



Mastering Inclusive Excellence in Hospitality and Tourism Education

Christina Klearchou Dimitriou
New Mexico State University

Abstract

In response to the increasingly pluralistic and globalized landscape of hospitality and tourism, this paper advances inclusive excellence as a critical and transformative framework for reimagining disciplinary education. Grounded in established theoretical and empirical literature, the study explores foundational definitions, conceptual underpinnings, and strategic approaches to embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across curricular, pedagogical, and institutional domains. It interrogates systemic barriers—both structural and cultural—that constrain progress toward meaningful inclusion, with particular attention to the unique dynamics of hospitality and tourism education. Through the articulation of an integrative framework, the paper proposes actionable strategies for cultivating culturally agile, ethically grounded, and socially responsible professionals equipped to lead in complex intercultural contexts. In foregrounding inclusive excellence as both an academic and moral imperative, this study underscores the necessity of sustained institutional commitment to equity, relevance, and innovation in preparing future leaders for a rapidly evolving global industry.

Key Words *Inclusive excellence, diversity, equity, inclusion, hospitality & tourism education*

Track *Educational Innovations (sixth track)*

Focus of Paper *Industry/Educational*

Type of submission: Paper

Introduction

Inclusive excellence (IE) has emerged as a transformative paradigm in higher education, emphasizing the creation of learning environments that not only acknowledge and celebrate diversity, but also actively ensure equity and inclusion for all students. Within the context of hospitality and tourism education, this concept holds particular significance given the industry's inherently global, multicultural nature. As future professionals prepare to engage with diverse clientele and navigate intercultural workplaces, educational institutions bear the responsibility of equipping them with the competencies needed to lead in complex, pluralistic environments.

This paper argues that IE is vital for advancing hospitality and tourism education. It reviews key definitions and strategic frameworks of IE, critically examining systemic barriers to inclusivity both generally and within the specific disciplinary context. By proposing a comprehensive framework for integrating IE into curriculum and pedagogy, this study challenges traditional educational models and reimagines hospitality education through a lens of equity, relevance, and transformative learning, while outlining the benefits of such an approach.

Inclusive Excellence

IE in education reflects a deliberate, systemic integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into the core mission, policies, and practices of academic institutions (Agrahari, 2024). It promotes a culture of equity and belonging where all members—regardless of identity—are supported in reaching their full potential. This concept goes beyond representation by focusing on equitable access to resources and institutional support.

Islam and Stamp (2020) emphasized that inclusive excellence (IE) extends beyond inclusion and access. Milem et al. (2005) argued that IE involves creating rigorous, high-quality learning environments that are accessible to all and enriched by the diversity of institutional members. They defined IE through four core elements: a) A focus on student intellectual and social development, b) a purposeful development and utilization of organizational resources to enhance student learning, c) attention to the cultural differences learners bring to the educational experience and that enhance the enterprise, and d) a welcoming community that engages all of its diversity in the service of student and organizational learning. del Carmen Salazar et al. (2010) stressed that IE initiatives are essential for supporting historically marginalized students—such as students of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, women, and students with disabilities—and proposed a five-part framework: intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness, curriculum transformation, inclusive pedagogy, and inclusive learning environments. Similarly, Murray et al. (2023) outlined five strategic priorities for advancing IE: leadership, student access and success, faculty and staff development, community engagement, and health equity research. They underscored that institutional leaders must move beyond advocacy to ensure accountability, foster a sense of belonging, and commit to collective action. As noted by Blumenfeld (2019, as cited in Murray et al., 2023), leadership for IE must be grounded in social justice, ensuring equitable access to rights and resources and dismantling hierarchies based on identity and background.

A diverse faculty, students, and staff cohort is vital to fostering an enriched academic environment. Diversity contributes significantly to the depth and quality of learning, as collaborative engagement among individuals from varied backgrounds cultivates cultural agility (Murray et al. 2023). Aoun (2017) defines cultural agility as the ability to understand diverse perspectives, contextualize cultural values, and engage effectively across cultures. Murray et al. (2023) add that it fosters critical self-reflection, respect for diversity, and enhances minoritized students' belonging and academic involvement. Agrahari (2024) identified six key components of IE in education: 1) Diversity, 2) equity, 3) inclusion, 4) excellence, 5) institutional commitment, and 6) continuous improvement. He mentioned that diversity “enriches the educational experience by bringing a variety of perspectives, experiences and ideas” (Agrahari, 2024, p. 105). He described diversity as enriching education through varied perspectives; equity as ensuring fair access by addressing barriers; and inclusion as creating a respectful, collaborative environment where everyone is heard, and valued. He also defined excellence as achieving high academic and institutional standards by leveraging diversity, equity, and inclusion as essential drivers of rigor and innovation. Agrahari (2024) underscored institutional commitment as the integration of DEI into strategic goals through leadership support, resource allocation, and embedded initiatives. Moreover, he highlighted the importance of continuous improvement via ongoing assessment, data-driven evaluation, and campus-wide dialogue to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of DEI efforts.

The Imperative of Inclusive Excellence in Hospitality and Tourism Education

Focusing on IE in hospitality and tourism education is essential for preparing future professionals to lead in an increasingly diverse and interconnected global industry. The hospitality sector thrives on human interaction, cultural sensitivity, and personalized service—all of which require a deep understanding and appreciation of diversity. By embedding IE into educational frameworks, institutions not only promote equity and belonging among students and faculty, but also enhance the quality and relevance of academic programs. Inclusive learning environments foster critical thinking, cultural agility, and collaborative problem-solving—skills that are indispensable in managing multicultural teams and serving diverse clientele. Moreover, embracing IE helps dismantle systemic barriers that limit access and opportunity, creating pathways for underrepresented groups to succeed and lead within the field. Given that the hospitality and tourism industry often serves as a gateway to global citizenship and economic mobility, cultivating IE ensures graduates are equipped to contribute meaningfully to inclusive guest experiences, ethical business practices, and culturally competent leadership. As the industry evolves, hospitality and tourism education must reflect values of equity and inclusion to remain

competitive, socially responsible, and aligned with global best practice.

Barriers to Inclusive Excellence

The advancement of IE is often impeded by a range of complex and interrelated challenges. del Carmen Salazar et al. (2010) argued that “faculty developers may be unaware of their own non-inclusive values, attitudes, and behaviors, in which case institutions must ensure their developers receive training in the practices of inclusive excellence” (p. 219). Key challenges include addressing entrenched biases, overcoming resource constraints, measuring progress effectively, and ensuring accountability for DEI outcomes. These obstacles underscore the need for comprehensive strategies, visionary leadership, and institutional commitment to transformative change (Agrahari, 2024, p. 104). According to Agrahari (2024), the following obstacles can hinder IE:

Historical Context: Numerous educational institutions carry historical legacies of exclusion and discrimination, which continue to shape and influence contemporary policies and practices.

Structural Inequities: Unjust admissions procedures, disparities in school funding, and discriminatory hiring practices can collectively reinforce and sustain systemic inequality.

Resistance to Change: It can be in the form of **institutional inertia** (resistance may arise from individuals who are invested in maintaining the status quo or who perceive diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives as challenging or compromising their personal or professional interests) **and cultural resistance** (both conscious and unconscious biases and prejudices can contribute to resistance toward DEI initiatives).

Resource Constraints: Either **financial limitations** or **Human Resources** as successful DEI efforts require committed personnel with the necessary expertise and time to effectively lead these initiatives. However, many institutions face challenges in allocating adequate human resources to DEI initiatives, resulting in burnout and suboptimal implementation.

Measurement and Accountability: That includes a **lack of reliable metrics** and holding individuals and departments accountable for DEI outcomes in order to ensure continual advancement.

Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy: This encompasses: **a) curriculum gaps** as incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum often faces challenges, including limited resources, resistance from faculty, and inadequate training in inclusive teaching methods, and **b) teaching practices** since implementing inclusive pedagogical strategies demands continuous professional development and support for educators. Resistance to altering teaching methods and a lack of awareness regarding inclusive practices can impede progress.

Support for Marginalized Groups: This refers to two sub-categories: **a) Insufficient support services** e.g., mentorship programs, mental health resources, and academic advising, can increase inequalities, and **b) climate and belonging**. Creating a welcoming campus environment for all students is crucial. Experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion can negatively impact the well-being and academic achievement of marginalized students.

Obstacles to Inclusive Excellence in Hospitality and Tourism Education

When it comes to hospitality and tourism education, several obstacles may also stand in the way of promoting IE:

Resistance to Change

Some educators may resist adopting inclusive teaching practices, either because they are unfamiliar with them or because they feel these changes may compromise the rigor of their curriculum. Additional factors underlying this resistance to change include: Fear of uncertainty, unclear expectations or outcomes of adopting change, loss of control, perceived threat to autonomy or decision-making, lack of understanding, and personal biases (Nwisagbo et al., 2025). Overcoming this resistance requires strong leadership, institutional support, and continued professional development opportunities.

Lack of Hiring and Retaining Diverse Faculty and Staff

The underrepresentation of faculty from diverse backgrounds can limit the ability of institutions to deliver a truly inclusive education. Recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty pool is essential to creating a learning

environment where all students feel represented and supported. Moreover, diverse faculty members primarily leave due to hostile department climates, lack of mentorship, and limited opportunities for promotion (Diversity.com, 2025).

Lack of Educators' Training on Inclusive Education

Faculty may struggle to create inclusive learning environments and provide adequate support if they lack a foundational understanding and the necessary skills to address the diverse needs of students, such as those with disabilities (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024).

Institutional Constraints and Resources

In many institutions, there may be a lack of resources or institutional support for implementing inclusive practices such as specialized learning tools, assistive technologies, and diverse educational materials due to budgetary constraints or lack of availability (Theoria Technical College, 2017). Lack of training opportunities, and insufficient administrative buy-in can also create significant barriers.

Cultural Barriers in Hospitality and Tourism Industry

Given that hospitality and tourism education often reflects industry norms and practices, there may be tension between academic inclusivity and industry realities. Some industry leaders may resist changes that prioritize IE if they are perceived to conflict with traditional operational models or profit-driven goals. This occurs because leaders often prioritize short-term financial gains and are skeptical of initiatives requiring long-term investment with intangible benefits.

Assessing Inclusive Excellence in Hospitality and Tourism Education

Advancing IE demands rigorous assessment frameworks that ensure accountability while embedding diversity, equity, and educational quality into institutional practices. The Inclusive Excellence (IE) Scorecard, developed by Williams et al. (2005), offers a strategic, data-informed framework for assessing the extent to which colleges and universities have institutionalized IE. Grounded in **four** interrelated dimensions: **(1) Access and Equity, (2) Diversity in the Formal and Informal Curriculum, (3) Campus Climate, and (4) Student Learning and Development**—this scorecard enables institutions to move beyond performative or compliance-driven approaches to diversity. It integrates equity and educational quality into the core of institutional planning, decision-making, and accountability by employing benchmarks and performance indicators to evaluate progress. In doing so, the scorecard facilitates systemic, measurable, and sustainable transformation aligned with the principles of IE.

Critical Strategies for Mastering Inclusive Excellence

To truly master IE in hospitality and tourism education, educators must adopt strategies that transcend traditional teaching practices. These strategies aim to build inclusive pedagogy, a supportive learning environment, and a diverse curriculum, all while addressing barriers to inclusion. Some key strategies include:

Curricular Reform and Integration

Hospitality and tourism programs must update their curricula to incorporate diverse perspectives, experiences, and case studies from various cultural and global contexts. This includes:

- **Internationalizing the Curriculum:** Introducing global case studies and cross-cultural analyses to help students understand international hospitality and tourism challenges. These graduates will think globally (Elkin et al., 2008), respect international diversity (Killick, 2008), and are fully equipped and prepared for employment in modern organizations (Bremer, L. & van der Wende, 1995; Jones & Killick, 2007; Rudzki, 2000; Sangari & Foster, 1999).
- **Emphasizing Social Justice and Ethical Leadership:** Embedding these topics into core modules, ensuring students not only learn technical skills, but also reflect on the ethical implications of their future roles in the industry. Our industry requires ethical leaders (Dimitriou, 2022, 2024, 2025).
- **Integrating Diverse Cultural and Global Perspectives:** Ensuring that all aspects of the curriculum reflect the diverse histories, contributions, and experiences of marginalized or underrepresented groups, including those from non-Western cultures.

Inclusive Pedagogical Practices

Inclusive pedagogy requires the use of teaching strategies that are flexible, adaptable, and supportive of diverse learning needs. These strategies include:

- **Active Learning:** Using pedagogical tools such as role-playing, simulations, and collaborative group work helps students move beyond passive learning by actively engaging with real-world scenarios that mirror the complexities of today's global hospitality landscape. Within hospitality and tourism education—fields inherently grounded in interpersonal interaction and cultural exchange—such methods foster intercultural exchange, empathy, and mutual respect, while cultivating essential professional competencies such as adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and ethical decision-making.
- **Interactive and Experiential Learning:** Creating opportunities for students to engage with real-world scenarios that emphasize global perspectives and inclusive hospitality practices. As a result, students are effectively prepared to navigate diverse environments and respond thoughtfully to the nuanced needs of guests and colleagues alike.
- **Peer-to-Peer Learning:** Encouraging collaborative learning among students from diverse backgrounds fosters an environment where they exchange ideas, challenge assumptions, and learn from each other's lived experiences. This method enhances intercultural competence through dialogue and shared reflection, allowing students to co-construct knowledge in meaningful ways. In hospitality and tourism education, such interactions are especially valuable, as they prepare future professionals to engage respectfully and effectively across cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic differences.

Innovative Technology in Teaching

Using technology, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), can create immersive experiences that allow students to engage with diverse cultural contexts. These tools can help bridge cultural gaps and provide students with practical, cross-cultural experiences without leaving the classroom.

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

An inclusive learning environment goes beyond the physical classroom; it encompasses the entire academic experience, from interactions with faculty to peer relationships. Key approaches include:

- **Fostering a Culture of Belonging:** Ensuring that every student feels respected and valued, particularly in the context of group work or student interactions requires **inclusive leadership** (Randel et al., 2016, 2018; Sharma et al. 2024). It is not just important, but mandatory for creating an environment where all students thrive.
- **Providing Access to Support Resources:** Offering academic and mental health resources that cater to the diverse needs of students—including those with disabilities or non-traditional backgrounds—promotes equity, reduces barriers to success, and fosters a supportive learning environment where all students can thrive both academically and personally.
- **Encouraging Open Dialogue:** Creating spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives without fear of judgment or exclusion fosters psychological safety, strengthens classroom engagement, and encourages open dialogue that enriches learning through diverse viewpoints.

Inclusive Assessment Practices

Inclusive assessment strategies are critical to measuring student progress in a way that is equitable and fair. This can include:

- **Multiple Modes of Assessment:** Offering various forms of assessment—such as projects, presentations, and portfolios—accommodates diverse learning styles and abilities, promotes inclusive evaluation, and allows students to demonstrate their strengths in meaningful and personalized ways.
- **Formative Feedback:** Providing regular, constructive feedback supports continuous improvement, builds student confidence, and fosters academic success—particularly for those from marginalized

backgrounds—by addressing individual challenges and promoting equitable learning outcomes.

- **Assessment for Diverse Learners:** Designing assessments that accommodate diverse cultural and academic backgrounds enables students to showcase their knowledge through multiple formats, promoting equity, inclusivity, and a deeper understanding of subject matter.

Faculty Development and Training

For IE to be effectively implemented, faculty must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools to foster inclusive classrooms. Key areas of training include:

- **Cultural Competency:** Helping faculty understand their students' cultural backgrounds and challenges, and how to address them effectively. Hospitality and tourism programs should aim to equip students with deeper insights into cultural understanding and awareness, effective management of diverse teams, and leadership through innovation and creativity (Gehrels & Suleri, 2016). Therefore, training should also cover and encourage these aspects.
- **Implicit Bias Training:** Addressing unconscious biases in teaching and student interactions is crucial for fostering equitable learning opportunities. Fassiotto and Girod (2025) explain that these biases stem from natural cognitive shortcuts shaped by societal stereotypes and personal experiences, impacting areas like admissions and evaluations. They recommend strategies including self-reflection and awareness, structured decision-making, bias training programs, and the implementation of inclusive policies and practices to effectively mitigate these biases.
- **Inclusive Leadership:** Encouraging faculty to become advocates for IE within their institutions not only strengthens a culture of equity and belonging on campus but also equips them to model inclusive leadership for their students. As faculty champion these values through their teaching, mentorship, and institutional engagement, they play a pivotal role in shaping the perspectives of future hospitality professionals. This guidance fosters a new generation of industry leaders who are not only skilled in service and management but also committed to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in their workplaces and communities.

Collaborative Industry-Academic Partnerships

By fostering deeper connections between academia and industry, hospitality and tourism education can provide students with real-world experiences that promote inclusive leadership and ethical practices. Collaboration with diverse industry partners can provide students with insights into how inclusivity is being implemented in the field.

Benefits of Inclusive Excellence

Milem (2003) supported that IE yields a broad spectrum of benefits across academic, diversity-related, and civic domains. Academically, it is associated with enhanced educational aspirations, increased motivation and self-confidence, as well as the development of higher-order skills such as creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and problem-solving. In terms of diversity outcomes, IE fosters meaningful engagement with diverse perspectives, deepens cultural awareness, and strengthens individual commitment to equity and social justice. Additionally, it contributes to elevated levels of civic engagement and supports the cultivation of a more informed, socially responsible citizenry.

Conclusion

As global hospitality and tourism systems grow increasingly interconnected, the imperative for educational institutions to cultivate diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning environments has never been greater. IE equips future hospitality leaders with the cultural competence and ethical grounding needed to navigate a multifaceted world. Realizing this vision demands intentional transformation across curricula, pedagogy, and institutional culture. By embedding inclusive practices, hospitality and tourism education can produce agile, globally minded professionals poised to lead with integrity in a dynamic industry.

References

- Agrahari, K. S. (2024). Inclusive excellence: Navigating challenges and seizing opportunities in education. In R. K. Kushwaha, P. K. Yadav, A. Kushwaha, & P. Dwivedi (Eds.), *Diversity, equity, & inclusion*. (p.p. 104-113). Bluerose Publishers.
- Bremer, L. and van der Wende, M. (eds) (1995). *Internationalizing the curriculum in higher education: experiences in the Netherlands*. The Hague: The Netherlands Organization for International Co-operation in Higher Education.
- Dimitriou, C. K. (2022). The critical role that national culture and ethical leadership play in fostering employee commitment to service quality in the hotel industry. *Research in Hospitality Management* 12(3), 255-271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22243534.2022.2133770>
- Dimitriou, C. K. (2024). *National culture and ethical leadership: The passport to strong employee commitment to service quality and positive ethical climate in organizations*. 3rd International Conference on Global Advanced Nursing and Healthcare, Sciencezo Planet Conferences, (Virtual Conference).
- Dimitriou, C. K. (2025). *Ethical leadership: The foundation for fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion in the hospitality industry*. The 6th International Conference on Tourism, Management and Hospitality, Novotel Paris 14 Porte d'Orleans, Pasis, France.
- Diversity.com. (2025, March 21). *The faculty diversity gap: Why universities struggle to hire diverse professors*. <https://diversity.com/post/faculty-diversity-gap-universities-struggle-hiring-diverse-professors>
- Gehrels, S., & Suleri, J. (2016). Diversity and inclusion as indicators of sustainable human resources management in the international hospitality industry. *Research in Hospitality Management*, 6(1), 61–67.
- Islam, M. S., & Stamp, K. (2020). A reflection on future directions: Global international and intercultural competencies in higher education. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 15(1), 69-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745499920901951>
- Jardinez, M. J., & Natividad, L. R. (2024). The advantages and challenges of inclusive education: Striving for equity in the classroom. *International Journal of Education*, 12(2), 57-65. <https://doi.org/10.34293/>
- Jones, E., and Killick, D. (2007). Internationalization of the curriculum. In E. Jones & S. Brown (Eds.), *Internationalizing higher education*. (pp. 109-119). Routledge.
- Milem, J. E (2003). The educational benefits of diversity: Evidence from multiple sectors. In M. Chang, D. Witt, J. Jones, & K. Hakuta (Eds.), *Compelling interest: Examining the evidence on racial dynamics in higher education* (pp. 126-169). Stanford University Press.
- Milem J. F., Chang M. J., & Antonio, A. L. (2005). *Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Murray, T. A., Benz, M. R., Cole, B., Jackson, J., Llamas, D., Marquard, S., Moore, K., Reeves, N., Stallings, D., & Taylor, C. L. (2023). The journey toward inclusive excellence. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 6(4), 225-232.
- Nwisagbo, D. E., Osuji, C. U., & Amachree, T. (2025). Leading changes in education: Strategies for managing resistance and building buy-in. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 1(1), 387-402.
- del Carmen Salazar, M., Stone Norton, A., & Tuitt, F. A. (2010). Weaving promising practices for inclusive excellence into the higher education classroom. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 208-226. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/715>
- Elkin, G., Farnsworth, J., and Templer, A. (2008). Strategy and the internationalization of universities. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 22, 239-250.
- Fassiotta, M., & Girod, S. C. (2025). How to recognize and address unconscious bias. In L. W. Roberts (Ed.), *Roberts academic medicine handbook* (pp. 283–292). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-91745-5_29
- Killick, D. (2008). Internationalization: Graduate attributes for a globalising world. Higher Education Academy.
- Randel, A. E., Dean, M. A., Ehrhart, K. H., Chung, B. G., & Shore, L. M. (2016). Leader inclusiveness, psychological diversity climate, and helping behaviors. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 31(1), 216–234.

doi: 10.1108/JMP-04-2013-0123

- Randel, A. E., Galvin, B. M., Shore, L. M., Ehrhart, K. H., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., & Kedharnath, U. (2018). Inclusive leadership: Realizing positive outcomes through belongingness and being valued for uniqueness. *Human Resource Management Review*, 28(2), 190–203. doi: 10.1016/j.hrmmr.2017.07.002
- Rudzki, R. (2000). Implementing internationalization: The practical application of the fractal process model. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 4(2), 77-90.
- Sangari, E., and Foster, T. (1999). Curriculum internationalization: A comparative study in Iran and Sweden. *European Journal of Marketing*, 33, 760-771.
- Sharma, L., Agarwal, P., Joshi, B. P., Kumar, N., & Tiwari, S. (2024), A study of impact of inclusive leadership on innovative behaviors and diversity at workplace. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(1), 1-19. doi: 10.54517/esp.v9i1.1721
- Theoria Technical College. (2017). *Overcoming challenges in implementing inclusive practices Pt4*. <https://www.theoriatechnical.com/post/overcoming-challenges-in-implementing-inclusive-practices-pt4>
- Williams, D. A., Berger, J. B., & McClendon, S. A. (2005). *Toward a model of inclusive excellence and change in postsecondary institutions*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.