

## Joint recommendations on diversity-sensitive and inclusive teaching

Equality and non-discrimination are foundational principles and fundamental rights within the European Union – anchored in its treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. One of the core values and transversal tasks of the FORTHEM Alliance is therefore the "realization of a non-discriminatory, diversity-sensitive and inclusive teaching, learning, research and working culture"<sup>1</sup> – a place where different backgrounds and realities of life are considered and valued.

Diversity, including learning in diverse classrooms, is a fundamental aspect of our reality that affects every individual. Diversity-sensitive and inclusive teaching is an important component and is intended to reduce barriers and to guarantee the participation of every student to the greatest possible extent – regardless of their different backgrounds, identities, abilities, and life experiences. This type of approach contributes to a learning environment that is equitable, respectful, and accessible, with the goal of enabling all students to reach their full potential.

To reflect and put this into action, teachers can work on several different levels. But diversity-oriented and inclusive teaching always starts with oneself, with the examination of one's own privileges and possible experiences of discrimination, and with an examination of power structures and hierarchies. On this basis, the FORTHEM Alliance's Diversity & Inclusion Unit has developed ten initial recommendations for diversity-sensitive and inclusive teaching, a practical approach aimed directly at teachers, on the following aspects: diversity-sensitive space, anti-discriminatory curricula, accessible teaching material, inclusive language, diversity-sensitive lecture planning, diversity-sensitive planning of non-teaching events, diversity-sensitive planning of field trips, diversity-sensitive interactions in the classroom, diversity-sensitive advising and accessible social media content.

These recommendations include a brief introduction, questions for self-reflection, and helpful tips or further points to ponder. In general, they should be understood as an offer to engage with individual aspects and not as a list to be worked through.

Please note that all following considerations and recommendations refer to the aforementioned common overarching anti-discriminatory values – in the awareness that national legislation (e.g. secularity in France) must always be taken into account during implementation.

Comments, feedback or the contribution of further aspects and perspectives are always welcome. Do not hesitate to contact us.

FORTHEM's Diversity & Inclusion Unit

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<sup>1</sup> The full FORTHEM statement on Diversity & Inclusion can be found here: <https://www.forthem-alliance.eu/alliance/diversity-inclusion>

## (1) University as a diversity-sensitive space

When we think about the academic space, we often tend to understand it in an abstract way – as a learning and teaching environment, as an organizational culture, as people’s interactions, feelings and thoughts working together to create a particular climate.

But we can also look at space in a very concrete way. Spaces around us – the classrooms, corridors and lecturing halls can be welcoming and friendly, they can “host” us, making us feel we belong there. But they can also leave us indifferent or reject us, making us feel strange and alienated.

Generally, spaces can reflect people’s diversity and needs in various ways, being the expression of institutional sensitivity (or lack of sensitivity) toward different elements of human identity.

Think about the institution you study or work at, using the following questions.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Are there any symbols (signs, pictures, posters, photographs) in your university environment reflecting people’s diversity?
- Can you see any references to different religions (holidays, celebrations) in your workplace?
- Can people easily find information about possible ways they can receive support in case of discrimination?
- Are there any spaces in your workplace where people can rest in silence/be on their own if they need it for a while?
- How is the furniture arranged in lecture halls? Can tables and chairs be arranged in a different way or are they fixed? Is this type of spatial arrangement conducive to cooperation?

### Points to ponder:

Everyone can make a difference. Sometimes it's a sticker, a door sign, a poster, or maybe a badge that makes someone feel welcome and seen. Actively shape your environment and point out things that contradict a diversity-sensitive and inclusive space. Engage in conversations, workshops, or training sessions on diversity and inclusion to further educate yourself and others, fostering a community of allies who support and uphold these values in every interaction.

## (2) Anti-discriminatory curricula

Curricula determine the scope of knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during university education and are intended to prepare students to function successfully in their professional, social, and personal lives. As such, the curricula should not only reflect social diversity but also be free from various forms of bias. This is especially important today, as we live in information bubbles and may have limited opportunities to learn about other points of view or even the scientific facts themselves. At our universities we therefore need curricula that will provide knowledge related to different groups of people, encourage the development of critical skills concerning the assessment of the sources of information, and shape attitudes of sensitivity, openness, and active acceptance. We need curricula which, like our level of knowledge, evolve and change – curricula free of bias or stereotypes, which include different perspectives and give a voice back to the previously silenced and marginalised groups of people.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Do any materials you use or cases you discuss during classes refer to the protection of underrepresented groups (e.g., people with disabilities, representatives of the LGBTIQ+ community, ethnically diverse groups)?
- Are the authors of the articles/books you use only the representatives of the dominant culture (e.g., white male Europeans)?
- Do you use materials that express the voices of marginalised groups?
- Does your curriculum give students the chance to share their personal experiences, is it related to elements of their identity or their cultural background?
- Does your curriculum give students the chance to question oppressive practices and phenomena (e.g., colonialism, sexism, xenophobia, etc.)?
- Do you regularly check the reading list and other materials regarding the inclusivity of the vocabulary used or their content (the presence of different perspectives, voices from various cultural backgrounds)?

### Good to know:

There is no universal template for freeing the curriculum from discriminatory practices – the approach depends on the context of the discipline and subject area. Start with the questions above and discuss them with colleagues. Also check the sources for further inspiration – you will find academic articles, toolkits, and other materials there.

### (3) Accessible teaching material

Students with disabilities or chronic illnesses are confronted with many obstacles in everyday university life – including in the classroom.

Some of these impairments are visible, but most of them remain invisible. Some of them may be temporary, others chronic. The forms in which they occur and their effects can be very different from person to person.

Providing accessible teaching materials is essential to ensure that all students, regardless of their individual needs, can participate effectively in classroom activities.

At the same time, material based on accessibility requirements is also helpful in many other learning situations – when using mobile devices, for non-native speakers, or for students who are newcomers and not yet familiar with the terminology.

The creation of accessible materials requires taking a number of things into consideration.

#### Questions for self-reflection:

- Do you generally provide your students with materials to prepare for and follow up on the learning content?
- Do you make your scripts, presentations, and other materials available in advance?
- Do you ask your students about special needs before or at the beginning of your course?
- Do you know who to contact at your university regarding advice and, if necessary, support in creating accessible materials?
- Do you know who is responsible for supporting students in this context at your university?

#### Helpful tips:

The fewer barriers the better. These steps will help you make your materials more accessible:

- **Structure and format:** Organise your text documents and presentations clearly (headings, paragraphs, bullet points).
- **Font:** Use a readable, sans-serif font of sufficient size and ensure sufficient contrast between the font and background.
- **Images:** Include alternative text or captions for graphics and illustrations.
- **File formats:** Use accessible document formats which can be read by a screen reader for your presentations, handouts, and documents.
- **Videos:** Use subtitles and/or transcripts for your videos.

## (4) Inclusive language

Speaking and writing in an inclusive way is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and respect among all individuals. Choosing inclusive language can mitigate the risk of individuals feeling not addressed, excluded, and marginalised, or even harmed. Additionally, you as a teacher can benefit from reflecting on inclusive and non-discriminatory language because it may prevent you from making unintended mistakes.

Inclusive linguistic practice involves several key principles:

- Avoid sexist, racist, ableist, etc. stereotypes
- Ensure a constructive discussion about terminology, particularly terms that may have negative or outdated connotations
- Eliminate discriminatory terms
- Avoid generalizations about groups of people
- Refrain from sensationalist or trivialising depictions

Furthermore, it's important to recognise that inclusive language is a dynamic and evolving field. Language evolves over time, and what may have been acceptable in the past may now be considered outdated or offensive. Therefore, all of us must remain vigilant and open to feedback, continuously striving to improve our linguistic practices to create inclusive and respectful learning environments.

### Questions for self-reflection:

Do you consider the impact of your words on others, regardless of your intentions?

Do you recognise your own biases and assumptions that may influence your language use?

- Are you creating a safe and inclusive space for students to express their preferred names and pronouns?
- Do you share your pronouns, so that students can address you correctly?
- Do you consider the background and possible traumatising experiences of your audience, such as racial discrimination, sexual harassment, etc.?
- Do you take responsibility for the language you use and its potential impact on others?
- Are you open to feedback from others on how you are using language?
- Have you considered incorporating content warnings or trigger warnings for potentially sensitive topics or discussions in your course materials?
- Have you ever been in a situation where some of your students bullied others and you did not have the correct language to stop it?

### Good to know:

Everybody makes mistakes. Being open for constructive criticism is a good place to start.

Listening to people and offering them the space to express how they want to be addressed can help avoid discrimination. By reflecting on these questions, everyone can enhance their awareness and use of inclusive language and take proactive steps to create more inclusive and respectful learning environments.

## (5) Diversity-sensitive lecture planning

As a teacher, you can contribute to the development of a diversity-friendly university through respectful and appreciative interactions with your students and also by acknowledging and addressing the diverse challenges that students may face which can impact their ability to fully engage in your course.

Students come from various backgrounds and circumstances, some more familiar with an academic environment, others less so, balancing work or caregiving responsibilities, navigating language barriers, living with disabilities or chronic illness, and may have experienced discrimination in various forms.

Planning inclusive lectures entails designing them in such a way that takes the diverse needs of your audience into consideration. This applies not only to your teaching methods and the content you deliver, but also to organizational matters.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Are you mindful of your students' diversity and the challenges they might be facing?
- Have you considered accommodating different scheduling preferences?
- Have you selected a venue that meets all accessibility criteria?
- Will you proactively inform participants in advance about available support services provided by your university (e.g., participants with disabilities/chronic illness, children, international students...)?
- Are your presentations and materials accessible to all students, free from stereotypes, and available in different languages if needed?
- Are there sufficiently long break times?
- Does your university provide sign language interpreters or induction loops?
- Are gender-neutral bathrooms located nearby?
- Have you engaged in discussions with your colleagues about their strategies for ensuring inclusive lectures and shared experiences to inform your own practice?

### Point to ponder:

This list is not exhaustive. But it is a starting point for including different perspectives in the process of planning. Think about asking about other challenges students face in your course evaluation.

## (6) Diversity-sensitive planning of non-teaching events

Whether it's an academic conference, a public lecture evening, the first-semester students' welcoming event, or the faculty summer party, a diverse array of events take place at the university in addition to regular lectures. To create a positive and inclusive environment for everybody, there are crucial aspects to consider that do not apply to standard courses. This includes implementing diversity-sensitive practices in various aspects of event planning, such as:

- Panel selection
- Public relations and marketing
- Registration process
- Scheduling of the event
- Accessibility and equipment of the venue
- Catering
- Awareness teams or protection concepts

Holding events in an environmentally and socially responsible manner has become standard practice and is an indication of professionalism.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Who do I reach with the topic, who might be excluded?
- Who are the intended attendees and what are their diverse backgrounds, identities, and needs?
- Who is speaking/presenting/performing – do I include experts in topics that have been less visible so far?
- Is the moderator diversity-competent?
- When scheduling, can I consider holidays, childcare commitments, the fact that some people might need more time to travel, etc.?
- Is the marketing accessible and appropriate to the target group?
- Do I give enough information about accessibility, safety, break times, dress code, gender-neutral bathrooms, opportunities to retreat or for people with different eating habits, etc.?
- Is some kind of recording/documentation required?
- How will I gather feedback from attendees to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusivity efforts and identify areas for improvement?

### Good to know:

Start by assembling a diverse project team to include as many perspectives as possible in the planning process. Besides that, it can be beneficial to integrate the headstand technique into your planning sessions from time to time. Ask yourself: “What could I do to ensure that my event turns into an absolute disaster?” This approach may reveal aspects that you hadn't previously considered, helping you anticipate and address potential challenges more effectively.

## (7) Diversity-sensitive planning of field trips

Excursions can be a special challenge for people with disabilities, familial responsibilities, psychological illnesses, and/or health or financial inhibitors. Aspects such as nationality – and therefore specific conditions of entry into a different country – gender, sexual identity and orientation or religious needs can also be important when planning an excursion. To ensure inclusivity and accessibility, it's essential to consider these diverse needs and circumstances when planning field trips.

Regardless of whether you are planning an excursion of one or more days, timely planning is a must. By encouraging your students to help plan the excursion, you are allowing them the chance to express special needs early. This gives you time to react to special needs.

Additionally, you can get an early impression of your excursion participants' profile and capabilities to optimise the inclusion of their different perspectives and backgrounds when you plan ahead.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Can I avoid school vacations and (non-Christian) holidays?
- Is there any financial support for students to finance the field trip? Or top-ups for students with care responsibilities or disabilities?
- Is the necessary equipment available for rent or loan at the university?
- Are there any destination-specific regulations or restrictions that may impact certain groups, such as women, individuals of certain nationalities, or members of the LGBTIQ+ community?
- Have accommodations, transportation, and excursion activities been assessed for accessibility to accommodate all participants?
- Is information on sanitation and hygiene needed?
- Are there any religious considerations, such as prayer times, dietary needs, or holidays that need to be considered?
- What is the availability and quality of medical care at the destination?
- Is an emergency plan necessary?
- Is there a need for a code of conduct among the participants regarding diversity-sensitive interaction within the group?
- Does the trip require a certain level of physical fitness?
- Can I utilise and include students' special skills in the planning process?

### Good to know:

Consider whether the field trip or the chosen destination of the field trip is essential for the intended learning outcomes. There may be alternatives that are more accessible, less cost-intensive, less time-consuming, or safer, while still achieving the objectives. Collaborating with colleagues to discuss potential alternatives and sharing experiences of organising inclusive field trips can provide valuable insights. Documenting these experiences can serve as a resource for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of organising field trips in the future.



## (8) Diversity-sensitive interactions in the classroom

Inclusive and diversity-sensitive teaching is more than just providing our students with support services. It means fostering a welcoming culture and creating a space where everyone can develop their full potential.

How you as a teacher and your students interact with each other in the classroom significantly influences the sense of belonging or exclusion experienced by individuals. Implementing diversity-sensitive design in these interactions can yield significant positive effects, often with minimal material required.

Achieving this requires a willingness to question yourself, your thinking, your routines, and your behaviour – and, most of all, to adopt a change in perspective. This can be challenging at times, but as an educator you act as a gatekeeper – and not only in terms of opening up new horizons of knowledge.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- What does diversity and inclusion mean to you?
- Do you cultivate a positive and inclusive classroom climate where students feel respected, valued, and supported?
- Have you ever asked students how they like to be addressed when you speak or write to them?
- How do you address sensitive learning content that could lead to re-traumatization?
- How do you encourage students to contribute their perspective and take away their fear of making mistakes?
- Do you offer your students opportunities to express their needs in different ways?
- Do you actively listen to students' perspectives and validate their contributions to the discussion?
- Are you open to questioning yourself, your beliefs, and your actions, and willing to change your perspective when necessary?
- Have you ever been in a situation in your classroom where students have insulted each other in a racist, sexist, or other way and you had to think about how to deal with it?
- How can you actively involve students in shaping the classroom environment and fostering inclusive interactions?
- There's a lot more to think about – how do you want to go on?

### Good to know:

Diversity-sensitive interactions in the classroom are not only about how you address your students verbally and non-verbally. It's also about how they interact with each other and with you. Reflecting on how you envision your teaching and learning environment to be can help you proactively shape interactions and respond effectively to disruptions that may occur. This includes considering how students interact with each other, fostering a culture of respect, empathy, and inclusion, and addressing instances of discriminatory behaviour or language in a timely and constructive manner.

## (9) Diversity-sensitive advising

Whether you are responsible for academic advising, career planning, anti-discrimination counselling, etc. – as an advisor, you will be confronted with a variety of students. There is no "standard student", after all. Diversity-sensitive advising means focusing on people with their individual needs, backgrounds, and personal experiences in an unbiased way and giving every person the feeling of being seen as an individual. Advising and support services should be accessible and effective for all students. Students who are treated with respect and recognised for their individuality tend to be more successful in their studies. A positive and supportive environment promotes well-being and motivation.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Who knows about your advising services?
- Where and how do you communicate the service offer?
- How can you make more students aware of your services?
- Can you offer advising at different time slots to accommodate students who have other commitments?
- Are the facilities you use barrier-free?
- Do you have certain assumptions about students in terms of age, appearance, educational background, accent or dialect, gender, etc.?
- Is the person seeking advising possibly confronted with structural disadvantages? Are these disadvantages relevant to this advising?

### Points to ponder:

**Accessible Facilities:** The advising facilities should be physically accessible.

**Accessible communication:** Information about the advising service offered should be barrier-free and available in different formats and languages.

**Communication at eye level:** Advisors should strive to ensure clear and understandable communication, especially if the advising language is different than the student's first language.

**Sincere interest:** Show sincere interest and a willingness to engage with your counterpart's point of view. Especially if it differs from your own.

**Reflection:** Everyone has unconscious prejudices and assumptions. An essential part of advising consists of reflecting on these assumptions, existing role models and your own actions, to reduce negative influences on the advising process.

You do not have to do this alone – (external) supervision or team case discussions can be helpful.

**Boundaries:** Pay attention to your own boundaries. Which basic rules of interaction are not negotiable for you?

**Empowerment:** Diversity-sensitive advising strives to encourage students to recognise and activate their own resources to achieve their goals. This includes the promotion of self-determination and self-confidence.



**Respect for individual differences:** Diversity-sensitive advising respects and accepts the individual differences of those seeking advising. This includes recognising different life experiences, perspectives, and needs.

**Knowledge of *cultural* differences:** Understanding *cultural* differences in terms of communication, learning styles and expectations is crucial to ensure effective advising.



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## (10) Accessible social media content

Social media platforms can, for example, be used as a channel to communicate with students, share course materials, facilitate discussions, or distribute academic content. Accessible social media content and posts ensure that your messages are available and understandable for everyone. This contributes to a user-friendly experience and is of particular benefit to people with specific permanent, temporary, or situational disabilities, such as visual impairments, hearing impairments, cognitive disabilities, or limited internet connectivity.

At the European level, there are several general directives and regulations aimed at barrier-free access to digital content.<sup>2</sup> Their implementation into national law or internal university regulations varies, but the overarching goal is to promote inclusivity and accessibility across all digital platforms and communication channels.

As a content creator, you want your information to reach a wide audience. The more accessible your social media content is, the larger your potential audience. This not only includes individuals with disabilities but also those accessing content on different devices or in diverse environments.

### Questions for self-reflection:

- Look at your last five social media posts: Do you think people with different kinds of disabilities would get all the relevant information?
- In what kind of situations do you personally benefit from accessible digital content?
- Have you already tested the platform-specific features that support the accessibility of your contributions?

### Helpful tips:

Follow these tips to increase the accessibility of your social media content:

- Use **concise and clear language** to deliver your message.
- Add **image descriptions (alt text)** to describe the editorial intent of an image. Use the alt text function of the social media platform. Alt text can be read aloud by screen readers.
- Consider using **voice-overs** for images/written content.
- Make sure that you **provide the same (amount of) information** regardless of the form of communication. Don't provide specific information only in writing or only in voice-overs, for example.
- For videos, **use subtitles and/or closed captions** wherever possible and check automated versions manually.
  - **Subtitles** should reflect the audio accurately. They help people with hearing loss and those who watch the video with the sound off.
  - **Closed captions** are read by screen readers and help people with sight loss or cognitive differences. They also caption non-voice audio elements.

<sup>2</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies; Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services.



- If you include a link in your social media post, describe what to expect on the landing page.
- Choose an **easy-to-read font** in a sufficient size. Avoid fancy fonts.
- Ensure **sufficient contrast** between text and background.
- **Avoid words in capital letters.** They could be read and misunderstood as acronyms.
- Use **emoticons sparingly** and place them at the beginning or end of the text.
- When you use **hashtags**, put them at the beginning or end of the text and start each new word within a hashtag with a capital letter (CamelCase).
- **Avoid flashing content:** This can be problematic for people with certain neurological conditions or vision problems.
- **Use platform-specific functions** that support accessibility.



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## Sources for further inspiration

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