



## Stream Title:

### Re-thinking Inclusion in Higher Education and Future Inclusion in New Worlds of Work for People with Disabilities

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#### Stream Outline

##### Introduction

In 2025, we are facing more than ever threats to Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI), and as academics aspiring towards a progressive University capable of including all stakeholders, we must also critically assess where we are when it comes to Students With Disabilities (SWDs) and the pathways leading them to future employment in organizations. As part of the 2025 EDI conference's central objective – to expand knowledge on DEI and to understand if “the future of work will be inclusive”, our stream explores the ever-changing dynamics of inclusion for SWDs in Universities and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in the workplace.

It is crucial to understand the particular challenges faced today by organizations of all types as they seek to remain inclusive of all forms of disability despite the current anti-DEI backlash which conflates DEI initiatives with the catch-all concept of ‘wokeism’ and misrepresents the hard-won successes that organizations have implemented to better include disabled workers (Dhanani et al., 2024; Follmer et al., 2024; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Prasad & Śliwa, 2024). In this current anti-DEI landscape, we invite papers that explore how PWDs experience both opportunities and barriers in their educational and professional lives--and beyond. We are also keen to explore collectively how organizations can and do create all-encompassing work environments that prioritise innovative approaches for accommodations; e.g. assistive technologies for neurodivergent individuals, or inclusive pedagogy and training that better includes and supports PWDs.



## **Higher Education and Disability Inclusion**

Despite considerable growth of SWDs entering HEIs in recent years (Kimball et al., 2016), and 184 countries ratifying the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) by 2022 (OHCHR, 2022), there remain myriad challenges. In fact, disability inclusion in higher education has emerged as a critical area of inquiry, particularly against the backdrop of global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed and exacerbated not only HEI-related issues such as drops in enrolment and degree attainment but also laid bare the many systemic inequities that certain students face. Even though PWDs constitute approximately 16% of the global population (WHO, 2011; 2023), they consistently encounter disproportionate barriers to accessing equitable educational and professional opportunities (Eurostat, 2014; Goodall, 2022; Morina & Biagiotti, 2022). As microcosms of society, HEIs are uniquely positioned to address these disparities. Their role extends beyond education to include modelling and shaping inclusive economic and social practices that can later be adopted in workplaces (Lipka, Forkosh-Baruch, & Meer, 2019). Despite this potential, many organisations remain rife with systemic ableism, where inclusion is often addressed superficially or reduced to token efforts that fail to confront structural barriers comprehensively (Osuna-Juárez & González-Castellano, 2024).

## **Accessibility Beyond Physical Barriers**

The concept of accessibility within organisations remains complex and contested. It is often narrowly understood as addressing physical or architectural barriers (López Gavira & Morriña 2015; Odame et al., 2019; Vornholt et al., 2018), while overlooking social, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions (Henly & Brucker, 2020; Mutanga 2018; Strnadová, Hájková, & Kvetonová, 2015). Nevertheless, inclusive practices are gaining traction as a transformative approach, challenging traditional norms by encouraging organisations to eliminate barriers and create opportunities for participation (Gibson and Cook-Sather, 2020; Gorard et al., 2019). For example, inclusive pedagogy emphasises the need to recognise and accommodate diversity among students rather than applying uniform teaching methods (Gale et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2009; Prieto-Alvarez et al., 2018; Myronova et al. 2021). Additionally, assistive technologies have shown promise in promoting independence and participation for PWDs by facilitating access to information and communication (National Academy of Science, 2017). Despite great technological advancements, true inclusivity remains a multifaceted challenge that requires critical exploration of deeper intersectional and structural dynamics within organisations.

## **Intersectionality and Marginalisation**

Intersectional Theory emerged from Black feminist and Critical Race Theory to offer a framework for understanding how overlapping identity categories such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and disability compound processes of marginalization. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991; 2020) demonstrated how US institutions had historically framed identities in mutually exclusive ways that eventually silenced and erased Black women. By all accounts, women and women of colour with disabilities often navigate dual (or triple) discrimination, facing both gendered or ethnic expectations and ableist norms (Dobusch & Kriessi, 2020). These



compounded experiences of marginalization necessitate some unpacking to elaborate more nuanced approaches to inclusion that address the intersectional experience of PWDs and other stakeholders in organizations. It is important to understand through the work of this stream how different country and cultural environments develop divergent conceptualizations of disability inclusion, and how their foundational assumptions can lead to different inclusion policies and end results. S  pulchre (2023: p. 362) found for example in her empirical comparison of American HEIs to Swedish ones that the Americans

*...tended to consider disability in terms of barriers and as a structural issue and advocated for the recognition of **disability as diversity**. By contrast, the Swedish participants seemed further away from an intersectional praxis because they tended to view **disability as a difficulty** that requires individualised support measures and as a situational issue regarding the learning environment.*

Intersectional analyses are essential for designing policies that understand diversity and inequality as “...contested fields where a galaxy of different actors....play a critical role in mobilizing workers’ social differences” (Alberti & Ianuzzi, 2020: p. 2). In other words, the power of organizations to meaningfully include PWDs is not just in the hands of HR managers and DEI officers. It is also shared by persons with disabilities who may, in certain contexts and cases, deploy their agency to mobilize their intersecting identities (age, ability, gender, ethnicity) to contest or draw attention to power asymmetries.

This is particularly crucial in HEIs, where young people should be empowered to begin their professional journeys in an environment of support; yet we can also acknowledge that HEIs are precisely where many entrenched structural inequalities can be robustly identified and challenged.

### **Challenges and Future Directions**

Despite advancements in accessibility policies, organisations face persistent challenges in creating truly inclusive environments for SWDs. Structural ableism, compounded by a lack of intersectional awareness, also contributes to the experience of marginalization that most PWDs experience (Gibson & Cook-Sather, 2020). Sachs and Schreuer (2011) underscore the importance of developing policies and programs that address these barriers comprehensively, including training to foster an organisational culture of inclusion.

Innovative and assisted technologies offer potential solutions (Fern  ndez-Batanero et al., 2022; McNicholl et al., 2021; Walstra & Chukwuma, 2023) but require thoughtful implementation to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities. In addition, innovations in pedagogical design can provide one productive pathway towards better inclusion of PWDs and a greater variety of learners in general. If we are to broaden the participation of individuals in organizations through disability inclusion policy, more emphasis should be placed on the adoption of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Meyer & Rose, 2006 ; Rao et al., 2014) which can be deployed as a mechanism for initiating socially just changes in higher education for SWDs (Liasidou, 2014). Further research is also needed to explore how the three pillars of UDL--i.e. psycho-neurological networks that underpin effective learning including affective networks, recognition networks, and strategic networks--specifically apply to classroom and training room settings involving PWDs (Sewell et al., 2022). Such understandings can help us better identify the factors



influencing PWDs' willingness to seek accommodations. Given the above developments, this stream calls for work from scholars who seek to share their empirical, conceptual, epistemological and ontological insights from both quantitative and qualitative traditions. We call for contributions to a deeper understanding of disability inclusion and inform the development of policies and practices that advance equity and representation for PWDs. We are interested in a range of work that will address the following topics, including, but not limited to:

1. How can contemporary organizations (e.g. companies, non-profits, or HEIs) best address the unique challenges faced by individuals with visible and invisible disabilities, and how can innovative policies better reflect their needs?
2. What sorts of scholarship on workplace disability inclusion can reflect what Ana L. Oliveira, President of the New York Women's Foundation who is also disabled, [describes as the need](#) to transition away "...from an ableist standard to an inclusive standard—not making *accommodations*, but instead creating *shared definitions of talent*" ?
3. How can companies, HEIs, and non-profits organize collectively to resist the current backlash against and dismantling of DEI policies and practices? How can coalitions form to better support and advocate for the unique needs of PWDs throughout their educational and/or professional journeys?
4. How can intersectional analysis and theory help us better understand the lived experiences of PWDs across organizational settings, whether combined with gender, race, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation and gender identity?
5. How is ableism expressed and understood in organizations vis-à-vis disability inclusion? How can PWDs contest, resist, challenge, or re-organize power dynamics when it comes to facing institutional and corporate administrations, management, and colleagues?
6. How have shifts in recent teaching and learning practices affected the accessibility and inclusion of SWDs? How does technology help or hinder the inclusion of SWDs? What sort of unintended consequences have been documented when it comes to technology and SWDs?
7. What role can inclusive pedagogy play in addressing systemic ableism in HEIs, and how can it be integrated into faculty training programs?
8. How can the adoption of recent trends in inclusive pedagogy, e.g. *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* serve to mobilise social change, shifts in mental models of curricular development, and greater equity for SWDs (and all students) in HEIs? How can existing pedagogical practices be 'retrofitted' to apply the core principles of UDL in classroom settings involving SWDs? How can assistive technologies, AI Agents, or other human-enhancing technologies aid be effectively implemented to promote autonomy and participation among PWDs How can they counter and resist the perpetuation of existing inequalities?
9. What strategies can HEIs and companies adopt to foster a culture of disability disclosure where students and workers are encouraged to come forth with their needs? How can policymakers craft and elaborate new approaches that balance privacy and support?
10. How do students with disabilities identify their strengths, interests and aspirations to plan their careers? How do HEIs ensure the alignment between career aspirations of students with disabilities and labour



market needs? How do HEIs support students with disabilities in the transition to meaningful and sustainable employment post-graduation?

11. How can potential employers engage with SWDs prior to completion of studies via university administrations/inclusion officers and other intermediaries? How can disabled employees mentor students transitioning to the job search and early career phases of life?
12. How can PWDs overcome perceived stigma and prejudice they may face with employers, managers, and colleagues?
13. What issues specifically impact and influence the organizational lived experience of PWDs?
14. How do different contexts (country and culture) comprehend and design disability inclusion, and how do their foundational assumptions lead to different inclusion policies and intended/unintended outcomes?

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