for assessment is described as featured by criteria of transparency, coherence and reliability.

According to the comma 3 bis of the article 26 of the Legislative Decree 251/2007 (art. VII LRC), “the recognition of the cultural formal education (professional qualifications, diplomas, certifications and other documents) acquired in the country of origin abroad could be considered for a refugee also in absence of documents or documents appearing uncomplete” (Merico and Scardigno, 2023, p.167), however, the same academic institutions are competent in adopting the assessment procedures useful to support this recognition, in line with what is stated by article 49 of the Decree of the President of the Republic (DPR) of the 31st of August 1999, n. 394.

The basis of the recognition process includes a careful listening to the refugee student and a significant consideration of the assessment request, focusing on the formal, non-formal and informal learning acquired in his/her difficult migratory path. These issues lead one to consider that “the recognition that quality assurance would/should lead higher education enhancement has raised a variety of perspectives about the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement” (Pastore, Manuti and Scardigno, 2021, p. 2).

With respect to what assumed within the process of academic recognition, the most recent article 1 comma 28-quinquies of the Law 15/2022 could be considered, according to which, as explicitly indicated in the article 2 of the Law 148/2002, it is competence of the Italian HEIs to proceed to the recognition of formal education acquired abroad, regardless of the citizenship of the single citizen, therefore the academic recognition would acquire a legal value as Italian certification and could be considered valid also for the access to public employment.

TOWARD AN AUTONOMOUS PROCEDURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This is highly important for refugee students who wish to continue their academic studies, as they would need support and “guidance to the academic choice to reduce any risk of dropout” (Colosimo and Scardigno, 2021b, p. 48). For this group of refugee students from outside Europe, we refer to the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997) that received numerous additions as recently as 2017. This convention explicitly refers to refugees coming to Europe from non-European countries and stipulates that the elsewhere acquired competences procedure should be accessible to them.

In Italy, for instance, universities may adhere to the Manifesto for Inclusive Universities promoted by the UNHCR in 2019 (2023c), which, in 2022, involved 55 Italian universities, including the University of Bari. This initiative is part of the activities aimed at contributing to the achievement of the UNHCR’s ‘15by30’ target, which aims to increase the enrolment rate of refugee students in tertiary education from the current 6% to 15% by 2030.

Italian universities are also involved in the Network of National Coordination on Evaluation of Refugees’ Qualifications (CNVQR), which has collaborated for many years with the CRUI (Conference of Deans of the Italian Universities) and with the Centre for information on mobility and Academic Equivalences (CIMEA). Since 1984, the latter has offered them the possibility to “be supported in the process of validation of the education paths of students coming from different countries, also through specific declarations of equivalence of formal education” (Scardigno, 2019, p. 127).
Therefore, Italian universities traditionally enrolling refugee students can rely upon the certification of equivalence issued by the CIMEA or by the Council of Europe with the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (EQPR). This carries great relevance at the European level, and is also given since “the evaluation methodology adopted draws on the best of the experiences developed in recent years at an international level, and on the experience gained by Cimea through the many international projects on the subject of which it has been an active part” (Marchegiani et al., 2023, p. 19).

Some refugee students do not have formal documentation of their prior education or have only parts of it. In such cases, the student could apply to the Council of Europe for equivalence, after which an assessment would issue the EQPR, valid throughout the entire European context and in use by several universities to warrant access to enrolment. Then, «the EQPR can be considered a game changer (Finocchietti and Bergan, 2021) since it brings a shift in the concept of qualifications, putting the spotlight on the knowledge, understanding, competencies, and abilities acquired» (Marchegiani et al., 2023, p. 18).

In order to cope with these difficulties and the longstanding bureaucratic obstacles faced by refugee students, the University of Bari, through the Center for Life-long Learning (CAP Uniba), has adopted since the academic year 2023-2024 an autonomous procedure for the assessment of formal documentation. This has allowed access and enrolment for refugee people and asylum-seekers, thanks to a disposition approved by the academic senate in February 2023. The autonomous assessment procedure, finalised to the acknowledgement of formal education and foreign qualifications for a refugee person, first requires that the beneficiary, who is entitled to international protection or temporary protection (e.g., coming from Ukraine), applies to the secretary’s office of the university for enrolment and to the department which oversees the organisation of the degree course.

The refugee student is accompanied by the expert operators of the Centre for Lifelong Learning through a counselling process made up of four phases where he/she will have the opportunity to recall and reconstruct all experience, his/her previously acquired skills and the formal and non-formal education acquired to have a complete overview of his/her social, professional, and educational capital. After reviewing the application and the conformity of the documentation in support, the Centre for Lifelong Learning informs the secretary’s office and the department that, in turn, submit the decision to the didactic commission of the degree course that will finally proceed to enrolment.

After the formal conclusion of this bureaucratic process, the Centre for lifelong learning provides the refugee student with a portfolio that includes an assessment of skills and a proposal for the recognition of eventual academic credit gained within formal, informal, and non-formal education as foreseen by the recent European recommendations on micro-credentials.

The autonomous procedure for the assessment (Figure 1) has been adopted by the University of Bari since the academic year 2021-2022 with reference to the projects Unicore 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0 – “University Corridors for Refugees”, promoted by the UNHCR in conjunction with the adoption of the Manifesto for Inclusive Universities. This is an agreement that many Italian universities have signed to facilitate access to higher education for refugees and promote their social inclusion and active participation in academic life. Thanks to these projects, the University of Bari has granted nine international students, coming from Eritrea, Congo and Nigeria, the possibility of a grant for enrolment to master degree courses in English.

As of the current academic year 2023-2024, prospective students at the University of Bari who have obtained refugee status in Italy can directly access a degree course in our educational offerings through an autonomous evaluation procedure of previous qualifications,
without necessarily having to request comparability assessments, declarations of value or other documents. Thus, in addition to the nine international students of the Unicore Project described above, there were two other refugee students (Ukrainian and Palestinian) who enrolled at the University of Bari with the autonomous assessment procedure implemented, for a total of 11 beneficiary students.

In total, 30 refugee students are currently enrolled at the University of Bari (19 males and 11 females) in first- or second-degree courses, and 16 of them have participated in the training service for validation and certification of soft skills provided by the Centre for Lifelong Learning. As a result of this certification process of soft skills, which can be considered as the most important social and communicative skills that need to be recognised and valorised in a constantly changing labour market context, the refugee students were awarded 16 digital certifications (Open Badges).

**LIFELONG LEARNING AND SOFT SKILLS VALIDATION FOR STUDENTS WITH A MIGRATORY BACKGROUND**

The Lisbon Recognition Convention states that all countries should develop procedures to assess whether refugees and displaced persons fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education or to employment activities, even in cases in which the qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence. On the other hand, higher education institutions have the autonomy to organise the inflow of third country nationals and to decide on the progression of this group of lateral entrants.

The CAP’s researchers have developed a procedure which includes different steps. First, the international student fills a module where he/she agrees to treat personal data and allows the registration of a biographical interview. This interview is conducted by expert personnel in the field of recognition of competences (EITC). Secondly, the international student completes a welcome module and a memo with a dossier of evidence where he/she can provide all the evidence in support of the competences he/she declares to have. Then, a transparency document is provided by the CAP to the student. This document, which reconstructs and summarises all formative and professional experiences of the student, helps identify within the Regional Repertoire of Professions the most pertinent professional profile, as well as the student’s most important competencies.
Furthermore, the student signs a declaration whereby he/she confirms that he/she has mastered the certified professional expertise. Finally, a dossier with the certification of soft skills is released to the student who is required to follow a two-step process. First, he/she is invited to fill in a self-report questionnaire provided by the expert of competencies validation. Second, he/she participates with a small group of other international students to a leaderless group discussion session where he/she will be observed by at least two experts while informally discussing the problem-solving task posed with peers. The structured observation is addressed to assess the same soft skills he/she has assessed through the self-report questionnaire. The convergence of scores gathered in the self and hetero assessment of soft skills results in a comprehensive certification that is considered in the final dossier/folder as the distinctive profile of the students in terms of personal transversal qualities. This methodology is evidence-based and follows the scientific prescriptions of the assessment centre used in recruitment, selection, and skill assessment practices. At the end of the procedure, this dossier is given to the student who is required to provide a general evaluation of the service.

The attention assigned to these skills and the validation process provided by the CAP are, indeed, clearly aligned with an LLL perspective because the recognition of previous learning of refugee students (in Italy, as well as in the country of origin) demonstrates that it is possible to give them a chance to value what they have learned in formal and informal contexts. As such, “Italian universities play a determining role in promoting actions for the academic integration and inclusion of refugees” (Salvati and Scardigno, 2021, p. 217).

CONCLUSIONS

The reflections reported in this paper stressed the importance of enhancing the inclusion of people with a migratory background. In order to guarantee this right, an investment in the education of young and adult migrants is paramount. Universities and HEIs are called upon to implement inclusion paths, allowing these students to develop autonomy, awareness, and responsibility as prerequisites for their academic integration, active involvement and participation in the social and professional context.

This procedure offers a feasible solution/substitution to the traditional procedure of comparability issued by the Ministerial Body CIMEA focal point Enic-Naric or by the value declaration of one’s own educational title adopted by most Italian universities. The autonomous evaluation of foreign titles is possible thanks to the Lisbon Convention (1997).

The experience reported in this paper confirms that in a more inclusive and sustainable European perspective on LLL, an investment in migrants and in cultural capital is crucial. Generally, these students are asylum seekers: they have left their own countries and request academic integration and a chance to conclude their formal education paths and to obtain a diploma (UNHCR, 2023d). Their requests and their voices cannot remain silent and unanswered.

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Lifelong learning and Higher Education serving for the inclusion of refugees and students with migratory backgrounds
Scardigno, F., Colosimo, M., Manuti, A., & Pastore, S.
# REMOVING FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

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## ABSTRACT

The University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI) offers continuing education courses that help already qualified and experienced professionals maintain their competitiveness in the changing labour market to avoid the risk of exclusion. However, the self-funding system for continuing education limits accessibility for disadvantaged groups because courses are offered at market price, and not everyone can afford the cost. An initiative was outlined to seek alternative funding sources to make SUPSI’s CE courses more inclusive by covering the needs of specific disadvantaged groups.

Raising awareness and interacting with active employees in continuing education is crucial to ensuring the initiative's success. We therefore decided to launch an internal communication campaign to promote a more inclusive continuing education culture and proactivity towards finding potential alternative sources of funding. A dedicated newsletter combined with meetings and individual counselling were the main tools identified to implement the campaign. This initiative aims to create a culture that encourages the identification of specific needs and promotes a participatory and inclusive vision.

## CONTINUING EDUCATION IN SWITZERLAND AND ITS BENEFITS

Continuing education (CE) at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), based in Canton Ticino, Switzerland, is part of the Swiss education system defined by the federal legislative framework (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2019). It has a mission assigned by federal legislation (Fedlex, 2017; Swissuniversities, 2023b) to continuously update the skills of experienced professional adults to enable them to adapt to changes and evolutions in the labour market in anticipation of the risk of exclusion. SUPSI’s CE is interdisciplinary, combining the diverse disciplinary fields of its four departments and three affiliated schools (SUPSI, 2023).

The CE courses at SUPSI have a modular architecture (Figure 1). In 2022, the structure consisted of 360 modules between 1 and 2 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), 482 Short Advanced Studies (SAS) courses, 732 Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) courses, 109 Diploma of Advanced Studies (DAS) courses, and 78 Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) courses. These types of courses award ECTS credits in varying degrees proportional to the length of the training and the amount of effort exerted by the participant. These
advanced studies certifications are not part of the formal European system of qualification and their value is recognised by the labour market. Such programmes have a big impact on the educational participation of work-experienced adults (Cendon et al., 2020).

Admission to these programmes requires a tertiary degree awarded by one of three types of universities (universities of applied arts and sciences, universities of teacher education and universities of federal institutes of technology) or issued by one of two types of professional education (colleges of higher education and federal examinations), together with sufficient professional experience in the relevant field of the study programme. Holders of lower-level degrees may be admitted only in exceptional cases.

Numerous courses, seminars, webinars and events open to the public that do not award ECTS credits are also offered. They are designed both to spread good practices and to keep the various communities of practice and alumni active. The latter ensures that knowledge is disseminated to as many people as possible in their local areas.

Overall, 11,306 people participated in our CE courses in 2022, with an average age of 38 years for women and 40 years for men. This is a significant figure relative to the number of inhabitants of the Canton of Ticino (308,662 people) and especially its working population of 178,168 people, of whom 79,181 are cross border workers from neighbouring Italy.

**AVOIDING LABOUR MARKET EXCLUSION**

Continuing education helps keep people active in the labour market longer and thus constitutes a preventive measure against unemployment. It also improves employment status and, consequently, earnings, both of which are factors that affect wellbeing (CSRE, 2023). Continuing education is, by nature, inclusive and accessible, as it welcomes people from diverse backgrounds.

The highly dynamic labour market also impacts the urgency for CE. Many workers frequently change jobs and, therefore, need to keep up to date, partly because the more dynamic a job is, the more workers need to remain competitive (CSRE, 2023).
SELF-FUNDING

According to The Federal Law on CE (Art. 9 LFCo 2017; Fedlex, 2017) the university continuing education (UCE) of the Swiss Universities of Applied Arts and Sciences (UAS) (Swissuniversities, 2023a), which is characterised by a self-funding system, is offered at prices that allow full coverage of costs and cannot be in competition with unsubsidised private offers. In this system UCE differs from traditional academic education (bachelor's and master's degree) and research, but also differs from other European countries, especially non-German-speaking countries (Cendon et al., 2020). As a result, the courses offered are priced according to their market value, which is not always affordable for the most unrepresented groups of participants. According to the annual monitoring of SUPSI's CE graduates, it appears that most of the costs of attending CE courses are covered by the participants. In some cases, employees can receive dedicated time off for their CE course. Exceptions to this include teachers in compulsory schools, whose CE is fully funded by the canton, and employees of public hospitals, who receive partial cost coverage.

Alternative funding initiatives could help identify needs with respect to reskilling and avoid labour market exclusion. Alternative funding initiatives could also assist in developing means to answer these needs, which cannot be covered under the current UCE self-funding system.

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR THE BENEFIT OF SPECIFIC GROUPS

Despite being actively employed, workers do not always have the financial capacity to undertake CE training experiences, and there is no guarantee that they will be able to find financial support from their employers or family networks. This was confirmed by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), which conducted a survey in 2021 that found that 29% of the population aged 25–74 could not undertake CE. In 20% of these cases, the combination of the high cost of CE and family needs was the primary reason for this barrier (FSO, 2023a).

In addition to identifying the needs of active professionals who, for various reasons, cannot afford the training, we focused on disadvantaged people – professionals with specific needs – and thus drew on situations that could be relevant to the SUPSI context. One example is people over 55 who are at risk of leaving or who have already left the labour market. According to the FSO (2023b), although more young people (7.5%) are affected by unemployment than older people, older people can also be affected (3.9%). In addition, people over 55 comprise the age group that engages in the least CE because the higher returns generated by training are applied in a short time that does not compensate for the costs compared with a younger person who will work more years before retiring (CSRE, 2023). Women may also constitute a disadvantaged group, as unemployment affects more women (4.6%) than men (4.1%) (FSO, 2023b), and work leave to care for children may increase this risk. Immigrants are also affected by unemployment more frequently (7.2%) than Swiss nationals (3.2%) (FSO, 2023b).

The FSO (2023a) confirmed these figures, stating that in 2021, 30% of the people who were interested in pursuing CE but could not were unemployed, and 18% had a migration background.

CREATE A PROACTIVE MINDSET FOR SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVE FUNDING SOURCES

In Switzerland the Swiss Confederation and Cantons may support financially CE measures regarding the furtherance of basic competences for adults (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2023).
They do not give support to reskill or upskill in advanced or specialised courses, such as those offered in the UAS (State Secretariat for Migration, 2024).

Given this challenging background, we investigated how to make our courses and programmes more accessible and inclusive for the disadvantaged groups mentioned above. We prioritised the creation of a cultural environment conducive to acquiring alternative sources of funding in a self-funding system. Therefore, the initiative focused on raising awareness of the needs of these disadvantaged groups among SUPSI's CE course managers in order to support their participation (Figure 2), thus fulfilling a social commitment (Cendon et al., 2020).

**PARTICIPATORY ACTIONS TO DEVELOP AN ENABLING CULTURAL CONTEXT**

A survey questionnaire, which collected data about the sociodemographic and professional characteristics of participants, was sent to SUPSI’s CE course managers. The results highlighted the case histories of potential participants who expressed a need for financial support due to their particular personal or professional situations.

After this situation analysis was conducted, the first measures to implement the initiative were activated. First, thematic categories were defined to direct the search for alternative funding sources. These included a broad and diverse spectrum of options, such as the following:

1. Targeting disadvantaged people such as women, people over 55, immigrants, and individuals with light neurodiversity (Asperger’s syndrome, dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention disorder, etc.),
2. Designing transformative CE programmes that foster a change in personal perspective (Mezirow, 2000) and that promote reskilling and employability, acting indirectly on inclusion,
3. Co-designing inclusive programmes in collaboration with strategic prior partners, because the identified funding bodies can provide financial resources as well as expertise on their issues,
4. Researching innovative, learning-oriented CE for older adults with skills and experience, the results of which could benefit disadvantaged people (category 1) and transformative CE programmes (category 2) by applying to competitive programmes that support research programmes (e.g., Erasmus+),
5. Marketing solutions to encourage access for the most disadvantaged people, such as promoting donations to activate a dedicated fund to support the five categories mentioned above and purchasing gift vouchers on the SUPSI website, in order to make it possible for individuals wishing to give a gift opportunity to participate in a continuing education course to financially support the courses.

Potential initiatives that fall into one of these five categories will be monitored amid dedicated foundation channels, through newsletters that funding institutions send out regularly, and by online research selected for suitability and then disseminated to the internal network. Usually, cross-cutting to the areas of interest of the departments and affiliated schools’ initiatives are selected to ensure that all can have the opportunity to take advantage of identified sources in the same way. After drawing up these five streams of potential fundraising research, we considered how to activate an outreach campaign to mobilise employees involved in CE to take a proactive attitude towards such research. We did this after analysing the context in which SUPSI CE exists and its potential participants with their respective needs, and we explored a new approach oriented towards the five identified categories (Gregory, 2020).

Therefore, an attempt was made to open and facilitate a communication channel with the employees involved in CE to proactively promote the identified funding initiatives. To this end, a biweekly newsletter was created to generate interest in the proposed themes. The recipients of the newsletter were individuals who had direct contact with the course participants. A mailing list was compiled to include course leaders, faculty, and administrative staff. More direct bilateral contacts in the form of specific informal meetings or internal events were also encouraged.

In parallel with these internal communication measures, efforts were made to expand the external relations with foundations, entities, or institutions that contributed information to the newsletter and with whom contact was established to find funding opportunities for the initiatives. We then assessed the effectiveness of these measures. Through timely and informal exchanges with the recipients of the newsletter, we realised that using email dissemination posed an obstacle, as the recipients received numerous emails every day, and for that reason, the newsletter was not being widely read.

Based on these findings, the previously introduced measures were adjusted. Email newsletters are now uploaded to a content management system software platform, and a team collaboration platform is used to notify recipients of the publication of a new edition. One advantage of this approach is that platforms are already used daily by all SUPSI employees, changing it from a one-sided to a collaborative communication approach.

In addition, an intervention was implemented regarding the presentation of issues. Now, the relevant issues are covered in depth over several editions, following a common thread. The topic is presented, data is provided, a survey is administered to the newsletter recipients and the results of this kind of interaction are presented, suggesting the development of projects that could potentially be funded by donors. Previously, topics were promoted as food for thought without any particular insight into where the interest lay. Also, more timely and specific additional content is posted between newsletters, which increases opportunities for interaction with the community.

At the same time, the expansion of external networking continues. Contacted organisations will not necessarily contribute financially to CE projects but may become partners in the co-construction of potentially fundable inclusive programmes (see research cluster 3). To ensure communication effectiveness, a record is kept of the organisations contacted and why they were contacted.
With this new communication approach, 10% of the network's recipients activated a contact to learn more about the proposed topic. The aim of this approach is to promote the creation of a cultural environment conducive to attracting funds in which employees who are active in CE are alerted to potential funding initiatives related to their professional contexts, based on a participatory model in which everyone brings their own added value and is actively involved in the initiative development process (Branch, 2002). Indeed, the exchange of information and the identification of funding sources can inspire the development of new ideas because project themes are provided, in which a need is recognised that can also be financed. By acting only at the central level, this process cannot take place. Thus, motivation and employee engagement are leveraged to support more inclusive CE.

**FROM INTRODUCING A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL TO FOSTERING A SHARED CULTURE**

Involving and interacting with employees is important for expanding the initiative because it not only allows them to put into practice the skills and knowledge of colleagues (Campbell et al., 2012) but also more easily reach their individual knowledge networks (Adler and Know, 2002), which are based on their field of interest because each one works in a different area due to SUPSI's organisational structure, which includes four departments with different areas of interest coordinated by a central CE direction. Skills and knowledge are intended to be enhanced for greater effectiveness of the initiative (Barney et al., 2011). In fact, the CE direction can extend to all areas of interest of the departments and affiliated schools through active employees who are experts in their target context (Branch, 2002).

With this type of internal communication channel, suggestions of fundable project ideas that can be co-designed with other stakeholders with common interests can be given and shared. Collaborators who launch projects are paired with internal facilitators who can assist them with the design. The role of the internal facilitator is twofold: 1) to present funding initiatives to the interested party and accompany them in the drafting of the project, and 2) to monitor projects to avoid overlap and ensure that the same financial support sources are not solicited by multiple employees.

**LIMITATIONS**

The CE landscape in Switzerland is highly diversified with numerous options for different target groups (CSRE, 2018). This diversified and complex context has an impact on the quality and the relevance of the statistical data, which are assessed only in an aggregated way (Rageth et al., 2022). In other words, data regarding only UAS CE are not available from the FSO (2023a; 2023b), but are aggregated with those of other CE providers in Switzerland.

Moreover, the applicability of the practice, especially in other countries, is difficult precisely because the Swiss model of CE is not included in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Europass, 2024). This prevents its clear comparability with other contexts. In implementing the initiative, it was decided that the action field would be restricted to the first category of the five presented, namely, that dedicated to disadvantaged groups. Future extension to other categories will enhance the impact of good practice.
CONCLUSIONS

This network outreach process not only secures financial support for certain scientific activities and projects but also supports the mission to satisfy social needs. Indeed, identifying financial support sources coincides with identifying the needs of specific groups or organisations. For example, a foundation with its statutes aims to support a specific group of people who have certain characteristics or needs. Discovering these needs makes those working for CE aware of which realities are sometimes overlooked in today’s society.

With this initiative, therefore, an effort was made to identify an aim that would create the appropriate commitment and engagement of the CE network collaborators. Efforts were then made to achieve this goal through newsletters and bilateral talks between facilitators and collaborators. The results of these interactions were tracked and will serve as the basis for defining an organisational culture and establishing common values and norms of behaviour conducive to seeking alternative funding sources (Kotter, 2008).

Promoting a new culture takes time and is not an automatic process. In this case, organisational communication, whose purpose is to convey an organisation’s mission to its employees, plays an important role in making this strategic initiative effective (Gochhayat et al., 2017). It’s an engagement approach that could be extended to other universities, inciting people to action by increasing their awareness and responsibility for the challenges of today’s society. It is a best practice that could be transferred to other European universities as a method of participatory communication that can help create a transformative competence and future readiness that even teachers and study course managers at universities must have in order to continuously adapt their courses to the emerging needs of people and organisations (Foo Seong Ng and Chua, 2023).

A participatory communication model can be effective when accompanying changes or responding to complex challenges. It is a step-by-step approach that does not provide immediate results, which over time creates active involvement in the community in which it is applied and promotes future-oriented thinking and solutions to the challenges of our society. For us as SUPSI’s CE, these challenges include finding innovative and participative solutions to make the provision of courses accessible and financially sustainable to today’s underrepresented and disadvantaged publics.

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Removing financial barriers to Continuing Education for disadvantaged groups

Rauseo, M., & Bregoli, N.
A PEBBLE IN THE SHOE: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN UNIVERSITY CONTINUING EDUCATION.
A CONVERSATION WITH LILIAN NWANZE-AKOBO AND MATTHEW WEAIT

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Matthew Weait is a Professor of Law and Society, Governing Body Fellow of Harris Manchester College, and, since 2022, the Director of the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford. After completing his undergraduate and master’s studies in Law and Criminology at the University of Cambridge, he undertook the research for his DPhil at the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies in Oxford. From there he moved to Birkbeck, University of London, where he was one of the founding members of the Law School. After periods as a Lecturer at the Open University and Keele University, he returned to Birkbeck where, in 2011, he was promoted to Professor of Law and Policy and Pro-Vice-Master for Academic and Community Partnerships. From 2015, he was Executive Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Portsmouth, and from 2020, he was Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Hertfordshire. Weait’s research focuses on the impact of the law on people living with HIV and AIDS, and in 2007 he published the monograph “Intimacy and Responsibility: The Criminalisation of HIV Transmission”. His professional career has focused on non-traditional learners, sometimes non-traditional learners in very traditional environments.

**Ester Cois:** An intersectional approach is necessary to counteract the risk that different inequality factors (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, health status, migrant background, etc.) are treated in watertight compartments in university continuous education, inducing one-dimensional policies to combat discrimination and promote diversity. What could help to strengthen a practical intersectional approach from your point of view and position?

**Matthew Weait:** Intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding and addressing inequalities. Research indicates that students' educational experiences and outcomes are not determined by single factors such as gender or socio-economic status but are impacted by the intersection of complex identities and systemic / structural inequalities. For example, a low-income female student from a migrant background may face distinct challenges that are not fully captured when considering these categories in isolation. Her experiences are shaped by the aggregation of economic hardship, gender biases, and possibly language barriers or racial discrimination. There is sometimes a tendency to compartmentalize different forms of inequality, treating them as discrete issues rather than interconnected phenomena. This compartmentalization can lead to strategies that address gender inequality without considering socio-economic status or which support migrant students without acknowledging the unique challenges faced by migrant women or LGBTQ migrants, for example.

Strengthening lifelong learning involves the design and implementation of programmes and policies that acknowledge how various inequalities intersect. This demands an evidence-based approach with comprehensive data analysis, aligned with institutional missions and underpinned by a recognition of the importance of social justice. Educators and those responsible for the development of policy need training in intersectionality in order that they can address diverse student needs effectively. Curricula should reflect this diversity, incorporating inclusive materials and perspectives, and, wherever possible, content that addresses both legally protected and (where they are not subject to legal protection) socially, culturally and economically significant characteristics. Collaboration between educators and others responsible for delivering students’ learning experience is essential for a holistic approach to inequality. Critically, the involvement of students in policy development can provide insights into the barriers they face and practical solutions. Finally, research and evaluation are important in assessing the effectiveness of these interventions and approaches.

**Lilian Nwanze-Akobo:** There is also a tendency for intersectionality to take up a life of its own and attain the dreaded “buzz word” status. So much so that it becomes all strategy, or policy or theory and makes its way into documents and speeches. This is all good only to the extent that the lives and experiences of real people are impacted positively. At the heart of intersectionality should be stories. The different ways identities can intersect are limitless and while we cannot capture all intersectional possibilities at a given time, if we can create avenues where critical conversations (and stories) can be held (and shared) by people who are directly impacted by the intersection of their identities, we can capture and deal with real issues that arise. If we could reframe our focus and look more at what stories people are actually telling about their experiences with oppression and concentrate on attempting to ameliorate the effects of those, we would be practicing intersectionality automatically. It is then that we can theorize, strategize and analyse. Start from stories, then understand intersectionality. Not the other way around.

**Matthew Weait:** I agree, and in a sense being Director of a Department creates challenges that are intersectional. The role can be understood conceptually, through an academic and political lens, and also as one that has to be concretely implemented in organizational and institutional realities. Adopting an intersectional approach involves attention to the theoretical
literature that addresses it – I’m thinking about Kimberlé Crenshaw’s\(^1\) or Patricia Hill Williams’\(^2\) work here - and the need to understand how this plays out in the practice of education. The distribution of educational opportunities always involves a filtering mechanism. This means that in managing any application, enrolment, or recruitment process, institutions cannot help but necessarily be, to some extent, "reductive". It is not possible to set up an institutional process that is infinitely responsive or sensitive to all possible differences. When an institution addresses the persistence of apparent disparities in who is accessing programmes or opportunities, it must always deal with a management problem, which consists of defining which of the peculiar characteristics of people can be taken into account to promote equity and diversity. However, this necessarily means reducing people to some of their most visible characteristics or to those that are "easier" to address. So, the reality of intersectionality in the classroom or learning space, in all its potential variety, may be different from the institutional imperatives on how to address access and inclusiveness, which must relate to the sole characteristics of the people who have been defined as relevant and detectable.

For example, at the University of Oxford, where for some courses there are around twenty applications for every place, it was well known that admissions from state schools were historically under-represented. Just as it was known that students of Afro-Caribbean heritage or ethnic background were underrepresented. Even more so, the intersection between these two characteristics - coming from state schools and Afro-Caribbean origin - represented very few people. Addressing this problem was relatively easy thanks to an access and participation plan that took these two characteristics into account to improve representation. This, however, does not apply to all the possible characteristics. An institution knows the information relating to the school of origin of the applicants and can also ask people for information on their ethnic identity, but everything becomes increasingly difficult to manage the more the spectrum of information to be provided broadens to consider "other" characteristics, which cannot be displayed or easily shared. People have their own privacy, and may not want to share other subjective dimensions, perhaps because they don't want them to become part of how they are identified. Or the intersection between a growing set of characteristics could identify such a small number of people that it would not be possible to report on this without making them immediately recognizable and identifiable. For example, you could identify in any year at Oxford those people who identify as disabled, transgender and who are also Muslim from an ethnic minority background. That would be a very small number, if such a person existed at all (as it would be in, I suspect, in any higher education institution).

There's a real difficulty in institutionally facing the challenge of intersectionality because it introduces a difference between how diversifying the pool of people admitted, based on some selected elements, and how intersectionality manifests itself and could be concretely managed, in the lived experience of people once they enter the learning space.

**Lilian Nwanze-Akobo:** I agree with you, Matthew. In my role as an educator who interacts with learners in the classroom, intersectionality plays out in a different way than it would when I wear the hat of Director of an academic program. I agree on the need to distinguish between different dimensions of an intersectional approach. For me, I see three levels of dealing with intersectionality. First, there is a "Macro" level, which is the theoretical or policy level. Then there is a "Meso" level, which could be the "academic" environment. But then there is the often neglected but very important, "Micro" level, that deals with the actual lived experience of an individual. On the policy and theoretical level, we tend to adopt very broad

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and standardized definitions in order to “encapsulate” everyone. These policies are purportedly created in order to achieve a positive impact on the lives of people. I think there is a need to facilitate those in authority to reflect on the purposes of policies in the first place and to make it clear that if the impact of the policies is not felt at the micro level, the entire policy-making enterprise would have been a waste of time! The major way to find out about the impact (or otherwise) of policy, is by listening to the stories and the experiences of people. We can do this by creating communities of practice or dialogic spaces where people can sit and have authentic critical conversations about their lived experiences within our educational spaces. We must recognise the power and the potential that story telling has to uncover and highlight the different ways people's specific characteristics intersect and how these can continue to change over the course of their individual biographies. Even within people with similar identities, intersectionality can play out very differently. In a seminar where I presented the findings of a research I did with Black migrant women in Ireland, a discussant challenged me about the need to have highlighted the socio-economic identity of the women in my research. The thing is, when I interviewed these women, the issue of class or socio-economic background was not highlighted as an issue for them. For them, irrespective of their occupation or status in society, whether they were medical doctors or people working at the lower levels of the healthcare sector, to be engage with dignity in the society, they had to overcome many obstacles other than class. So, although I know that an intersectional approach must theoretically also take class into account, if the people I talk to tell me that class is not the main problem for them, who am I to say that class must still intersect with the experience of potential marginalization they are facing? Of course, this can undermine the canonical and "macro" approach to intersectionality, yet it is through collecting and listening attentively to the concrete stories of people that we can check whether inclusive policies are working and having an impact on the ground.

Matthew Weait: I agree. When we think about categories of intersectionality, our personal narrative reflects our disciplinary perspective and also our specific academic position, as if it were already filtered through a certain set of privileges. That's why we must always deal with our own experience, which may not coincide with our theoretical framework, even if this leads us to decide whether to include socio-economic status as a relevant distinction. We must also add two further dimensions.

The first is a biographical and temporal dimension because the intersectional experience can change over time. For a female student, for example, it could change when she obtains a doctorate awarded by her university or when she enters a narrower and more privileged group as an associate professor. Any new status will not change her gender or other aspects of her identity, but will certainly mediate them, changing the way she perceives and lives her identity within academia. And it probably will change again when she becomes a full professor.

The second dimension is institutional and has to do with how much the status, role, and space one occupies within an organizational framework matter. If you are a manager, a director, or a leader of an institution, this element is part of your identity, and will inevitably intersect with every other characteristic. It will be easier to negotiate and manage decision-making processes because you already have a voice that is provided by your institutional position, it makes a difference. When you speak in a meeting, people listen to you, and not necessarily because you have something useful to say, but because of a kind of deference to the position you occupy. Yet, even this top institutional space can prove to be more precarious, depending on other characteristics with which it intersects, such as gender or race, as the President of Harvard discovered when she lost her job. Probably, given the same institutional space, if she had been a white man instead of a black woman, this would not have happened to her, and she would still be in her place.
Since the temporal and institutional dimensions of intersectionality make it changeable over the life course, I think that carefully listening to people’s stories and giving them the space they deserve is fundamental for those who hold decision-making powers within an institution to understand the impact of their political choices.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: My current academic experience fits well with these remarks. I have experienced greater empowerment since becoming the director of one of the teacher training programmes at my university, but this continues to clash with the fact that I am a black woman. For example, when people refer to the programme, normally they turn to my fellow white male co-director, even though we have the same role. This means constantly compromising my authority, especially in front of students. Although people often don’t even realize it, imagine going through this five times a day, five days a week, for many years. It becomes exhausting. It can impact you. Again, these are the little things that a general policy cannot address, but this personal dimension is no less important.

Matthew Weait: Lilian has a fundamental goal, to become a pebble in my shoe, forcing me to be aware that my privileged position does not always guarantee I fully grasp that intersectional mechanisms can work differently for other, more vulnerable people. This is the provocative power of storytelling.

Ester Cois: A possible effect of a superficial adoption of inclusive policies is the so-called “tokenism,” i.e., the practice of making only a symbolic effort, for example, by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of gender or racial equality within an organization. Based on your concrete experience, do you think that tokenism is a widespread phenomenon? And if so, what could be done to counter it and by whom?

Matthew Weait: Tokenism can be a real problem, arising from the pressure to demonstrate that action is being taken – a desire or need to be seen to be doing something – or to meet eligibility criteria for specific funding programmes, for example. There’s a risk that we make what are merely symbolic efforts rather than delivering genuine, substantive inclusion and change. Institutions may feel compelled to showcase diversity through superficial measures, such as hiring a small number of underrepresented individuals or featuring them prominently in promotional materials, without addressing the underlying structural and other issues that perpetuate and reinforce inequality. This can lead to a situation where the presence of a few diverse individuals is used to occlude ongoing exclusionary practices and policies. It can put additional pressure on educators and students from minority groups – for example on hiring committees - adding to their work.

Addressing tokenism requires a sustained commitment to meaningful change. First and foremost, institutions should focus on long-term structural changes rather than superficial diversity efforts. This means revising hiring practices, creating inclusive curricula, and fostering an institutional culture that genuinely values and supports diversity. While being transparent about areas of under-representation can be risky for universities, leading to negative press and media attention, it can also lead to significant improvements. Support systems are also important. Mentorship programmes, peer groups, and professional development opportunities for those in underrepresented groups can contribute a sense of belonging and provide opportunities for community and solidarity. Inclusive policies must also be developed and enforced to tackle discrimination and bias, with regular diversity training for staff. As far as funding is concerned, institutions should collaborate with funders to develop criteria that prioritise genuine and sustainable inclusion efforts. We could also think more creatively about regulatory frameworks that incentivise genuine inclusion. This might include accreditation standards that emphasise diversity and inclusion outcomes.
**Lilian Nwanze-Akobo:** Undoubtedly, tokenism is bad. It reinforces marginalization and oppression and is almost like insult upon an injury. However, I think that there are other ways to frame this issue of tokenism. I like to refer to what Critical Race Theory (CRT)\(^3\) calls “interest convergence. Interest convergence is a tenet of CRT that states that the interests of black people (or people who are minoritised) would only be considered when these interests align with the interests of white people (or people of the dominant group). In this sense, tokenism can be used as a strategy. There are times when I am invited to spaces that ordinarily would be inaccessible to a Black person. It is obvious at many of those times that I am invited as a tick box “diversity face.” At times like this, I use tokenism as a strategy, and I take the opportunity to address issues that my host would be embarrassed to ignore or to do nothing about. I am only able to raise these issues and to bring my voice into that space because I was invited in the first place. There is definitely scope to use tokenism in a positive way.

I recently went to my children’s primary school to give a talk to a class of 5\(^{th}\)-year students. I was asked to talk about “Nigeria”. It was one of those “cultural day” talks that schools would usually put up once a year, to tick the box of doing diversity. As I walked into the classroom, I noticed a young girl who was obviously of a dual-ethnic heritage. As I got to find out later, her parents were Senegalese and Irish. I introduced myself and mentioned that I taught at Maynooth University. I was immediately struck by her reaction to my very brief introduction. She pulled her hand backwards really dramatically and released it into the air whilst at the same time shouting a loud “Yes!” She was so delighted and proud that someone who looked like her could be a university lecturer and she didn’t hide that. I was very aware that I was entering that space as a “diversity person,” as a Nigerian woman, as “the tokenistic parent”, wanting to get the whole thing over with. Yet, here was a student who didn’t see tokenism but saw that her race wasn’t broken and that she could become anything she wanted, just by me standing in front of the classroom. Even if this was the only thing I could do that day, even if that girl was the only person who benefited from my presence, it was worth it! Of course, this is a big deal, because it means we must consider our impact one person at a time.

So, while tokenism can be damaging, there is usually a hidden opportunity that pops up when people on the margins are brought into spaces they could otherwise not inhabit. Stating that good can come out of the very toxic practice of tokenism is very uncomfortable, and I don’t encourage tokenism in any shape or form. What I would encourage is for us to facilitate people on the margins to see “the tokenistic game” as a space for advocacy and for activism, and to encourage them to take advantage of those spaces in a critical and constructive way.

**Matthew Weait:** Tokenism could also produce some weird things. In fact, the law requires it sometimes; for example, most HR policies and guidelines oblige to include at least one woman in hiring committees. The goal is to make gender representation in higher education less asymmetrical, but since in some disciplinary fields the women who have seniority and position requirements to be part of these committees are very few, it happens that they will have to bear a larger proportion of the burden. Likewise, this happens to people from different ethnic minorities, because there are still too few who meet the criteria to serve on those committees. I am aware that this is tokenism because to move forward with the procedure for doing that committee, there is no other choice. But, as the chair of that committee, I feel embarrassed when I’m forced to ask the same people again and again because they, too, are aware that have been included as “the token professor” or “the

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female professor on the panel". This is another challenge: sometimes this mechanism can give the impression of a more diverse pool than the person selected by that commission will experience once joining the institution. The narrative of a diverse group may not correspond to the concrete field experience once recruited.

Moreover, this mechanism makes me feel guilty, so much so that when I am not obliged to ensure a diverse committee, due to institutional policy or the law, I feel pressured to self-police not to do it. I don't want people to feel like they're being invited because they're "the black person on the panel." This is a destabilizing sort of introspection, that often affects the kind of "progressive white male", who tends to internalize a sense of structural guilt whereby he does not want a person to feel that the reason why he/she was included in is his/her specific "protected minority" status, just to give the impression of being part of an intersectional space.

I have a great example of this. In my Department, we invite a guest speaker to our award ceremonies. It is true that in some programmes, we have more minority ethnic students from than in other parts of the university, but we cannot call ourselves a "racially diverse programme". And I'm aware that I tend not to invite a black keynote speaker to appear in front of an almost entirely white audience because I don't want him/her to feel like the only "diversity person" in the room. This is a challenge for people in top positions. And Lilian's words make me think, when she states, "I can exploit this mechanism, I can use it". How should I solve my dilemma? Should I actively give people the opportunity to speak so they can become visible in those environments and not deny them the chance to have a voice? But at the same time, I can't help but be transparent with those people and inform them in advance that the audience will be predominantly white, or middle class or whatever, and maybe give them the choice to participate anyway, or not. Perhaps this is the most appropriate behaviour. But I am also aware that this is a kind of "liberal guilt game," which can have a negative effect on progressive practice, creating an interesting paradox in leadership. It really is "a pebble in my shoe".

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: I think that at the heart of any Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiative should be an ethos of love and the concept of humanity. If we take humanity and love away from EDI initiatives, we would be left with an empty lifeless shell that has no impact on the lives of people. I think the answer to this dilemma Matthew is to simply name it. Say it as it is - , “I feel guilty bringing you into this space, but do you think you want to come here anyway?” Allow people on the margins to consciously choose if they want to be in that ‘tokenistic’ space or not.

Otherwise, what would happen, is that your sense of guilt, would push you to make the decision for them and even with the best intentions, this would become an action steeped in white privilege. For me, there are times when I turn down requests to be the tokenistic face but every time I get the opportunity to be asked, I am grateful and I can decide, using my own agency, whether I want to be there or not and I can prepare accordingly.

Just a suggestion: Stephen Brookfield (2021) spoke about cluster hires to counter tokenistic recruitment. So, rather than hire one minority ethnic person, hire a cluster!

Ester Cois: Promoting equity and diversity in the framework of university lifelong learning requires a structural cultural change. Do you think that it should also include specific programmes for staff development to be sustainable? Which concrete actions could constitute good practices in this perspective?

Matthew Weait: To effectively address diversity and promote genuine inclusion we would need to implement a number of things. First, comprehensive diversity training programmes are essential. These should cover unconscious bias, cultural competence, inclusive pedagogy, and the importance of equity in education. Additionally, they would need to include awareness training about the specific demographics of our local and regional student communities. Second inclusive curriculum development is crucial. We need to ensure that our curriculum reflects diverse perspectives. Engaging staff and learners in revising course content can help incorporate materials from underrepresented groups and address issues of inequality and social justice. In our department, we require all new programmes to align with our Mission, Vision, and Values. Providing teaching resources is another important step. Staff should have access to resources and toolkits to help them design inclusive syllabi and adopt teaching practices that accommodate diverse learning needs and backgrounds. The University of Oxford’s Centre for Teaching and Learning offers a range of such toolkits.

Creating peer support networks for staff based on shared identities or interests is also beneficial. These groups can offer peer support, advocacy, and a platform for discussing specific challenges. At the University of Hertfordshire, we had various networks, including a Menopause Network, which addressed important issues impacting people’s experiences beyond the standard protected characteristics. Leadership training is vital to fostering an inclusive culture. We need to train and support leaders who are committed to implementing equitable policies and practices. Role modelling inclusive behaviours is crucial for leaders. Having Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) champions can further our efforts. These advocates can lead initiatives and promote best practices within their areas.

Regular policy and practice reviews are necessary to ensure that our institutional policies promote equity and do not inadvertently disadvantage any group. This includes reviewing recruitment, promotion, tenure, and evaluation processes. Finally, developing external partnerships and collaborations with community organisations focusing on equity and diversity can provide valuable insights, resources, and support for our EDI initiatives. In our Department, we have successfully partnered with organizations like Asylum Welcome and the University of Sanctuary scheme.

Lilian Nwanze-Akobo: Allow me to bring everything back to stories. Listen to stories from all kinds of people with all sorts of intersecting identities. Let stories inform policy, strategies and plans. And then keep checking. Often, we have robust strategies and plans in place but we forget to check with the people whom these things are meant to “help.” So, increase spaces and communities of practice where stories can be told as well as check periodically that these things are achieving the effects they were meant to.

Storytelling is one of the tenets of critical race theory because people are experts in their own lives, and that applies to absolutely anyone: people on the margins, women, men. But not just storytelling as “a rant”, because that’s one of the criticisms of CRT. What I propose, rather, is that we should facilitate critical storytelling, critical dialogue and normalize it in academia at all levels, both at the administrative level and at the management level.

5 https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/mission-vision-and-values
6 https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/resources-hub
7 https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/news/oxford-continuing-education-awarded-20000-bid-for-diversity-fund
8 https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2023-05-11-oxford-university-awarded-university-sanctuary-status
supporting those communities of practice where people basically can sit down and critically discuss the things that affect them.

There is a lot of talk about “de-colonizing the curriculum,” but that’s very vague and often used without really defining what it means. Some form of de-colonization of academia generally will be positive, but I also think that beyond the ‘what’, the ‘how’ we do it is important. The diversifying of the curriculum for instance, should not be tokenistic and superficial. Just putting in your syllabus 3 black or minority ethnic authors, as optional reading is not just inadequate but could worsen the inequities in the system.

Matthew Weait: There is not only the “reading list”, but also the buzz word of “de-colonising”. In Oxford, we’ve moved towards kind of not de-colonising so much as not deracialising. In the UK, the phenomenon of colonization has a very particular resonance, given its history, very different from other contexts, such as Ireland, where “de-colonise” would be a very odd and perhaps inappropriate word, given that it was a colonised country. At the University of Stockholm, where I was a visiting fellow ten years ago, as part of a research project with the Department of Criminology, they instituted what I thought was a very smart practice: in their reading lists, they required presumptively a 50% male and 50% female authors. But precisely the impossibility of doing that in some disciplinary fields, due to the absence of a sufficient number of female authors, became an opportunity for critical reflection on those reading lists, because the course leaders were required to write an explanation for why there weren’t 50% of the women. This caused people to pay attention to the absence of the possibility of including if you’re doing a primary sources ancient philosophy course. There are not enough female authors. There might be more poetry; there might be Sappho or some women whose writing survives to the present day. But you know it’s going to be Aristotle, Plato, and all the old Greek philosophers, all men, the ones who got their words saved. The question was: what do you do to rebalance that in your writing? It was a concrete action because even the absence or serious gaps become the opportunity for critical reflection, a learning opportunity, and a chance to think about training programmes for staff.

I also agree with the importance of communities of practice. Think about the Menopause Network at the University of Hertfordshire, or the Women Professional Standards Network, or the LGBTQI+ networks, which are on the list of most institutions now. But, even where there is freedom of expression, in the West, it is interesting that we didn't have a male-white privilege network. It’s just as important to give people the opportunity to find space to reflect on the advantages that they have as opposed to the things that set them apart, creating the opportunity for critical self-reflection. The only place we managed to do this was in Hertfordshire, in a men's Health Network framed around physical and mental health and well-being, but apart from a couple of closed-door sessions, it was open to everyone. Men wanted to have spaces where they could talk about their things, in the same way that women wanted to have spaces where they could simply talk without men being present. Sometimes, it became a space where people didn't exactly beat their chests, but where issues around privilege could be honestly spoken about. Otherwise, privilege will continue to remain just background noise, against which everything else is evaluated and judged, but without self-critical and conscious reflection.

There is another interesting question. Learning, teaching, and education are a dialogue that takes place both between a person and a group or between people in the group, but bilaterally and collectively in a space. It's very important to open up the space and make the edges of learning more osmotic and more liminal, so as to recognize that learning can also happen in communication with communities beyond the formal institution and standardised learning processes. Take what you have learned with you when you leave the classroom and bring into the classroom what you have learned outside, to break down the barrier between the classroom and the community. This connection with community organizations,
so that they can also bring their experience into the classroom, gets a voice through the power of storytelling.

When Lyndsey El Amoud was working in Cork with the wives of the traveller community, that could not have happened unless they were the voices that determined how it could work. They were active participants in the construction of the learning outcomes and the mode of delivery, also with respect to timetables: at what times of day it needed to be taught so that they could go back in time to make tea or cook or do all those other things which were the concrete reality of those women’s lives. It’s a really important thing, but very difficult to do, because often the resources for these progressive programmes are not enough, in terms of funding, time and people. Higher education and lifelong learning are creaking at the seams in terms of what resources and capacity are available.

**Lilian Nwanze-Akobo:** Letting the community lead is how we work in adult education. We need to find a way to mainstream it in the rest of academia. That is definitely a way forward. I also think that communities of practice for privileged people are a great idea. Once the critical framework is well structured and people don't talk just to feed their egos, then the community of practice could really work.

**Matthew Weait:** To conclude, I’d like to share two inspiring quotes. The first, by the social geographer Nicholas Blomley (1994), is focused on academic activism and progressive politics. He describes the role of the intellectual as a critical organic catalyst, someone who remains outside academia and progressive organizations but maintains a close relationship with academic developments.

"I am still left with a search for an alternative model, one that navigates between the opposed perils of academic elitism and political disengagement. How can we contribute to and learn from progressive struggles without reinforcing the hierarchies of privilege, silencing those with whom we work? What can I offer? What do grass roots activists stand to lose from such an exchange? Does my status and economic power necessarily create distance? Is our role that of catalyst, facilitator, or student? How much of my angst entails a quest for self-validation or "holier-than-thou" status? How much of ourselves are we willing to put on the line, given an institutional system that rewards docility and obedience?"

The second quote comes from my inaugural lesson as a Professor, a long time ago now.

"For me, nowhere is the importance of taking account of the experience of those directly involved in combating unsafe law at the grassroots and of acknowledging the academy’s debt to their work in making law safer more clearly illustrated than in the following, personal, experience. In 2010 Jennifer Gatsi, an activist and member of the International Community of Women Living with HIV, gave a talk at the World AIDS Conference in Vienna. Her presentation was to be about the widespread forced sterilisation of women and girls with HIV and AIDS in Namibia - one of the most egregious human rights violations in the history of the epidemic (ICW, 2009), and not a story whose horror is easy to communicate, not least in the artificial, air-conditioned confines of a windowless seminar room in the former capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Those of us in the audience waited, each in his or her straight-backed chair, pens and notebooks at the ready. And then, from a seat in the front row - not from the podium, not from a position of formal, staged, authority - Ms Gatsi stood up. And she looked around. She looked at each person in the audience in the eye, one by one, black and white, positive and negative, old and young, gay and straight, man and woman,

academic and activist, and then she spoke in a voice just loud enough for all of us to hear: 'My brothers and my sisters', she said. 'Listen. Listen and you will understand.'

This is what the power of storytelling is. There wasn't a dry eye in that room. Jennifer Gatsi is an amazing person, and her experience as a woman living with HIV, as an activist, as someone living in Africa and managing this total destruction of women's bodies through coercive biomedical interventions, was incredibly inspiring. As educators we learned more from that conversation, about how we should refer to lived experience, than we could ever get from any book written by anyone. And it happened in an instant, in a seminar room in Vienna, in 2010. And I have never forgotten it. We all have a different voice, maybe not as extraordinary and powerful as Jennifer's, but unique. What if we could stand up and say, "Listen, just listen. And maybe you will understand," that would be a really good message. This is the very meaning of lifelong learning, because you never know whether, right now, you are a learner, a facilitator, a catalyst, or all of these roles at once. This is intersectionality: you are all those identities.

Ester Cois: Thank you very much for this inspiring conversation.
Contemporary Issues in University Lifelong Learning. Making diversity and inclusion a central strategy