

## Inclusive University Digital Education: Partner in Focus



Over the next 15-months, Rennes 2 University and the 3 project partners, the [University of Wolverhampton](#) (UK), [Universitaet Klagenfurt](#) (Austria), and [the European Association of Service providers](#) for Persons with Disabilities (Belgium) will work together to:

- Provide an easy way to search and access free and open tools for online accessibility.
- Create a practical, step-by-step resource that guides lecturers through setting up online teaching sessions that are accessible to a wide range of students.
- Create guidelines of considerations that can help lecturers to make their teaching scheduling and practice more inclusive.

Funded by Erasmus+, the project is led by the [University of Wolverhampton](#). With a diverse range of students attending the university, enabling all of its students to unlock their potential and access new opportunities stands at the heart of the institution's work. Over the course of the project we'll be introducing each of the INCLUDE project partners to you via an interview with a 'Partner in Focus' article. In this first 'Partner in Focus' we spoke to Dr Ada Adeghe, the University of Wolverhampton's Associate Dean for Inclusivity, to find out what the university is doing to create an inclusive learning environment for staff and students and how the INCLUDE project will support their work.

For many the position of Associate Dean for Inclusivity is an unfamiliar one. What does that mean? What is your role at the university?

The Associate Dean for Inclusivity is a newly created post. The creation of this post serves as recognition for our need to serve a diverse group of students better. Within my role I have the responsibility for the inclusivity of the university. Broadly I have two main responsibilities: the first is to make sure that we close any significant award gaps to promote equity of outcome and secondly is to ensure that all of our staff and students feel like they belong.



How many students do you have studying at the University of Wolverhampton? How many of those students do you support?

The University of Wolverhampton has over 20,000 students, our team looks to support all those students. We have a diverse student population: many of who are the first in their families to attend universities; 51% of our students are from black or ethnic minority backgrounds and we also have many students who have disabilities. These groups are not homogenous, we have to consider the intersectionality of students and their diverse needs, this has implications for how we support them and requires different strategies.

What is the University currently doing to promote the inclusion of students with accessibility or support needs?

Our work to promote a more accessible, inclusive university is guided by the University's new Inclusive Curriculum Framework. This framework has 4 key principles:

The first is enabling students to identify themselves in the curriculum. All students, regardless of their background and identity, need to be able to see themselves in what they learn and relate to the curriculum.

- We must also remove obstacles to learning. For our university a key aspect of this concerns assessment literacy and anticipatory learning, to provide flexibility that enables students to have a choice in how and when they are assessed. In doing this we remove the need for reasonable adjustments, as learners already have choice in how they learn and how they demonstrate the knowledge and skills that they have acquired. Blended learning, with a mix of online and in person learning, as well as the use of digital and non-digital tools is important for this. Academic rigour cannot be compromised however, and it is also crucial that there is a shared understanding of what academic learning is and how it can be demonstrated. The need to uphold these standards can lead to uncomfortable but necessary conversations within faculties to really address what it is that we want our students to learn.
- The third principle is making sure students are co-creators in the learning process. At the university of Wolverhampton, we aim to empower students to have a voice in their education. As a result, listening to their voices and experiences to inform university policy is a key part of our work. Our annual Inclusivity Conference is an important moment for promoting the co-creation progress and providing students with the opportunity to give feedback on the university's performance in this aspect.
- The final principle is the development of our inclusive lens. We must acknowledge and address the systems of privilege, power and fragility in our societies and the university. We have a diverse group of students and so we must also represent and introduce them to a diverse group of scholars and academics in our curricula. Together these principles help us to have a holistic framework to guide our work on inclusion. This framework needs to allow process within the university to be flexible enough to adapt to needed change, but also have enough rigour to ensure the value of the framework are upheld in all aspects of university life.

While the Inclusive Curriculum Framework gives us a clear way forward; we need to accept that we may make mistakes in the inclusion process. It is important to be open and a constant dialogue between us, our students, staff and external stakeholders is important for this.

Have you faced any specific challenges to creating an inclusive university? What do you think is the biggest barrier?

A first barrier is the need to be brave. Our move to increase the inclusivity of our university has led to uncomfortable conversations. We must make space for these talks and the more we talk about these issues the easier it gets. It is important to be open and not defensive when interacting with others and listening to their experiences.

Non-disclosure is another challenge we face. Due to stigma, students don't always want to speak up and say they have a disability or a support need. Thanks to our work, students are increasingly more trusting in the university and more and more are coming forward to disclose any support need they have.

Ensuing the academic rigour of assessments, while still allowing learners to express themselves in different means has also been a challenge. Clear indicators, good cooperation between staff and thoroughness is needed to do this. Making space in the busy work cycle for university learning staff to have these discussions is important. It can also be difficult to cooperate with professional bodies as they do not always recognise alternative forms of assessment.

How has COVID impacted your work to promote the inclusion of all students and the accessibility of the university's courses?

As with all other aspects of life COVID has brought negatives as well as new opportunities. The move online has been challenging, and the pandemic has exposed digital poverty as a pressing issue. Lessons have been learnt however and these will be taken forward. For example, providing learning materials online before classes and the recordings of lectures, has been helpful for many students, especially those with disabilities. Another positive has been that the pandemic has made people more open about speaking about mental health, which enables us to better support students.

How will the work of the INCLUDE project support your work?

The INCLUDE project will be very beneficial for our work on inclusion. We are constantly looking for good practice in inclusivity and this project will help to highlight possible good practices which we can adopt at the university. With such large faculties it is easy to work in silos, each faculty has an inclusivity lead and they come together monthly to share good practice across the universities. These leads will be able to tap into the messages of the INCLUDE project and we also hope to share the results of the project more widely across the university via our inclusivity newsletter and our podcast.

What are your top three tips for universities to become more inclusive?

- Firstly, have a plan! Inclusion is not just going to happen; you have to be intentional and it is important to develop a strategy which reflects your inclusive values.
- Secondly, the student's voice is crucial, it is important that you have a close working relationship with your Student Union.
- Finally, you need to ensure that your staff are well prepared and onboard with the inclusion process. This starts by explaining why you are taking the actions that you plan to implement. It is also crucial to provide multiple opportunities for staff to be able to implement and provide feedback on the strategy. Its key to remember that staff need support just as much as students. At the University of Wolverhampton, we have many internal staff networks, for example one for B.A.M.E. staff, Disabled Staff Network and another for LGBT staff, these have proved useful for providing support as well as gathering feedback.

To find out more about the University of [Wolverhampton's work on Inclusion](#), [click here](#). To find out more about the [INCLUDE project](#), [click here](#).

04 October 2021