

Promoting the Quality in Higher Education Institutions: Aspects of an Inclusive Environment

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are becoming more available to a broader audience, which requires flexibility in processes and teaching techniques to ensure their possibility to meet expectations from various stakeholders. This paper aims to research aspects of inclusive environment and inclusivity in higher education institutions. Acknowledging these key elements is vital for institutions to develop their study and administrative process and to adjust to students' needs. Based on the application of the chosen method, the authors have obtained 15 factors that impact the creation of an inclusive environment in a higher education institution. The main factors are adjusting study content and inclusion of transversal competencies, accessibility to physical and digital infrastructure, and differentiated didactics and evaluation methods. The research is limited to the inclusivity of students and does not address the issues related to the inclusivity of employees.

Keywords: inclusive environment, quality of higher education, inclusive higher education, university

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, Europe has adopted the European Pillar of Social Rights, which states that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society. This has been a decisive step towards a future where education is becoming increasingly available for people with different needs. [20]

The concept of inclusive education is no longer unfamiliar in the Latvian education system, as it has been brought to the fore with the reform of primary and secondary education institutions and the "School 2030" project, which covers pre-primary, primary and secondary education. The concept is based on a philosophy with six guiding principles [37]:

1. An environment where the learner is welcome.
2. An environment where both the teacher and the learner are accepted for individuality.
3. An environment in which personal uniqueness is respected in the organisation of the educational process and the design of the premises.
4. An environment in which everyone is given time to grow.
5. An environment in which everyone can overcome learning challenges and independently seek explanations.
6. An environment where mistakes and errors are tolerated.

Similar principles can be applied to higher education. However, no universal national policy documents on inclusivity in higher education have been developed in Latvia. The interpretation of

this concept by higher education institutions is still very diverse [34]. Inclusive education in higher education institutions has emerged as a pivotal area of study, emphasising the need to create learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities, different cultural backgrounds, and varying socio-economic statuses. Substantial gaps remain in understanding the multifaceted factors influencing the efficacy and quality of inclusive education at this level. This involves administrative factors, teaching competencies and the availability of digital and physical infrastructures. Current literature predominantly focuses on the broad policies and theoretical frameworks supporting inclusive education. Many studies also examine specific factors in depth; however, they do not address different areas or dimensions of the same aspect, thus creating a gap in exploring this topic from a systemic perspective. There is a lack of empirical studies that dissect the specific institutional, pedagogical, and social factors that directly impact the inclusivity of educational practices in higher education. Moreover, limited research addresses the perspectives and experiences of students and educators who navigate these inclusive environments daily.

This paper aims to research aspects of inclusive environment and inclusivity in higher education institutions. This research was conducted as a literature review using qualitative content analysis to comprehend the answer to the research question, "What factors facilitate or limit inclusive environment in higher education institutions?" By conducting a comprehensive investigation into these factors, the study seeks to provide actionable insights that can enhance inclusive education practices and the quality of studies for students with different needs. The term quality of higher education can be viewed from the perspective of meeting the necessities of various groups of stakeholders. Understanding these dynamics will contribute to developing more effective strategies for fostering an inclusive academic environment, ultimately improving educational outcomes and quality for all students. The key phrases and factors related to an inclusive environment are identified in Sections 3 and 4 and include an analysis of frequency and quantity.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A selection of scientific literature from several databases - Web of Science and ScienceDirect - was carried out to understand the concepts and definitions used to describe an Inclusive environment in higher education. Literature sources were searched by entering keywords in English. Initially, articles were searched using particular keywords such as "inclusive environment" and "inclusive education". The number of sources found in the databases during the research was too large to process, so in addition to other limiting criteria, the keywords

were combined with each other. This resulted in the use of combinations of keywords:

- inclusive environment AND higher education;
- inclusivity in university;
- inclusive environment AND university quality management;
- inclusive education AND university student support;
- supportive higher education AND inclusive environment AND student support.

Combining keywords not only facilitated the discovery of the most relevant literature but also reduced the total number of articles to be reviewed. To find the desired scientific articles more accurately, additional formal criteria were developed:

- The source of the literature is a scientific publication;
- Scientific publications published 2016-2024;
- Sources for research in the European Higher Education Area have been sought where possible;
- If the research is from a third-world country or another region but is relevant in content and concept to the research topic, it is included;
- Scientific publications must be available in full text;
- Scientific publications must answer the research question.

Given that the literature was selected through two databases and with several combinations of keywords, the articles were checked several times to avoid duplication. Studies have also been used that have been carried out outside the framework of the European Higher Education Area but are relevant to the subject and content of the research. The steps of the literature selection with the number of scientific references are shown in the PRISMA diagram in Figure 1. The literature content analysis includes 36 scientific articles.

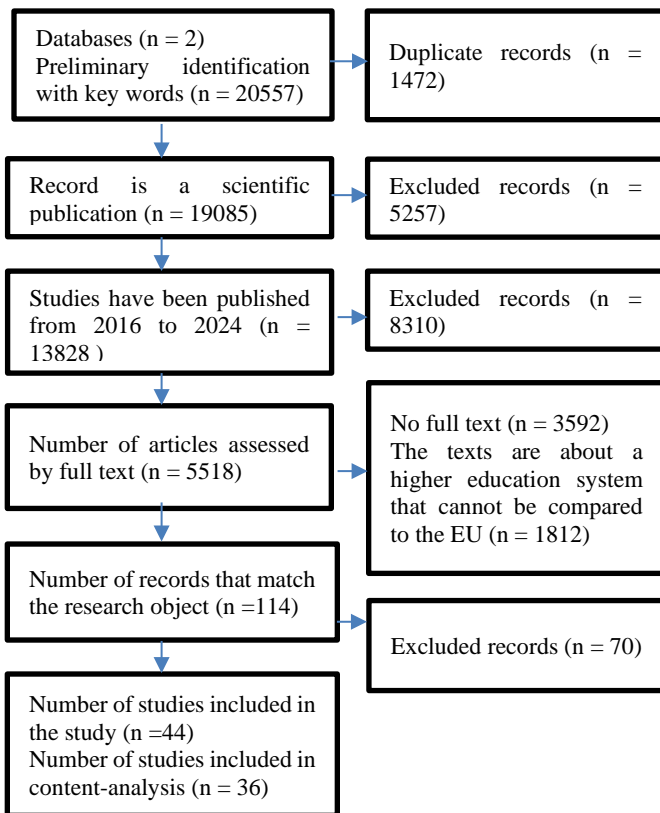


Figure 1. The selection order of the scientific publications [created by authors]

The selection process revealed that many articles with particular keywords are found within the general education framework, while the research on higher education is much more limited. Literature from outside the European Higher Education Area was also included in the selection, as it is relevant to the research topic in terms of content and concept. For example, these exclusions were for articles that looked at the possibility of integrating information technology, artificial intelligence and digital assistants into the study process or into the overall processes of a university. Overall, a search of the publications on this topic reveals that the inclusive environment as a whole system within the framework of a higher education institution needs to be addressed. This implies a fragmented perception of the topic in society and in the scientific community, either in terms of concepts related to inclusive education and teaching methods, or in terms of the emphasis on the involvement of digital tools, or in terms of different groups of students (with special needs).

This calls for thorough research addressing this topic from a holistic approach. As various digital tools in higher education area appear, traditional campuses are being transformed into sustainable smart campuses, and universities have started experimenting with big data to improve how students live and learn on campus [13]. The identified key phrases related to this topic are initially used to reinforce the author's understanding and definition of an inclusive environment in higher education and the processes involved. The key phrases identified are described in Figure 2.

3. ASPECTS RELATED TO INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

While identifying the factors impacting inclusive environments, some key phrases (see Table 1) that play an important role in categorising the identified factors were also noted.

Table 1. Identified key phrases related to inclusive environment [created by authors]

Key phrase	Reference
Study programmes can develop interdisciplinary skills across all disciplines and departments involved in implementation	[34]
There is potential to develop methodologies with artificial intelligence and machine learning to analyse and predict student performance (educational data mining)	[17]
ICT products have great potential to provide virtual environments and accessibility for different groups	[39]
There is a need for a separate unit within the university to work individually on inclusive environments for people with different disabilities	[22], [30], [33],
One of the most important factors is the willingness of lecturers to teach according to the principles of inclusive education and professional development opportunities	[6], [28], [31], [35]
Universities should identify and take into account additional needs already in the admission process	[8]
Some institutions believe that inclusive education means students adapting to institutional conditions; however, it should be the other way around	[24], [40]

Essentially, a critical perspective on inclusive education challenges the notion that students should conform to existing institutional norms. Instead, institutions should adapt to meet the diverse needs of their students. This student-centred approach requires a shift in mindset and practice, emphasising flexibility and responsiveness. Incorporating considerations for inclusivity during the admissions process is fundamental for supporting diverse student populations. Universities should identify any additional needs of prospective students early on. This proactive approach ensures that appropriate accommodations and support systems are in place from the beginning of their academic journey. For example, providing information about accessible housing options or academic accommodations can help ease the transition for students with disabilities. Early identification and support can significantly enhance the student experience and promote a sense of belonging. [11]

Inclusion strategies have to occur at all levels of the academic ecosystem - students, faculty, alumni and staff, especially at the administrative level. Each part of the academic ecosystem needs to engage in broader discussions on diversity and inclusion by communicating with each other. The process of selecting or electing representatives for each stakeholder also requires the selection of each member of the ecosystem to be most effective. Suppose a student or staff member is selected from a pool of applicants. In that case, each undergoes a lengthy assessment process that results in a commitment by the institution to them as members of the institutional family. Thus, there must be strong support from the highest management levels that diversity and inclusion are an integral part of the institution's mission or strategic plan. [26], [33]

The analysis of key phrases from Table 1 gave authors the understanding that the identifying factors can be classified in areas related to administrative, study and social dimensions. Factors are further analysed in Chapter 4.

4. FACTORS IMPACTING INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION

The result of the content analysis identified 15 impact factors for fostering an inclusive environment, which the authors categorised into 3 clusters: social factors, academic factors (excluding research) and administrative factors. The social factors cluster identifies 5 impact factors, the academic factors cluster identifies 3, and the administrative factors cluster holds 7 impact factors. The cluster frequencies can be seen in Figure 2.

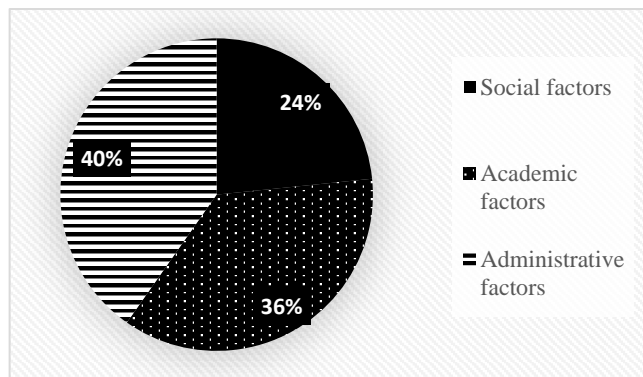


Figure 2. Frequency of factors by category [created by authors]

Among the identified factors, the highest share of impacts is in the administrative cluster, which is composed of 7 impact factors:

1. Physical and virtual university infrastructure;
2. Special unit working with students with special needs;
3. The involvement of artificial intelligence in student performance measurement and administrative processes;
4. Financial support and scholarships for students from different backgrounds;
5. Adjusted admissions process;
6. Stakeholder feedback and its inclusion in the university's key performance indicators (KPIs);
7. Student-centered approach in all processes;

Administrative factor frequency can be seen in Figure 3.

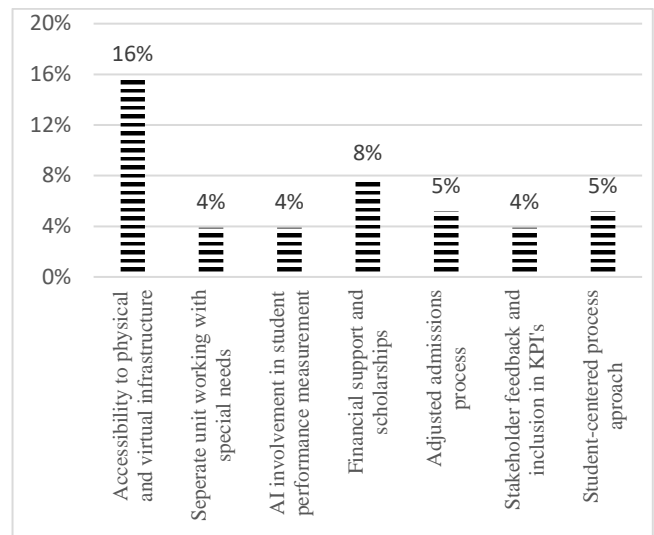


Figure 3. Breakdown of factors in administrative category [created by authors]

Throughout the research, digitalisation is broadly explored, including artificial intelligence usage in administrative processes, such as determining student performance. The effective utilisation of technology significantly contributes to the operational efficiency and educational quality within HEIs. These technologies enable enhanced information gathering, time-saving, cost reduction, improved information sharing, connective communication, easy learning, and comprehensive online services [1], [23].

However, the most impactful factor from this category is the accessibility of digital and virtual infrastructure, which allows students to manoeuvre both within the campus, classrooms and the digital environments.

The second most frequently mentioned factor is "physical and virtual infrastructure". On the other hand, the criterion of infrastructure is mainly characterised in the literature by the physical accessibility of buildings and classrooms. More recent literature also tends to analyse digital infrastructure, either the accessibility of a university's intranet or internal e-environment or the accessibility of websites for the visually impaired. For example, virtual environments and websites should be equipped with digital assistants, as well as be able to highlight text in a larger font [19]. The topic of additional university services, such as the availability of halls of residence as well as various counselling options for non-study issues, is also addressed. For example, if universities develop mobile applications for applying for studies or services, they should be able to change the font, set different colour modes, etc. [3], [32].

The factor "financial support and scholarships", which describes the different material support available to students from different social groups, is also relevant to the changes in the system. This factor can include scholarships from different philanthropists, which are open competitions, scholarships organised by the higher education institution itself or scholarships awarded by a national institution. Accordingly, some studies also focus on the format in which news about such scholarships reaches the public and how to successfully promote them so that everyone has an equal opportunity to apply for these scholarships [14], [15].

The next category consists of academic factors. There are 3 dominant elements:

1. Adjusted study content and integration of transversal competences into study programmes;
2. Interactive problem-solving and the involvement of digital tools in the study process (including digital assistants);
3. Increasing the competence of teaching staff in inclusive teaching methods and assessment.

The frequency of these factors can be seen in Figure 4.

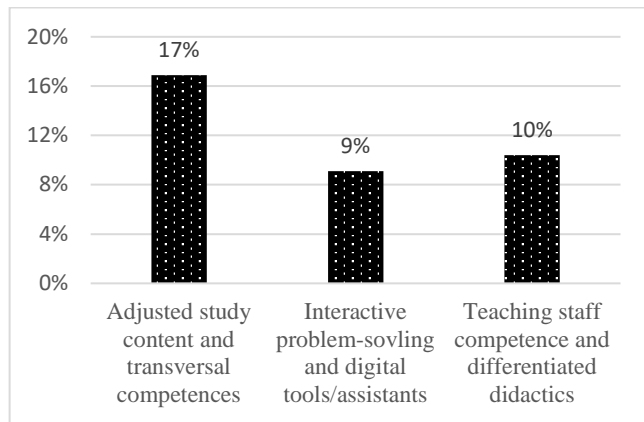


Figure 4. Breakdown of factors in academic category [created by authors]

While this category has 3 impact factors only, it holds almost the largest share of frequency, being almost at the same quantity as administrative factors.

The most frequently mentioned factor is "adjusted study content". Tailored learning content has been described in studies from different perspectives - for example, starting with the development of interdisciplinary skills, [34] which encourages students to engage in a learning process that requires their direct involvement; the aspect of accessibility of learning materials, both physical and digital, has also been addressed [19]; the development of critical thinking and other pervasive competences have been addressed in several studies [12], [16], which are necessary for students to become active and engaged citizens in society. There is also an emphasis on creating individual study plans for students to help them learn at their own pace, especially for those with learning disabilities. Adapted teaching methods and assessment of learning outcomes are also an integral part of this criterion. [18]

It should also be noted that adjusted study content could also mean a different workload to avoid, especially for first-year students, from multitasking, which would significantly increase the risk of potential dropout due to psychological distress and burnout. [36]

The third most mentioned key factor is "improving the competence of teaching staff". This criterion is characterised by concepts common to student-centred education, such as adapting teaching methods that focus on engaging learners in learning and

understanding concepts rather than memorising them. Situations in which teachers give extra time for tests or additional materials are also typical of this factor [29]. Equally important is the readiness of the teaching staff to respond to unexpected situations during lectures. To develop such skills, there is a need for regular methodological conferences and training for teaching staff, as well as a clear university policy on the need to upgrade their skills continuously [2].

The fourth most frequently mentioned factor is "interactive problem-solving and digital tools". This category includes both adapted study methods using digital assistants, artificial tools and other information and communication technologies to enhance the learning environment. One of the arguments mentioned under this factor is the assessment of learning outcomes in interactive ways by simulating different scenarios or by solving situations in groups in a role-play format. Some academic articles also discuss the concept of Education 4.0, which is related to the concept of Industry 4.0 or the next stage of the Industrial Revolution, involving automation, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things (IoT) and other relevant digital technologies in processes. Education 4.0 can include the use of information technologies in studies (e.g., interactive whiteboards, learning applications, simulators), learning content in online formats, and an overall personalised learning experience tailored to the individual needs of each student [4], [16], [31]. Academic factors are most influential, but other relevant factors surrounding systems change are less petitioned overall.

The last and the least frequent cluster contains social factors. These can be seen in Figure 5, along with their frequencies. Social cluster include the following:

1. Mentoring support for students;
2. Different or opposite interpretations of inclusion policies and their actual implementation;
3. Awareness-raising activities for all staff and a change in internal culture;
4. Highlighting examples of good practice in the university environment;
5. Stakeholder resistance to change.

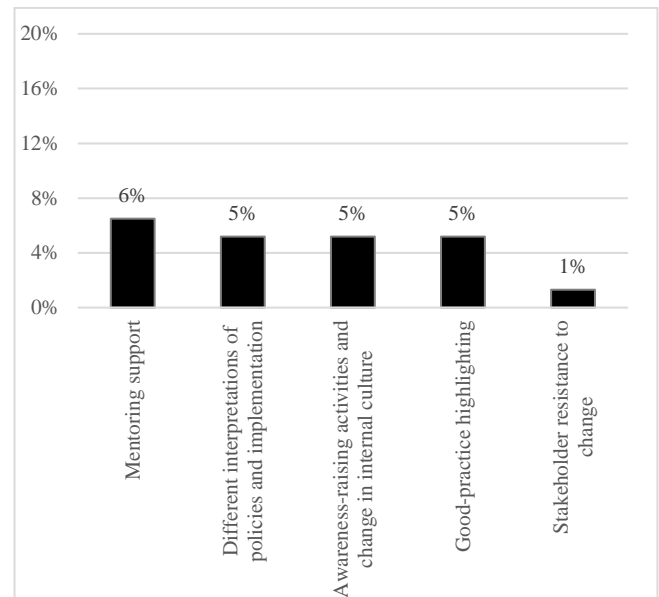


Figure 5. Breakdown of factors in social category [created by authors]

Some studies find that contrary to common assumptions, students with disabilities often exhibit greater resilience during their transition to higher education compared to their non-disabled

peers. Research indicates that non-disabled students frequently experience more negative emotions and a more significant impact on self-efficacy when facing difficulties. In contrast, students with disabilities tend to express more positive emotions and view the transition to higher education as just another challenge among many they have faced. This resilience is attributed to their lifelong experience managing their disabilities, which better prepares them for the demands of higher education. [7], [9], [30]. The sixth most popular criterion is "mentor support", which is studied in the literature from two perspectives: the support of another student as a mentor, often these students are from older years, or the support of a specific member of staff as a mentor in their studies. A student may feel uncomfortable asking different questions when the mentor is a member of the university staff, especially if these staff members are involved in the study process. This criterion also includes cases where the mentor is used as a neutral moderator between students and staff in case students have any perceptual impairments. [16], [26]

The following 5 criteria are considered in equal measure in the literature review: "Different interpretations of inclusion policies", "Educating all staff", "Highlighting good practice in the university", "Adapted admissions process", and "Student-centered approach to processes". Where 'different interpretations' refer to views and understandings of inclusion policies within the same institution, this may indicate internal diversity or differing opinions within the educational institution itself. In this case, the criterion 'different interpretations' suggests that the same policies or approaches may be understood or interpreted differently within different individuals, groups or departments, so it is essential to define clear guidelines for implementing change and the role of each stakeholder in the change process. [16], [33], [39] To create an inclusive environment, all staff in an educational institution need to be educated and trained in the principles and best practices of inclusion. This includes administrative staff, counsellors, mentors, etc., who need to be informed and prepared to work with different groups of learners and understand their needs. This factor also describes a change in the internal culture of the organisation; e.g. Herrero et al. (2020) highlight that students with disabilities do not necessarily need to feel 'singled out' among other students and should be treated in the same way as students without disabilities. However, this is also influenced by the general public's perception of different groups of people with disabilities and other unconscious prejudices that exist more widely [18], [21].

For this reason, the university must highlight best practices that colleagues in other departments can adopt. For example, Twomey [38], in his study, found that up to 75% of university staff believe that management is the main driver of change, and this is why management must also remember that they are the ones who lead by example in their actions. But it is equally important to discuss and highlight good practices regularly, for instance, at faculty conferences or various internal meetings. [16], [38]

The factor 'Tailored admissions process' is addressed, for example, by Morina [29] and other studies describing the need for universities to clarify and identify the different needs of students already in the admissions process. This would enable the university to collect data on the needs of the student population centrally and to follow up in-depth on the assessment of infrastructure and other criteria. [29]

The "Student-centred approach to processes" factor describes the university's ability to change systems and adapt different processes to the needs of students depending on the situation. Understandably, this factor has several external constraints. Still, for example, universities' internal rules on the administration of

examinations or the design of different support systems may be able to be adapted to specific groups. For instance, Bjørnerås et al. describe a system in which older students with special needs are seen as mentors for younger students, thus creating a broader support system [4].

It should also be emphasised that, according to the present contingency analysis, the factor 'department working with students with special needs' is relatively weak. This is because much of the scientific literature describes systems as a whole, and more research is needed on the work of such individual units. For example, Hewett et al. [19] describe in their study that such a unit is centralised, and students are supported through such a department or centre. This takes the form of either providing additional technical or material resources for the study process or communicating with staff at the student's site to provide tailored teaching and assessment methods. [19]

One of the latter factors is the "incorporation of feedback into university KPIs", discussed by May [27] and Dawodu et al. [10], concluding that internal audits or regular reviews of the execution of departmental or institutional strategies are important drivers for change. In this case, it is important to consider that there is already a system in place to foster an inclusive environment, which is a way of checking whether progress is being made. The inclusive environment check mustn't become a compliance assessment, which, in this case, becomes meaningless. [10], [27] In addition to the previous factors, a further one identified is 'the use of artificial intelligence to measure student performance', where two important studies from Malik [25] and Jokhan et al. are discussed [22], which have created AI models with machine learning to be able to analyse and determine student performance in the run-up to a semester, modelling shields in advance and predicting where students might fail exams or where help from administrators or faculty would be needed. Such a system would be necessary for all students as it would allow tracking of all students, reducing drop-outs due to stress or self-discipline, especially in the first year. [22], [25]

The least identified factor is "stakeholder resistance to change", as Martinez-Acosta et al. [26] described. Although this is a significant threat to any change, this study highlights the need for a coherent plan on the necessary actions to adapt the learning environment and methods gradually and to build both political and financial support at the university level to raise this issue. The emphasis is also on the fact that universities can adopt no single methodology, as each case has different priorities and needs, so universities must find the best solution for themselves. [5]

From the contingent literature overview, it can be concluded that problems at the individual level are the most significantly identified, while there is less research on common, systematic solutions to these problems, consisting of factors such as the inclusion of KPIs and a student-centred approach to processes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Inclusive education in higher education institutions demands a shift from expecting students to institutions adapting to meet diverse student needs. This approach requires flexibility, responsiveness, and proactive identification of student needs during the admission process to ensure appropriate support from the beginning. Accessible digital infrastructure and differentiated teaching and evaluating methods are incredibly crucial. This study concludes that 15 major factors play a significant role for a higher education institution in establishing an inclusive environment. These factors are related to the study process, staff

competence and overall internal culture at the institution, accessibility in terms of physical and digital attributes, adjusted study content and didactics and evaluation, as well as financial support. The most frequent and essential factors are adjusted study content and transversal competencies, accessibility to digital and physical infrastructure and teaching staff competencies, and adjusted didactics and evaluation methods. Key factors that facilitate inclusive environments are the adaptation of institutional processes to meet diverse student needs, early identification of these needs, and the integration of digital tools and AI to support accessibility. Limiting factors include inadequate infrastructure, resistance to change, and lack of staff training in inclusive practices. Enhancing inclusive education practices requires early identification of student needs, adaptive teaching methods, and continuous training for faculty and staff.

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