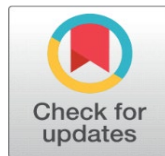


EXPLORING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF MARGINALIZED LEARNERS TO ENRICH ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS IN FOSTERING HOLISTIC EDUCATION AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The intensifying diversification of contemporary higher education has generated an urgent pedagogical and ethical imperative to reconceptualise inclusion beyond the reductive logic of accommodation and institutional tokenism. Universities increasingly engage with learners situated across multiple axes of marginalization, including socio-economic precarity, racial and ethnic exclusion, linguistic displacement, disability, neurodiversity, forced migration, and first-generation educational trajectories. Yet, despite the democratization of access, higher education institutions frequently continue to reproduce epistemic hierarchies, cultural hegemonies, and structurally exclusionary pedagogical practices that privilege dominant modes of knowledge production and participation.

This article critically interrogates inclusive educational practices capable of cultivating transformative and holistic learning environments within tertiary education. Drawing selectively upon Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogical orientation, the study argues that meaningful inclusion necessitates dialogic, context-sensitive, and socially emancipatory educational frameworks that challenge institutional inequities while validating learner agency and plurality. Particular attention is devoted to culturally responsive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as foundational paradigms for equitable educational transformation. The discussion further examines equity-oriented institutional policies, disability inclusion frameworks, trauma-informed educational systems, collaborative pedagogical ecosystems, inclusive curriculum design, and faculty professionalization initiatives.

The article contends that inclusive tertiary education must transcend procedural compliance and instead pursue systemic restructuring grounded in equity, accessibility, democratic participation, representation, critical consciousness, and belongingness. Ultimately, holistic education within higher education can only be meaningfully realized when universities cultivate culturally sustaining, emotionally affirming, technologically accessible, and socially just academic environments capable of fostering both intellectual empowerment and human emancipation.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Tertiary Education, Marginalized Learners, Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Social Emotional Learning, Equity, Holistic Education, Critical Pedagogy, Post-Method Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary university exists within an increasingly complex socio-cultural, technological, and geopolitical landscape characterized by accelerated globalization, transnational mobility, digital transformation, and expanding educational participation. Consequently, tertiary institutions now accommodate learners representing heterogeneous linguistic, cultural, cognitive, economic, and psychosocial realities. These populations include historically marginalized

groups such as ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, refugees, first-generation learners, economically disadvantaged students, neurodiverse individuals, and students with disabilities. However, the expansion of access has not necessarily translated into substantive educational equity. Instead, higher education institutions frequently continue to reproduce systemic asymmetries embedded within dominant epistemological, linguistic, and institutional structures.

Traditional university systems were historically constructed upon standardized pedagogical paradigms privileging Eurocentric epistemologies, normative cognitive models, and culturally dominant forms of academic participation. Such educational architectures often marginalize alternative ways of knowing, being, and learning, thereby perpetuating symbolic exclusion and institutional alienation. Emerging scholarship increasingly demonstrates that exclusionary academic environments adversely affect learner engagement, emotional well-being, academic persistence, and institutional belongingness (Jackson-Summers et al., 2024).

Within this context, inclusive education has evolved from a compensatory framework into a transformative educational philosophy committed to dismantling structural inequities and democratizing academic participation. Simultaneously, holistic education foregrounds the multidimensional development of learners by integrating intellectual, emotional, ethical, cultural, and social growth. The convergence of these paradigms necessitates a pedagogical shift from transmissive models of instruction toward dialogic, participatory, and contextually responsive educational practices.

In this regard, Paulo Freire's conception of critical pedagogy becomes particularly relevant. Freire critiques the "banking model" of education in which learners are reduced to passive recipients of knowledge and instead advocates dialogic pedagogies capable of fostering critical consciousness. Inclusive tertiary education, therefore, cannot merely provide access; it must enable learners to interrogate structures of domination, reclaim marginalized epistemologies, and participate actively in knowledge production. Likewise, Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy challenge universalized instructional prescriptions and emphasizes pedagogical particularity, practicality, and possibility, thereby foregrounding the necessity of context-sensitive and culturally negotiated educational practices within diverse tertiary environments.

This article critically examines inclusive practices capable of addressing the multidimensional needs of marginalized learners while simultaneously enriching academic environments through holistic educational transformation.

2. INCLUSIVE AND HOLISTIC EDUCATION IN TERTIARY CONTEXTS

Inclusive education within higher education refers to the deliberate creation of institutional environments that ensure accessibility, participation, representation, equity, and belongingness irrespective of learners' socio-cultural, linguistic, economic, cognitive, physical, or psychological differences. Holistic education, conversely, seeks the comprehensive development of learners through intellectual inquiry, ethical reflection, emotional well-being, social engagement, and intercultural understanding.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that inclusion extends far beyond physical access or procedural accommodation. It encompasses emotional safety, curricular representation, democratic participation, institutional responsiveness, and epistemic justice. Universities implementing inclusive pedagogical frameworks frequently report improvements in learner engagement, retention, collaborative participation, and academic achievement (Jackson-Summers et al., 2024). More significantly, tertiary institutions occupy a crucial role in cultivating critically conscious citizens capable of functioning within pluralistic democratic societies.

From a Freirean perspective, inclusive education must resist depoliticized notions of neutrality by recognizing education as an inherently ideological and transformative process. Inclusion therefore becomes inseparable from questions of power, voice, representation, and social justice. Similarly, Kumaravadivelu's post-method orientation reinforces the inadequacy of universal pedagogical prescriptions in culturally diverse educational settings, emphasizing instead locally responsive and learner-centered pedagogical negotiation.

3. CORE INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

1) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) recognizes learners' cultural identities, linguistic repertoires, lived experiences, and community epistemologies as legitimate and indispensable components of the educational process. Within tertiary education, CRP challenges monocultural curricular traditions and epistemological hierarchies that frequently marginalize diverse student populations.

Culturally responsive educational practices promote:

- Integration of multicultural perspectives within curricula
- Recognition of indigenous and localized epistemologies
- Linguistic inclusivity and multilingual engagement
- Dialogic and participatory classroom environments
- Context-sensitive pedagogical practices
- Critical interrogation of systemic inequalities

Recent scholarship indicates that culturally responsive pedagogies substantially strengthen learner engagement, academic participation, and institutional belongingness among refugee learners, international students, and minority populations (Bilic, Hetz, & Allain, 2025).

Such approaches additionally mitigate stereotype threat, cultural alienation, and symbolic exclusion experienced by marginalized learners. The Freirean pedagogical emphasis upon dialogue and learner voice resonates strongly with culturally responsive teaching, particularly in its rejection of authoritarian instructional models. Likewise, Kumaravadivelu's principle of pedagogical particularity reinforces the necessity of designing educational practices responsive to local socio-cultural realities rather than relying upon homogenized instructional methodologies.

By legitimizing diverse identities and knowledge systems, culturally sustaining pedagogies cultivate academic confidence and encourage learners to participate actively within intellectual discourse communities.

2) Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has emerged as one of the most influential paradigms within inclusive higher education. Rather than depending upon reactive accommodations, UDL advocates proactively designing educational environments capable of addressing learner variability from the outset.

The framework is grounded in three foundational principles:

- Multiple means of representation
- Multiple means of engagement
- Multiple means of action and expression

UDL=Representation+Engagement+Expression

The increasing diversification of student populations and the expansion of digital learning ecosystems have intensified the significance of UDL within tertiary contexts. Research demonstrates that UDL strengthens accessibility, learner autonomy, and participation among diverse student groups, including neurodiverse learners and students with disabilities (Zhang et al., 2024).

Examples of UDL implementation within higher education include:

- Captioned and recorded lectures
- Flexible assignment structures
- Accessible digital learning materials
- Screen-reader-compatible resources
- Multimedia instructional content
- Alternative assessment formats
- Self-paced learning modules

Digital technologies further enhance UDL implementation through adaptive learning systems, accessible online platforms, and personalized educational interfaces (Veytia Bucheli et al., 2024). Nevertheless, persistent barriers include

technological inequities, insufficient faculty preparedness, infrastructural limitations, and institutional resistance to pedagogical transformation (Zhang et al., 2024).

From a post-method perspective, UDL exemplifies pedagogical flexibility by recognizing learner diversity as foundational rather than exceptional. Its emphasis upon multiple pathways to participation aligns with broader democratic and emancipatory educational objectives.

3) Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction (DI) involves adapting instructional content, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, and learning environments according to learners' readiness levels, interests, cultural locations, and cognitive profiles.

Within tertiary education, differentiated instruction recognizes that learners enter universities with unequal access to academic preparation, technological literacy, linguistic competence, and institutional capital. Inclusive university classrooms therefore employ differentiated pedagogical strategies through:

- Flexible grouping practices
- Scaffolded learning activities
- Alternative assessment structures
- Project-based and experiential learning
- Peer-assisted instructional models
- Diverse instructional modalities

Research identifies significant conceptual intersections between UDL and differentiated instruction in fostering equitable and learner-centered educational environments (Cardoso Villacorta & Villafuerte Alvarez, 2024). Differentiated pedagogical approaches particularly benefit first-generation learners, multilingual students, learners with disabilities, and students emerging from historically disadvantaged educational systems.

Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy becomes particularly salient here, as differentiated instruction necessitates pedagogical adaptability responsive to specific classroom ecologies rather than rigid adherence to predetermined methods. Such flexibility enables educators to negotiate learning processes collaboratively with students while strengthening learner autonomy and academic engagement.

4) Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has acquired increasing significance within higher education due to escalating concerns regarding student mental health, discrimination, social isolation, identity-based marginalization, and academic anxiety.

SEL promotes competencies such as:

- Self-awareness
- Emotional regulation
- Empathy and compassion
- Relationship-building
- Responsible decision-making
- Psychological resilience

Inclusive SEL initiatives within universities frequently include:

- Trauma-informed pedagogical practices
- Peer mentoring systems
- Mental health counselling services
- Anti-discrimination and anti-bullying initiatives
- Restorative disciplinary frameworks
- Emotional wellness programs

Marginalized learners frequently carry psychological burdens associated with poverty, exclusion, displacement, institutional alienation, and structural discrimination. Consequently, emotionally supportive academic environments substantially contribute to holistic learner development and educational persistence.

Research suggests that supportive institutional climates improve learner retention, social integration, and academic achievement (Jackson-Summers et al., 2024). Freire's insistence upon humanization within educational practice further underscores the ethical necessity of emotionally affirming pedagogical environments that recognize learners not merely as academic subjects but as complex social beings situated within unequal material realities.

5) Personalized Learning, Collaborative Teaching Teams, and Technology Integration

Personalized Learning

Personalized learning adapts instructional experiences according to learners' strengths, aspirations, competencies, and support requirements. Contemporary universities increasingly employ adaptive learning technologies capable of facilitating individualized learning pathways, personalized feedback systems, and learner autonomy.

Such approaches strengthen self-directed learning, academic confidence, engagement, and educational inclusion while simultaneously resisting homogenizing pedagogical structures.

Collaborative Teaching Teams

Inclusive tertiary education increasingly depends upon multidisciplinary collaboration among faculty members, counsellors, psychologists, special educators, disability support professionals, academic advisors, families, and community organizations. Collaborative educational ecosystems reduce institutional fragmentation and facilitate coordinated learner support structures.

Technology Integration

Technology functions as a powerful equalizing mechanism within inclusive higher education through assistive technologies, AI-based adaptive learning systems, accessible digital platforms, speech-to-text software, and virtual collaboration tools. Emerging scholarship highlights that digital technologies significantly enhance inclusive learning environments within higher education institutions (Veytia Bucheli et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, critical pedagogical perspectives caution against technologically deterministic approaches that overlook socio-economic inequalities and digital exclusion. Inclusive technological integration must therefore remain ethically and contextually grounded.

4. ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF MARGINALIZED LEARNERS

1) Equity-Based Strategies

Equity-oriented education recognizes that learners require differentiated forms and levels of institutional support to achieve equitable outcomes. Unlike equality, which assumes identical treatment, equity acknowledges the structural disadvantages shaping learner experiences.

Equity-focused institutional practices include:

- Financial assistance initiatives
- Scholarships for underrepresented groups
- Bridge and transition programs
- Flexible admissions frameworks
- Academic mentoring systems
- Language support services
- Community outreach initiatives

Inclusive universities must additionally interrogate institutional mechanisms perpetuating inequities within admissions procedures, assessment systems, disciplinary structures, and classroom participation. Research on equitable teaching highlights the necessity of department-specific and data-driven interventions within higher education contexts (Soicher, Baker, & Thomas, 2024).

Freirean critical pedagogy further suggests that equity cannot remain confined to compensatory support systems; rather, institutions must interrogate the socio-political structures reproducing educational marginalization itself.

2) Disability Inclusion

Disability inclusion remains central to inclusive tertiary education. Historically, students with disabilities encountered inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes, and exclusionary pedagogical practices within universities.

Contemporary inclusive frameworks advocate:

- Accessible campus infrastructure
- Assistive technologies
- Inclusive digital learning environments
- Flexible assessment practices
- Sign language interpretation services
- Co-teaching models
- Universal accessibility standards

Research demonstrates that UDL significantly strengthens accessibility and participation among students with disabilities (Zhang et al., 2024). Disability inclusion additionally requires dismantling ableist assumptions embedded within institutional cultures and dominant academic norms.

3) Addressing Behavioural and Psychological Needs

Marginalized learners frequently experience behavioural and psychological challenges emerging from trauma, discrimination, social exclusion, economic precarity, and academic pressure. Traditional punitive disciplinary systems often disproportionately affect vulnerable student populations and reinforce institutional alienation.

Inclusive universities therefore increasingly adopt:

- Trauma-informed educational frameworks
- Positive behavioural support systems
- Restorative justice practices
- Mental health counselling services
- Peer support initiatives
- Conflict mediation programs

These approaches facilitate a transition from punitive institutional cultures toward empathetic, relational, and restorative educational environments grounded in care and human dignity.

5. FOSTERING A HOLISTIC INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

1) Collaborative Ecosystems

Inclusive higher education necessitates sustained collaboration among faculty members, students, policymakers, disability support services, mental health professionals, families, and community organizations. Such collaborative ecosystems strengthen institutional responsiveness to learner diversity and foster collective responsibility for educational inclusion.

Universities engaging meaningfully with local communities and advocacy organizations often develop more socially responsive and contextually relevant academic cultures.

2) Curriculum Design

Inclusive curriculum design extends beyond symbolic representation toward the substantive integration of diverse voices, histories, identities, and epistemologies.

Essential dimensions of inclusive curricula include:

- Decolonized knowledge frameworks
- Multicultural perspectives
- Interdisciplinary learning models
- Social justice education
- Flexible curricular pathways
- Representation of marginalized communities

Inclusive curricula enable learners to recognize their identities and lived experiences within academic discourse, thereby strengthening engagement and institutional belongingness.

Recent scholarship within inclusive science education further emphasizes the necessity of balancing disciplinary rigor with accessibility and learner participation (Lenzer et al., 2024). From a Freirean perspective, curriculum must function not merely as content transmission but as a dialogic space through which learners critically engage with social realities and structures of power.

3) Teacher Development and Professional Training

Faculty preparedness remains among the most significant determinants of successful inclusive tertiary education. Professional development initiatives should therefore emphasize:

- Inclusive pedagogical practices
- UDL implementation strategies
- Anti-bias education
- Cultural competence
- Trauma-informed teaching
- Digital accessibility
- Collaborative instructional practices

Research indicates that although many faculty members express support for inclusive education, they frequently lack sufficient institutional support and specialized training (Timuş et al., 2024). Continuous professional development consequently remains indispensable for sustaining inclusive academic cultures.

Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy additionally foregrounds teacher autonomy, reflective practice, and context-sensitive instructional decision-making, thereby positioning educators not as passive implementers of prescribed methodologies but as transformative intellectual practitioners.

6. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE TERTIARY EDUCATION

Despite increasing advocacy for educational inclusion, numerous challenges continue to obstruct transformative reform within higher education institutions. These include:

- Insufficient funding and resource allocation
- Limited faculty training opportunities
- Technological inequities and digital divides
- Institutional resistance to reform
- Policy-practice inconsistencies
- Overcrowded learning environments
- Persistent social discrimination
- Inadequate accessibility infrastructure

Furthermore, many institutions adopt inclusion rhetorically without pursuing substantive structural transformation. Critical educational scholars argue that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved without confronting broader socio-economic inequities, institutional power asymmetries, and epistemological exclusions embedded within higher education systems.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen inclusive and holistic tertiary education, universities should:

- 1) Develop institution-wide inclusive education policies grounded in equity and social justice.
- 2) Expand digital accessibility infrastructure and assistive technologies.
- 3) Strengthen mental health and counselling services.
- 4) Promote culturally responsive and decolonized curricular frameworks.
- 5) Invest in sustained faculty professional development focused on inclusive pedagogy.
- 6) Establish collaborative multidisciplinary learner-support ecosystems.
- 7) Ensure universally accessible physical and digital learning environments.
- 8) Encourage participatory governance involving marginalized communities.
- 9) Implement flexible and inclusive assessment frameworks.
- 10) Promote research-driven innovation in inclusive educational practices.
- 11) Foster dialogic pedagogical cultures that encourage critical consciousness and democratic participation.
- 12) Encourage context-sensitive pedagogical experimentation aligned with post-method educational principles.

8. CONCLUSION

Inclusive tertiary education represents not merely an administrative initiative but a transformative educational paradigm committed to dismantling structural inequities and fostering equitable, accessible, culturally sustaining, and democratically participatory academic environments. Educational practices such as culturally responsive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, and Social Emotional Learning significantly contribute to the multidimensional development of marginalized learners.

Holistic education within tertiary contexts extends beyond academic achievement to encompass emotional well-being, ethical consciousness, cultural affirmation, social participation, and critical democratic engagement. Universities embracing inclusive philosophies cultivate intellectually empowered, empathetic, resilient, and socially conscious graduates capable of contributing meaningfully to pluralistic societies.

Future reforms within higher education must therefore transcend performative inclusion and prioritize transformative institutional cultures that recognize diversity not as a deficit requiring accommodation, but as an epistemic and democratic strength enriching academic life itself. In alignment with Freire's emancipatory educational vision and Kumaravadivelu's post-method orientation, inclusive tertiary education must ultimately strive toward pedagogical spaces where learners become active co-constructors of knowledge, critical interpreters of social reality, and participants in the ongoing project of educational and social transformation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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