



Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

#ACATHINKS

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Building a truly inclusive European University: the YUFE experience so far and emerging challenges



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Dr Daniela Trani is Director of the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) Alliance. She holds a Master of Science degree in Physics (cum laude, 2003) from the University of Naples Federico II, Italy, and a PhD in Thoracic Oncology and Applied Biotechnology (2007) from the Second University of Naples, Italy. She worked as NASA/NSBRI postdoctoral fellow in the field of space radiation biology at Georgetown University (2008-2011) and then as senior researcher at the Department of Radiotherapy at Maastricht University (2011-2014). From 2014 to 2019, she worked as Senior Advisor for International Research Policy at the department of Academic Affairs of Maastricht University. In this position, she combined her international academic and policy background to advise and support the Executive Board of Maastricht University on strategic partnerships with other higher education institutions as well as research organisations in Europe and worldwide.

YUFE (Young Universities for the Future of Europe) is a European University Alliance, selected by the European Commission in 2019 as one of the first 17 in the European Universities Initiative. YUFE has been awarded funding for an initial three-year period (December 2019 to November 2022) during which the foundations of the YUFE European University are being laid. Our stated mission is 'to bring a radical change by becoming the leading model of a young, student-centred, non-elitist, open and inclusive European University based on the cooperation between higher education institutions, public and private sector, and citizens (University+ ecosystem)'. The YUFE Alliance is made of 10 universities from all corners of Europe and 4 non-academic partners, bringing together a very diverse set of cultures.



Our diversity and inclusivity objectives are:

- To put inclusion at the core of all activities by embedding equality and diversity within our organisational structures, policies, processes, and procedures and ensuring that we 'live' our values in practice
- To build cultural intelligence across our alliance and enhance the capability to relate and work effectively across cultures
- To attract, retain, develop, and support a truly diverse staff and student population
- To ensure that all members of the YUFE community are aware of their personal responsibility to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion

We set out to achieve these objectives by working on three activities:

1. Prepare and adopt a YUFE Diversity and Inclusivity (D&I) Strategy
2. Implement a set of YUFE diversity and inclusivity measures
3. Foster a YUFE D&I culture

In this article, we focus on our experience of developing our Diversity and Inclusivity Strategy, the responsibility for which lay with the YUFE Diversity and Inclusivity Taskforce. It seemed like a reasonably straightforward thing to do – bring together diversity and inclusivity experts from all YUFE partners, review the existing related policies and practices at each institution and draft a strategy based on an alignment of the most effective ones.

MEETING THE YUFE CHALLENGES IN BUILDING A TRUE D&I CULTURE

While this task was met with enthusiasm by all partners, staff and colleagues involved, a number of challenges emerged which we need to take into close account.

First challenge – not every YUFE partner had a diversity and inclusivity expert within their institution, meaning there were differences in the institutional role of the Taskforce members and their mandate. Some members of the Taskforce already held roles relating to diversity and inclusivity before their institution became a member of YUFE, others were appointed to diversity and inclusivity-related roles after their institution became a member of YUFE, others have no substantive role or experience in diversity and inclusivity.

Second challenge – not every YUFE partner had diversity and inclusivity policies across the breadth of their activities and some of the relevant topics were still taboo within their institution (and community).

Third challenge – the words 'diversity' and 'inclusivity' were given different meanings in different institutions.

Fourth challenge – having a shared commitment to diversity and inclusivity as YUFE partners did not automatically translate into a clear way forward for ten different institutions, who are all at very different points in their journey to embed diversity and inclusivity.

This should not have come as a surprise. The higher education sector has long been grappling with issues relating to inclusion. The first article in this Think Piece series [Lessons from European history on inclusion and international higher education](#), referred to 'the exclusionary history of European higher education institutions (*which*) underpins the persistent sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Black and anti-Asian realities that many students and staff report experiencing in our sector'. Different institutions have responded differently to try to address these inequalities, within the framework of the legislative, cultural, and political context within which they operate.

The heterogeneity that exists across YUFE institutions in regard to the way diversity and inclusivity is handled is reflected in a number of examples. Some YUFE institutions ask their staff and students to disclose information such as their sexual orientation, gender identity or whether they have caring responsibilities, some do not. *But, how can YUFE know whether it is reaching students from underrepresented or marginalised groups if we do not create environments in which people feel safe to be their authentic self, to disclose this kind of information and put in place systems to gather and monitor it?* In this context, it is also important to note that some YUFE institutions already have procedures in place for staff and students to report discrimination and harassment, while some do not. The question is then: how will YUFE know whether the environment is inclusive and perceived as safe for all if we do not encourage people to report inappropriate behaviour and support them to do so? Some YUFE institutions formally require decision-making and selection committees to have due regard to diversity and inclusivity, some



do not. *How can YUFE ensure that issues are considered through the lens of inclusion if there is no mechanism to do so, no institutional parameter that guides the change?*

MUTUAL KNOWLEDGE UNDERPINS THE YUFE D&I STRATEGY

Early meetings of the Taskforce were spent trying to identify areas of alignment and areas of divergence and this is when it became clear that we needed to spend time on cultivating knowledge and a shared understanding of the language used around diversity and inclusivity. From these conversations the [YUFE Diversity and Inclusivity Glossary of Terms](#) was put together. It is not a list of definitions that one might find in the Oxford English Dictionary, it is YUFE's definition of words that we use in our diversity and inclusivity work, such as 'authentic' or 'intersectionality'. YUFE institutions are not required to use the YUFE definitions in their own policies (although they can if they wish) and they may choose not to use certain terms, to fit their own particular context and environment. The glossary provides institutions with a compass, a guide, a starting point for a discussion and has been translated into a number of local languages for use more broadly across partner institutions which we hope will contribute to wider conversations about diversity and inclusivity, not only in the YUFE context but also within the individual communities of our European University's partners.

We also needed to explore in more detail what YUFE's diversity and inclusivity aspirations meant in practice to each institution. We were all very clear that we wanted flexible degree programmes that enable all students - including those working, single parents, lifelong learners, and socially disadvantaged groups such as migrants and refugees - to benefit from the European university experience and broaden their horizons; that we wanted to recognise and optimally foster individual talents; that we wanted members of the YUFE community to benefit from intercultural and intergenerational exchange and enrichment? But...saying it, believing in it, wanting it, was the easy part. When it came to translating this into a shared strategy and tangible actions that ten institutions could agree to, the work really began.

FROM YUFE-WIDE ASPIRATIONS TO AN APPROVED YUFE D&I STRATEGY

With hindsight, the challenges we identified quite early in the process particularly impacted the work of the Taskforce leadership beyond the concrete deliverables that were defined. In fact, the Taskforce Lead and Co-Lead needed to:

- (i) Manage the differing levels of knowledge and awareness of existing institutional diversity and inclusivity strategies and approaches amongst its members
- (ii) Foster an environment in which its members felt comfortable in sharing the true extent to which diversity and inclusivity was embedded (or not) within their institution
- (iii) Manage anxieties around committing an institution to a strategy that felt in some way out of reach
- (iv) Dismantle any pre-conceptions or assumptions about the diversity and inclusivity culture of each YUFE institution
- (v) Balance meeting pre-set deadlines for specified outputs with building relationships and laying strong foundations for future success.

Again, with hindsight, we recognised that the process we went through followed [Tuckman's model of group development](#): the Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning model.

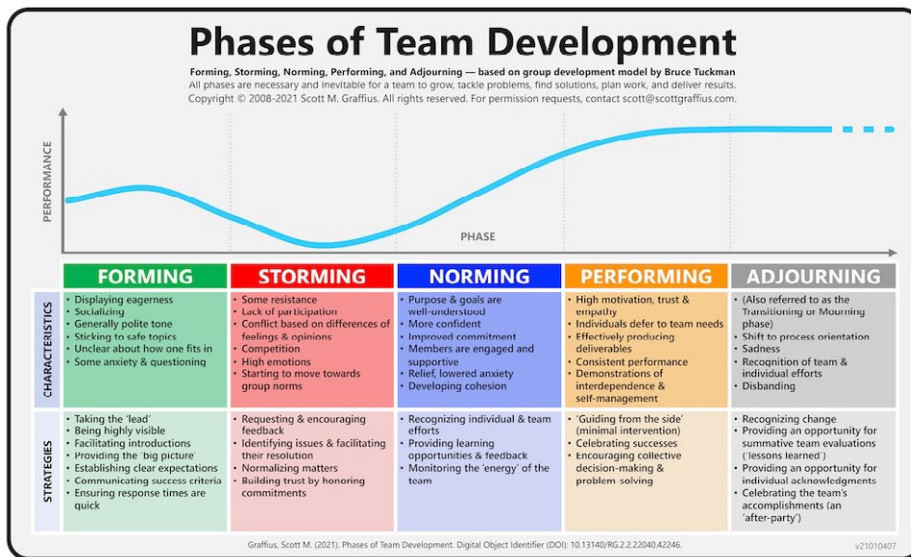


Figure 1. Image used with permission of owner. Copyright © 2008-2021 Scott M. Graffius. All rights reserved.

We ‘formed’ in November and December 2019; ‘stormed’ between January and June 2020; ‘normed’ between July and December 2020 and are now performing and adjourning. We have a strong core of around 15-20 people who have stuck at it when things got tough; who have been brave in sharing their own and their institution’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities and who have emerged as a cohesive group, not afraid to challenge the status quo and prepared to stand up and be role models for diversity and inclusivity. The notion of having role models at all levels of YUFE is a critical part of our strategy - we consider it key in providing students, staff as well as other stakeholders of our European University ‘in the making’ with tangible evidence of how we are ‘living’ our diversity and inclusivity vision - and we knew we needed to engage people in conversations about this at an early stage. We did this by involving the senior leadership of YUFE in joint reflections about what inclusive leadership means in practice and how important it is, and we continue to do this on a regular basis. We created a diversity and inclusivity workshop, as a mandatory part of student induction, which includes a discussion about various ways in which they can be role models and we discuss the topic regularly at Taskforce meetings, supporting each other when we are met with resistance.

So, our [YUFE Diversity and Inclusivity Strategy](#), and its accompanying action plan, are the result of many months of conversations, discussions and negotiations which were, at times, difficult. Trying to create a shared diversity and inclusivity identity from multiple identities was never going to be easy but the result is a flexible roadmap for institutional change; a framework for implementing local-level solutions that drive forward equality, diversity and inclusion and prepare each institution for being part of one European university.

Overall, it is clear that being part of the YUFE alliance and embracing YUFE’s approach to fulfilling its diversity and inclusivity ambitions is helping institutions to move beyond simply aiming to fulfil the requirements set by legislation and take major steps forward. Feedback from members of the taskforce support this observation; “YUFE has had a very positive impact on YUFE University Partner 1”, “I am seeing a real change in my institution” (representative from YUFE University Partner 2), “I have learned a lot – I am glad that I have role models and it is inspiring to work with all our YUFE colleagues.” (representative from YUFE University Partner 3). Beyond the taskforce, feedback has also been positive with comments such as “the work of the diversity and inclusivity taskforce within YUFE has made me think differently about D&I” and “many thanks for sharing so many good practices with us!” It is very early days, but the signs are promising and the will to improve is beyond doubt.

We have learned so much along the way and we hope that our experience will help other university alliances as well other interuniversity/interinstitutional partnerships to navigate a pathway towards a shared vision for inclusion.



Our advice is to:

- Be prepared to have difficult conversations
- Set aside any preconceptions and assume nothing
- Be flexible
- Take time to build relationships and create an environment in which people can be open and honest without fear of reprisals
- Encourage people to think, propose and build beyond the status quo.

INTERINSTITUTIONAL D&I CULTURE – WHAT IS NEEDED BEYOND A COMMON STRATEGY?

When the Strategy was approved by the YUFE Strategy Board in July 2021, it felt like a huge achievement – and it was. But it will only take us so far. If implemented in full across all YUFE partners, it will start to transform our institutions, but will it lead to YUFE being a truly inclusive European University, and is it the ‘radical change’ we aspire? This is our ‘adjourning’ stage. We have conducted a mid-term review of our Diversity and Inclusivity Strategy, and we are looking towards the future, reflecting on the new equality, diversity and inclusivity challenges facing higher education institutions and how existing structures and approaches are equipped to deal with those.

As observed by Anna Britten in an article written for [University Business](#) in January 2021, ‘the brutal killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter global protests forced the world’s attention on the deep-rooted racism that still pervades today, either subconsciously or consciously. It galvanised universities to reflect on their own equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies – but nobody thinks the removal of a statue or the renaming of a building is enough. Complacency is the enemy, and change must happen at all levels of an institution, notably in Human Resources practices’. As we move into the next phase of development, YUFE needs to ensure that it does not replicate existing, traditional Human Resources practices and processes that (inadvertently) disadvantage particular groups of people and lead to structural inequalities. We need to recognise the importance of leadership – at all levels - in resolving conflicts and challenges, rather than relying solely on a process. Where we do need a process, it must be proportionate and maintain fairness for all. It must be a tool that supports a strong set of values, felt and lived daily by the members of our community.

The emergence of societal divisions around immigration, diversity and identity has led to distrust and alienation. A failure to see, or at least be open to, the perspective of others, means that civil discourse in conversations and controversies over equality, diversity, and inclusion is being lost. Of course, this is not the first time in history that civil discourse has been threatened. In the book “[A Crisis of Civility?: Political Discourse and Its Discontents](#)”, co-edited/authored by Kansas State University’s [Timothy J. Shaffer](#), historical examples from the New Deal era in the 1930s and 1940s are used to show how civil discourse was cultivated using citizen-centred discussion groups. Shaffer argues that ‘a look at the past may help ordinary people improve civility’. So, YUFE needs to find ways to promote civil discourse, and balance our commitments to academic freedom, freedom of speech and inclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic also shone a light on the degree to which pervasive inequalities exist for certain groups of people. Those already marginalised because of the colour of their skin, because they come from a low socio-economic background and are in digital poverty, because they have a disability, because they are a refugee – we could go on with this list – have been further disadvantaged by additional health and wealth inequalities. There is already evidence to suggest that this will have an impact both on current university students and prospective university students, from these groups. According to the NESET Analytical Report 2021, [The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence](#), ‘underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups were disproportionately affected by the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, in terms of perceived learning losses, financial concerns and lower levels of mental health and well-being. In turn, students with lower levels of mental health and well-being face a greater risk of drop-out. The effects of COVID-19 on deteriorating educational equality in pre-tertiary education are also likely to have a direct effect on lowering the level of participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education’.

Recruiting students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education is one of YUFE’s main aims. This implies that we need to find innovative ways to reach out to these students, to mentor and support them by providing, for example, flexible entry and study pathways that mean higher education is a realistic option for them. Becoming truly inclusive and standing for equality cannot be equalled to deprioritising on quality. Inclusion and



excellence are not opposing values and principles. A more inclusive (academic) system and community is built on a greater diversity of strengths and talents, resulting in a richer, more fertile ground for knowledge creation and innovation – both at academic as well as societal level.

YUFE is not burdened by long-standing ways of doing things. YUFE partners are socially responsible institutions keen on innovating together to the benefit of all students, staff and citizens across Europe and beyond. In YUFE, we can do things differently – we can be radical, and we are working hard to understand what that radical change needs to look like and how to achieve it.

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