

Equality Diversity and Inclusion Framework

Digital4Business

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Introduction

How EDI Can Facilitate the Growth of 20 million New ICT Specialists by 2030

The digital economy is rapidly transforming, and by 2030, Europe alone will need an additional 20 million ICT specialists. This urgent demand will not be met automatically. In response, our framework for equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) within the Digital4Business master program is both a strategic necessity and an ethical imperative. This programme, developed by a consortium of 15 industry and academic partners, is dedicated to fostering an inclusive and equitable educational and work environment.

Our EDI framework is informed by robust, evidence-based policies and recommendations from leading international bodies, including the European Union, European Commission, UNESCO, European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Athena Swan and various global agreements. We adhere to the principles and requirements of the Horizon Europe, European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and the Global Platform for Gender Equality to track progress and drive transformative action in several key areas:

- Gender-transformative education sector plans, budgets, policies, and data systems
- Gender parity and non-discrimination across all education levels and subjects
- Gender-transformative curricula, teaching materials, and pedagogies
- Inclusive learning environments
- Cross-sectoral collaboration and youth involvement in decision-making
- Investments targeting marginalized learners

By prioritizing these areas, we ensure an inclusive and equitable educational experience for students, woman, marginalized groups, and employees

The Digital Imperative and Gender Disparity in Europe

The digital transition is crucial in today's rapidly evolving job market. Currently, 90% of jobs require basic digital skills, yet significant gender disparities persist in the ICT sector. Women represent only 17% of individuals in ICT studies and careers within the EU, and only 36% of STEM graduates. Furthermore, worldwide lack the necessary skills to succeed in these rapidly changing job markets.

Despite often outperforming men in digital literacy, women constitute only 35% of higher education students in STEM fields. Addressing this gender gap is essential for meeting the growing demand for ICT specialists and fostering a more inclusive digital economy. Ensuring that women and other underrepresented groups have equal opportunities to develop digital skills is not just a matter of fairness but a strategic imperative for economic growth and innovation.

Digital4Business, aligned with EHEA recommendations, emphasises EDI importance. By adopting student-centred approaches, promoting the development of soft skills, and facilitating the exchange of best practices, we can create a supportive environment tailored to the needs of diverse learners. This includes lifelong learners, part-time students, and those from disadvantaged groups.

Key strategies include offering flexible learning pathways, such as micro-credentials, and leveraging digital technologies to enhance accessibility and engagement. By integrating EDI principles into the framework of ICT education and careers, we can help bridge the gender gap and empower a new generation of ICT specialists, ultimately contributing to a more diverse and inclusive digital economy.

Inclusivity and Equity in Digital Education

Our document emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, equity, and responsiveness to local communities. We advocate for policies that prioritize accessibility and diversity, highlight the benefits of increased participation from vulnerable, marginalised and underrepresented groups, and provide guidelines for integrating these values within Digital4Business. We prioritise a holistic approach and continuous improvement at all levels.

Commitment to Digital Skills and Open Education

We commit to supporting higher education institutions in using digital technologies for learning, teaching, assessment, academic communication, and research. We invest in developing digital skills and competences for all, promoting open science and education to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and openly licensed materials. These materials can be easily shared among higher education stakeholders, who can adapt and repurpose them as needed.

An interconnected D4B Consortium promotes collaboration and mobility, enriching intercultural competences and bolstering global competitiveness. We are dedicated to cultivating international proficiencies through achieve these goals, we need innovative curricula and various ways for students to move between institutions, including virtual platforms. Cooperation among universities, especially through the European Universities Initiative, is crucial. Joint digital strategies are vital to improve recognition, ensure quality, and facilitate mobility. These strategies should also focus on making digital systems work together smoothly while protecting privacy and security.

Socially inclusive higher education remains at the core of the EHEA, requiring opportunities and support for equitable inclusion of individuals from all parts of society. Learners from diverse socio-economic, professional, cultural, and educational backgrounds must have the tools to access educational options at any life stage. We commit to reinforcing social inclusion and enhancing quality education by fully utilizing the opportunities provided by digitalization. While societies increasingly rely on innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence, we must ensure these observe ethical standards, human rights, and foster inclusion and equality.

Building an Inclusive Culture

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) aim to foster a diverse, safe, and respectful culture where everyone, regardless of background, can learn, work, belong, and succeed. EDI strives to build an inclusive culture, promote equality, prevent discrimination, and protect the human rights of staff, students, and all affected by college policies and plans.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous world. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (SDG 5) is a standalone goal, intricately linked to SDG 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. This agenda envisions a world of universal respect for human rights, human dignity, and equal opportunity, enabling the full realization of human potential. We commit to approaches that ensure girls and boys, women and men, gain access to and complete education cycles, empowered equally in and through education.

Legal Justification for Integrating EDI in ICT

The EU faces a severe shortage of ICT professionals, with women holding only 15% of these jobs. To address this disparity, it is essential to implement a national inter-sectoral, target-based strategy for girls and women, or to integrate the Women-in-Digital strand into existing national strategies. Such a strategy should focus on education, qualifications, and creating a women-friendly working environment. Key goals include motivating girls to explore STEM early, reskilling women, establishing mentoring schemes, and supporting digital skills for unemployed and vulnerable women.

As mentioned in European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2021, critical actions involve adopting gender-sensitive STEM teaching methodologies, providing gender bias training, designing inclusive curricula, ensuring equal access to ICT studies, maintaining zero tolerance for sexual harassment, and promoting shared parental responsibilities. Creating multi-stakeholder platforms to foster partnerships with schools, universities, and industries is vital. These platforms can offer vocational guidance, mentoring, scholarships, and support for women entrepreneurs. Companies may be incentivized through public funding and procurement opportunities.

The Ministerial Declaration of Commitment on 'Women in Digital,' signed by 28 countries including Germany, Ireland, Greece, France, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden, underscores this commitment. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the updated Digital Education Action Plan aim to address gender gaps in the digital sector. The 'Women in Digital' scoreboard and the updated Skills Agenda for Europe are key tools in combating these disparities. Additionally, the Council's vocational education recommendations and the reinforced Youth Guarantee target women not in education, employment, or training, ensuring equal opportunities for all.

According to the EU Gender Equality, Youth, and Digitalisation Conclusions from 2018, digitalisation—driven by innovations like the internet, AI, and robotics—is transforming lives and communities, bringing new opportunities but also perpetuating inequalities, especially for young women and girls. Policymakers must listen to young people and support them in strengthening their digital competencies. Member States should provide funding and equipment for digital education, create inclusive and safe online spaces, educate teachers on gender equality and digital literacy, address gender gaps in digital skills with age-appropriate curricula, and highlight digitalisation's benefits for innovation, citizenship, and equal opportunities.

Policy Context

At the Rome Ministerial Conference in November 2020, higher education ministers from European countries adopted principles and guidelines to enhance the social dimension of higher education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Equity and inclusion in education are central to EU policy development, integral to the European Education Area and the European Strategy for Universities, and a key focus within the EHEA.

Equality Diversity and Inclusion Definition

EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) ensures fair treatment and opportunity for all. It aims to eradicate prejudice and discrimination based on an individual's or group of individuals' protected characteristics.

What is Equality?

At its core, equality means fairness: we must ensure that individuals or groups of individuals are not treated less favourably because of their protected characteristics. Equality also means equality of opportunity: we must ensure that those who may be disadvantaged can access the tools they need to obtain the same fair opportunities as their peers.

What is Diversity?

Diversity is recognizing, respecting, and celebrating each other's differences. A diverse environment encompasses a wide range of backgrounds and mindsets, fostering a culture of creativity and innovation.

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion means creating an environment where everyone feels welcome and valued. An inclusive environment can only be created once we are aware of our unconscious biases and have learned how to manage them.

What are the Protected Characteristics?

Under The equality legislation, including the Equal Status Acts 2000-2015 protected characteristics are:

- Age
- Civil Status
- Disability
- Family Status
- Gender
- Membership of the Traveller community
- Race
- Religion
- Sexual Orientation

Discrimination based on any of these characteristics is unacceptable. It can take many forms, including direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, bullying, harassment, and victimization. If you believe you have experienced discrimination as a student or staff member, please contact the EDI board members. Additionally, it is considered best practice to include socio-economic status (class) as a characteristic where discrimination is also unacceptable.

The Meanings of Inclusivity

In higher education, inclusivity involves:

1. **Recognizing Inequality:** Understanding that protected characteristics reflect persistent social disadvantages affecting people and also inequality can be imbedded in institutional practice.
2. **Challenging Bias:** Combating discrimination such as racism, sexism, and homophobia.
3. **Active Engagement:** Challenging negative stereotypes and not just valuing diversity.
4. **Individual Treatment:** Recognizing that students with similar characteristics may experience disadvantage differently and should be treated as individuals.
5. **Universal Diversity:** Acknowledging that diversity affects all students, with everyone's experiences shaped by factors like race, class, gender, and disability.
6. **Curriculum Integration:** Ensuring diverse experiences inform curriculum design, making it central, not additional.
7. **Recognizing Other Differences:** Considering factors like study mode and entry qualifications that impact learning.

Championing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity

Inclusivity in higher education requires:

- **Protection:** Safeguarding against discrimination in the classroom.
- **Learning and Advocacy:** Understanding EDI to challenge discrimination and support underrepresented groups.
- **Addressing Power Dynamics:** Uncovering hidden power structures in the curriculum and teaching environments.
- **Beyond Legal Requirements:** Intersectionality, the impact of a multiplicity of issues. Additionally, recognizing additional characteristics, such as ethnicity, classes and cultural heritage, that influence student experiences.

Terms

- **Underrepresented Students:** A group of learners is underrepresented in relation to certain characteristics (e.g., gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socio-economic background, ethnicity) if its share among students is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total population. This can be documented at admission, during studies, or at graduation. Individuals often have multiple underrepresented characteristics, necessitating consideration of intersectionality. Underrepresentation can impact various levels of higher education, from study programs to entire institutions.
- **Disadvantaged Students:** Disadvantaged students face specific challenges compared to their peers in higher education. This can include disability, low family income, migrant status, lack of family support, orphan status, frequent school moves, mental health issues, pregnancy, or the need to work or perform caregiving duties. Disadvantages may be permanent, intermittent, or temporary. Disadvantaged students can be part of an underrepresented group but are not necessarily synonymous.
- **Vulnerable Students:** Vulnerable students may be at risk of disadvantage and have special protection needs. This can be due to illness (including mental health), disability, minor status, residency permit conditions, or risk of discrimination. These learners may

not be able to ensure their well-being or protect themselves from harm or exploitation and therefore need additional support or attention.

Principles, Objectives, and Goals

Principles

- **Inclusivity and Equity as Priorities:** In the Digital4Business Consortium and its Master program, we prioritize inclusivity and equity, integrating them into the core of our higher education strategies.
- **Alignment of Goals with Social Targets:** Clear goals aligned with social dimension targets ensure our efforts are focused and effective, while engaging all stakeholders fosters collective responsibility.
- **Comprehensive Equity Policies:** Equity policies are not confined to specific levels but permeate across all education stages, providing lifelong pathways for learning and education.
- **Sustainable Funding for Diversity Initiatives:** Ensuring sustainable funding is essential to support the ongoing diversity and equity efforts within our institutions, guaranteeing the longevity and effectiveness of our initiatives.

Objectives

- **Promoting Multilingualism:** Our objective is to foster inclusivity by promoting multilingualism, enabling learners to embrace and benefit from Europe's rich cultural diversity.
- **Supporting Teachers in Managing Diversity:** Enhanced support for teachers in managing diversity enhances the quality of education, particularly for students with migrant backgrounds.
- **Cultivating a European Perspective:** Introducing a European perspective in education cultivates critical thinking and nurtures an understanding of European values.
- **Creating Safe Educational Environments:** We are committed to creating safe educational environments that are free from discrimination, ensuring equal access to education for all individuals.
- **Focus on Gender Equality:** Gender equality is a tangible objective, focusing on challenging stereotypes, fostering respect, and achieving gender balance in leadership positions.

Goals

- **Promotion of Equality and Diversity:** We strive to promote equality and diversity within our own organization, serving as a beacon of inclusivity.
- **Achieving Gender Balance and Accessibility:** Our goals include achieving gender balance among students and ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities, reflecting our commitment to diversity and inclusion.
- **Fostering an Inclusive Culture:** We aim to foster an inclusive culture that supports gender equality for all staff and students, identifying and addressing barriers to career progression for underrepresented groups.

- **Implementation of Targeted Actions:** From adopting a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination to ensuring a fully accessible workplace, we are dedicated to creating an environment that values and promotes diversity at all levels.

Curriculum and Inclusive Language

To integrate Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) into the curriculum, The consortium will ensure that course materials reflect diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Include contributions from various identities and communities in readings and case studies. Encourage students to share their own experiences, integrating them into discussions and assignments. Use inclusive, non-discriminatory language in all materials and communications, and provide diverse visual representations to resonate with all students.

Teaching, Learning, and Accessibility

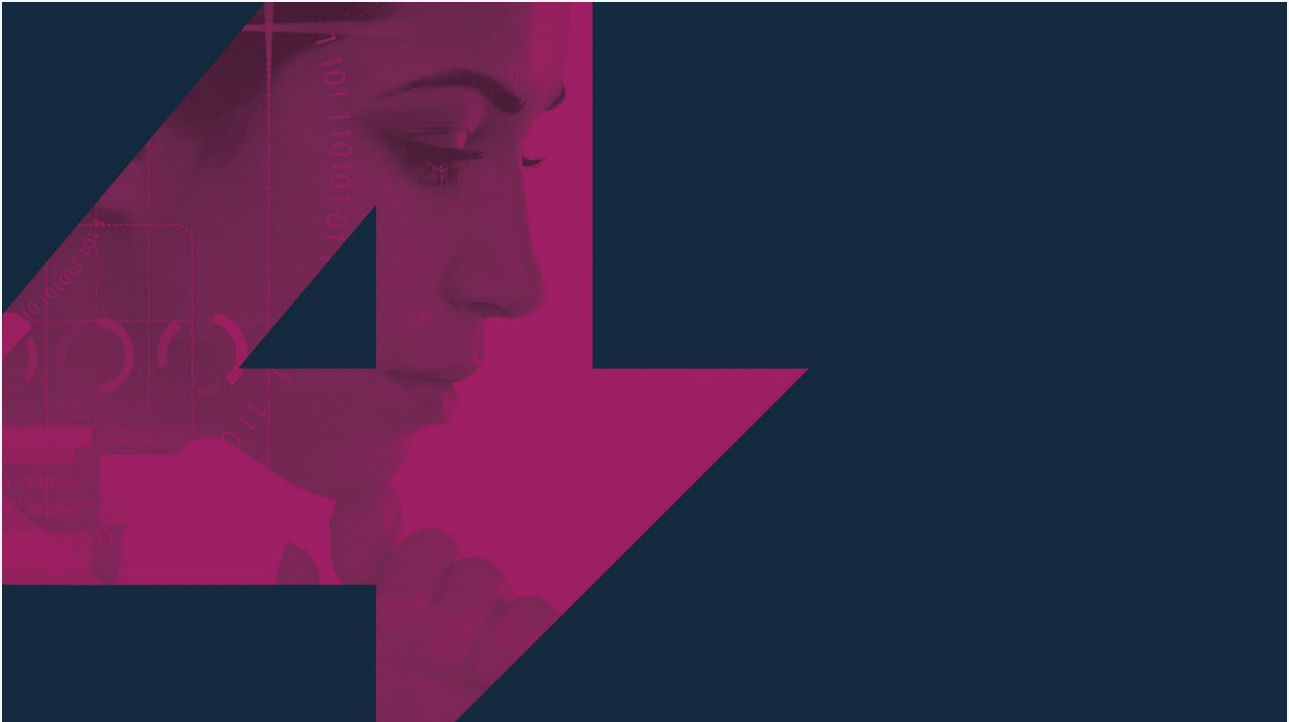
Adopt teaching methods that address the diverse needs and experiences of students. Facilitate group work that brings together individuals from different backgrounds, ensuring inclusivity. Make reasonable adjustments to accommodate students with disabilities and different learning preferences. Use various participation methods, such as discussions and project work, and provide lecture notes in advance to support all students. Adhere to best practices regarding accessibility. Create a supportive environment by actively listening, respecting student identities, and fostering a sense of belonging.

Assessment

Design assessments to provide equal opportunities for all students, ensuring they are free from bias. Offer flexibility in assessment topics to allow students to draw from their experiences and perspectives. Use multiple formats for the same assessment to cater to different needs and learning styles. Incorporate real-life diversity and inclusion scenarios in assessments to encourage critical engagement and reward evidence-based diverse perspectives.

Communication

To support the dissemination of EDI policies and raise awareness, Digital4Business engages in communication activities. The EDI Board will establish mechanisms to seek feedback from staff and non-staff personnel through the Global Staff Survey and real-time polls. These activities include workshops, training sessions, and dialogue sessions on issues such as harassment, supported by reporting and resolution mechanisms to ensure a respectful and inclusive environment.



Framework for EDI Integration in Digital4Business Consortium and Master Program

Capacity Building and Awareness

- **EDI Training:** Provide comprehensive EDI training sessions for Consortium partners, teachers, and educators to enhance awareness and understanding of EDI principles and practices.
- **Representation:** Ensure adequate representation of EDI topics within the Consortium and integrate them into the Master program curriculum to foster inclusive learning environments.

2. Assessment and Feedback

- **Surveys:** Conduct regular surveys among Consortium members to gather feedback and insights on current EDI practices, challenges, and areas for improvement.

3. Platform Accessibility and Safety

- **Platform Testing:** Incorporate EDI considerations into platform testing, focusing on accessibility aspects to ensure that the Digital4Business platform is usable by individuals

with diverse backgrounds and disabilities. Follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 standards.

- **Accessibility Checker:** Utilize tools like [Accessibility Checker](#) for ADA & WCAG compliance to ensure the Platform meets accessibility standards.

4. EDI to Guarantee Safe Environments: Implement EDI measures to guarantee safe environments within the Consortium and Master program, addressing issues such as sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination.

- Appoint a designated person for students and consortium partners who will be available for advising on EDI questions, addressing any form of discrimination, and promoting EDI values and principles.

5. Visibility and Communication

- **EDI Visibility:** Create an EDI section on the Digital4Business website and Moodle platform, showcasing EDI content, resources, and initiatives to enhance visibility and awareness.
- **Communication:** Keep EDI issues at the forefront of communication efforts within the Consortium, emphasizing the importance of diversity and inclusion in all activities and initiatives.

6. Student Representation and Support

- **Youth Representative:** Appoint a young person as a youth representative with decision-making power within the Steering Committee, ensuring that student voices are heard and considered in EDI-related decisions. They will be supported by the Consortium members.
- **Financial Support:** Anticipate financial support for 100 students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those affected by war, disabilities, and socio-economic challenges. Develop a transparent process for scholarship selection and distribution.

7. Task Forces and Guidelines

- **Task Forces:** Establish task forces to monitor platform accessibility and develop inclusive teaching practices.
- **Guidelines:** Develop comprehensive guidelines for trainers, teachers, and content creators on inclusive teaching practices, creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all stakeholders.

8. European Student Card Integration

- **ESC Integration:** Enable Digital4Business students to benefit from the European Student Card (ESC) system, simplifying student mobility in Europe and providing access to on- and off-campus services.

Scholarships for Inclusive Access

As a concrete expression of these EDI commitments, the Digital4Business consortium offers 100 fully funded scholarships supporting access to the Joint European Master's in Advanced Digital Technologies for Business. The scholarships are targeted at disadvantaged, underrepresented, and vulnerable groups, in line with the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) framework, and are awarded on the basis of EDI criteria rather than academic merit. Eligible applicants are assessed across three EDI categories: socioeconomic status (including unemployed individuals, low-income students, students under the age of 25, and first-generation students); underrepresented groups (women in male-dominated Tech and STEM fields, and persons with disabilities); and geographic diversity, supporting citizens of Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Slovakia, Greece, Germany, Slovenia, and Latvia.

Legal Disclaimer

This call (as well as the financial support that will be provided through it) is NOT an EU action. This call is launched solely by Digital4Business consortium (D4B). The financial support to the selected successful applicants will be provided directly by the Digital4Business consortium in its own name and under its own responsibility. D4B's own responsibility includes the preparation and drafting of this call as well as the selection of successful applicants that will receive the said financial support. The publication of this call in the EU Funding & Tenders Portal is made solely for information purposes with the aim to increase the visibility of this call to the general public, including to potential applicants (i.e. students). The said publication shall not be construed as direct or indirect approval of the content and conditions of this call by the relevant EU authorities or as any form of waiver from the above-described responsibility of D4B.

8. Cross-Cutting Actions

- **Management Support:** Provide support for managers in promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace.
- **Recruitment Strategies:** Increase staff diversity through targeted recruitment strategies and outreach efforts.
- **Learning Offer:** Develop a diversity and inclusion learning offer for managers, HR professionals, and all staff members.
- **Communication:** Maintain communication and awareness-raising efforts on EDI issues, ensuring that diversity and inclusion remain a priority within the Consortium.

Through these concrete actions, the Digital4Business Consortium and Master Program demonstrate their commitment to integrating EDI principles and practices into all aspects of their operations and initiatives.

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Digital **4** Business

Evolving your digital future

