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Enhancing diversity and inclusion in tourism and events: strategies for Industry and Higher Education

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1. Introduction and Background

Diversity is a complex concept that includes various aspects of human differences. It refers to the presence of individuals from different social categories within a given context, including characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, and cultural values (Aitken, 2012). The concept has shifted from focusing on affirmative action to a more inclusive understanding. Diversity can be quantified using various indices and methodologies, and its applications span beyond biology to fields like linguistics, industrial concentration, and income inequality. In the digital age, diversity analysis has broadened to include image searches, context analysis, and bias detection (Zontone et al., 2009).

Diversity in tourism and events encompasses various aspects, including cultural, ethnic, gender, and disability considerations (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Ritchie, 2023). It is therefore important to promote inclusivity to attract a wider audience. According to Addo (2011), “cultural diversity, including European heritage and traditional festivities, is the cornerstone of tourism in countries like Ghana”. Cultural diversity is significant in economic, social, and cultural sustainability. It enhances innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic development. Diverse networks are strongly linked with economic prosperity in communities. Cultural diversity also contributes to richer ideas, skills, and perspectives, potentially sustaining economic growth through creativity-oriented policies. It provides economic benefits in production and dynamic demand for goods. However, diversity can present challenges, such as a lack of trust and conflict. To alleviate these issues, intercultural competence and social tolerance are crucial. Furthermore, embracing sociocultural diversity nurtures innovation, enhances cross-cultural connections, and strengthens sustainable economic development. Globalisation has also increased the need for effective diversity management in tourism businesses (Pourjam, 2020). Events are integral to tourism development, contributing significantly to economic activity and expansion. The tourism and events sectors face challenges in addressing diversity issues, especially in e-government services for major events such as the Hajj (Sehli et al., 2016). A study by EventMB indicated that 35-40% of events in 2020 did not have any black speakers on their panels (Inevent, 2021). This suggests that diverse communities are underrepresented in the events industry, depriving events of valuable insights, perspectives, and experiences.

To address some of the challenges in the events industry, the Berlin Convention Office's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) implemented measures such as inclusive registration processes, accessible communication, and diverse visual content to ensure that all participants feel valued and included (Berlin Convention Office, 2024). According to their

report, this has led to increased engagement and a positive atmosphere at their events. This demonstrates that diversity is crucial for the future of the tourism and events industry to create more just, equitable, and sustainable futures. Regardless of the above efforts, research suggests that inequality and marginalisation are still a continual concern based on gender, age, race, and disability in the industry (Dashper & Finkel, 2020). Moreover, Diversity management research in tourism trails behind business literature, with clear gaps in theory and workforce impact evidence (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017; Malik et al., 2017). It is quite evident that diversity and inclusion are fundamental to both the tourism and events industry. Thus, Higher Education (HE) has an important role to play in preparing future professionals with the skills and awareness needed to navigate diverse environments. By embedding diversity and inclusion into tourism and events education, universities can produce industry leaders who prioritise ethical and inclusive practices. This not only strengthens the industry's social and economic impact but also creates a more equitable and culturally rich society.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing rhetorical commitment to diversity and inclusion, substantial gaps remain between policy and practice in both the tourism and events industries and in HE. In tourism and events, underrepresentation of marginalised groups in leadership positions, speaker panels, and decision-making structures persists, even as destinations and organisations use diversity as a marketing asset. Structural barriers related to cost, discrimination, accessibility, and digital exclusion continue to constrain participation by lower-income groups, racialised communities, disabled people, and LGBTQ+ travellers. In higher education, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are recognised as ethical imperatives and drivers of institutional innovation. Nevertheless, many HEIs struggle to move beyond symbolic commitments towards systemic change. Persistent attainment gaps and the continued misalignment between curricula and the competencies required in contemporary workplaces demonstrate that current approaches remain inadequate.

Crucially, there is a lack of integrated analysis that connects diversity management in tourism and events with DEI strategies in higher education. This fragmentation obscures how HEIs shape the values, skills, and practices of future tourism and events professionals, and how industry developments should, in turn, inform curriculum design. There is also limited empirical and conceptual work that brings together organisational diversity theories, critical perspectives on inequality, and sector-specific evidence into a coherent framework. These challenges highlight the need for a structured inquiry, which is outlined in the research questions that follow.

1.2 Research Questions

To respond to the problem outlined above, this chapter is guided by the following research questions:

- How is diversity currently conceptualised and implemented in the tourism and events sectors?
- What challenges limit the achievement of diversity and inclusion within these industries?
- What role does higher education play in promoting D&I-related competencies for future professionals?
- What evidence-based strategies can organisations adopt to strengthen diversity and inclusion outcomes?

1.3 Research Gaps

Building on the challenges highlighted in the introduction, several specific research gaps emerge:

1. **Limited integration of sectoral perspectives.** There is a lack of integrative frameworks that connect diversity and inclusion in tourism and events with DEI strategies in HE. Existing scholarship tends to treat these domains separately, overlooking how HEIs shape the values, skills, and practices of future tourism and events professionals.
2. **Underdeveloped theoretical frameworks in tourism diversity management.** While the business literature offers a range of theories linking diversity management to organisational outcomes, tourism-specific frameworks remain underdeveloped (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017; Malik et al., 2017). There is limited work that combines workforce composition, leadership diversity, and inclusive event design within a single conceptual model.
3. **Insufficient empirical evidence on effective diversity strategies in tourism and events.** Although examples of good practice exist e.g. gender-balanced festival line-ups, inclusive speaker policies, and culturally inclusive campaigns, systematic evaluations of their impact on stakeholder experiences, organisational performance, and community outcomes are scarce.
4. **Limited exploration of technology's role in inclusion across both sectors.** While assistive technologies, AI translation tools, and digital learning platforms are recognised as powerful enablers, there is a need for more nuanced understanding of

how technology can both mitigate and reproduce inequalities in tourism, events, and HE.

5. **Lack of comparative and longitudinal case studies.** Case studies such as IMEX Group, the University of Michigan, and Kingston University show promising models of systemic DEI practice, but there is a need for more comparative, longitudinal analysis that examine how such initiatives evolve, scale, and transfer across contexts.

1.4 Contribution of This Chapter

This chapter responds to these gaps by offering an integrated, cross-sectoral analysis of diversity and inclusion in tourism, events, and higher education, with a particular focus on the role of HE in preparing future professionals for diverse and inclusive practice.

First, the chapter clarifies key concepts by distinguishing, yet connecting, diversity and inclusion in organisational settings. It emphasises diversity as representation and heterogeneity, and inclusion as the creation of environments where all individuals can participate fully and influence decision-making. This conceptual grounding informs subsequent discussion of tourism, events, and HE contexts.

Second, the chapter synthesises literature on the importance of diversity in tourism and events, including the shift towards authentic, immersive, and ethically informed travel experiences. It explores how diverse events, campaigns, and destinations attract global audiences while supporting cultural exchange, innovation, and sustainable development.

Third, the chapter critically examines the challenges and barriers to achieving diversity in tourism and events, including industry-level obstacles, economic and social inequalities, and persistent underrepresentation in festivals and major events. It links these challenges to broader organisational diversity management research to demonstrate how strategic approaches such as inclusive HR policies, leadership commitment, and comprehensive training can be adapted for tourism and events organisations.

Fourth, the chapter foregrounds the role of higher education in promoting diversity, both within universities and through curriculum and pedagogy in tourism and events programmes. By comparing sectoral approaches in HE and industry, it highlights misalignments and synergies and identifies opportunities for HEIs to better prepare students as inclusive practitioners and leaders.

Fifth, the chapter draws on detailed case studies to illustrate what effective, systemic DEI practice can look like in both industry and HE. The case studies provide concrete examples of how inclusion can be embedded across governance, operations, curriculum, and culture.

Sixth, the chapter proposes evidence-based strategies for embracing diversity in tourism and events, building on current research on diversity management and organisational performance. It outlines practical approaches such as comprehensive training, inclusive HR policies, leadership commitment, inclusive work environments, and robust monitoring and evaluation that tourism and events organisations can adopt or adapt.

Finally, the chapter looks ahead by considering future directions for HEIs and industry, including the use of technology for inclusion, the evolution of policies for long-term sustainability, the role of industry bodies and global collaborations, and the need for educational innovation, mentoring ecosystems, and civic engagement. In doing so, it offers a roadmap for aligning diversity management with broader goals of sustainability, digital transformation, and social justice.

2 Review of Literature

The existing literature on diversity relevant to this chapter can be grouped into three intersecting strands: diversity and inclusion in tourism and events; the importance of diversity in the tourism and events industry; and the challenges in achieving diversity in the tourism and events Industry.

2.1 Diversity and Inclusion in Tourism and Events

2.1.1 Defining diversity and inclusion in the tourism and events sectors

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are distinct, but these two concepts are interrelated in organisational settings. Diversity should be about people and their differences; it encompasses various social categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Thus, diversity focuses on the representation of different groups, and the emphasis should be on bringing together people with varied backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. It is, therefore, often expressed in proportions, indices, and legally driven agreements. On the other hand, inclusion can be viewed as the practice of creating an environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and able to contribute fully, regardless of their differences. It emphasises belonging, participation, and the redistribution of power through leadership and cultural practices. This involves creating systems, policies, and behaviours that ensure all people have equal opportunities to participate and thrive. While diversity efforts secure the presence of underrepresented groups, inclusion initiatives create the conditions for these groups and all organisational members to engage meaningfully. This suggests that diversity without inclusion may lead to a diverse group of people who still feel marginalised or excluded. In

contrast, inclusion without diversity can mean an environment that does not truly reflect the broader society. These two terms are key to promoting a fair, equitable, and thriving community or workplace.

2.2. The Importance of Diversity in Tourism and Events

2.2.1 The Shift Toward Authentic, Inclusive, and Diverse Travel

Tourists are now increasingly selecting authentic and immersive experiences over traditional tourism. Instead of simply visiting famous landmarks, they prefer engaging with local cultures, traditions, and lifestyles in meaningful ways. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2021), cultural immersion is a main factor influencing travel decisions, with tourists actively looking for opportunities to participate in traditional ceremonies, learn local crafts, and engage with host communities. One of the most significant drivers of this trend is social media and digital connectivity. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube expose tourists to a diverse array of global experiences, from indigenous-led tours to LGBTQ+-friendly destinations. Additionally, user-generated content and travel vlogs provide first-hand accounts of cultural experiences, inspiring others to seek similar adventures.

These digital platforms also enable tourists to support locally owned businesses, contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable tourism industry (Richards, 2018). In addition, the growing awareness of ethical and responsible travel further impacts these preferences. Therefore, tourists are now more conscious of the negative effects of mass tourism and actively look for experiences that encourage cultural exchange rather than exploitation (Gössling et al., 2019). As a result, homestays, language immersion programs, and sustainable tourism initiatives have gained popularity, allowing visitors to establish meaningful connections with local communities while preserving cultural heritage.

2.3 Enhancing Cultural Exchange and Enriching Travel Experiences

“The increasing emphasis on diversity in tourism encourages cultural exchange, which helps bridge gaps between communities and promotes global understanding and mutual respect”, (UNWTO, 2021). Instead of passive sightseeing, tourists now prefer interactive experiences that allow them to engage deeply with local customs, art, music, and history. These interactions can lead the tourists to a much greater cultural appreciation and personal enrichment. Participating in activities such as traditional festivals, cooking classes, and artisan workshops enables tourists to gain an understanding of the cultural values and history of the destinations they visit. They can also develop a broader worldview, challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about other cultures (Gössling et al., 2019). These benefits are not one-sided since local communities can also gain from cultural exchange. Tourism provides an

opportunity for communities to share and preserve their traditions while creating economic opportunities. According to UNWTO (2021), cultural tourism accounts for 40% of global tourism revenue, making it a vital economic driver in various regions. Guided tours, performances, and workshops not only provide income but also play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage for future generations.

2.4 Attracting Global Audiences with Diverse Events

Diversity in tourism is further promoted through festivals, exhibitions, and international conferences that celebrate different cultures and traditions. Events such as the Rio Carnival in Brazil, which merges Afro-Brazilian heritage with contemporary music and dance, attract millions of international visitors each year (UNWTO, 2021). Similarly, Lunar New Year celebrations in cities like Beijing, London, and San Francisco feature dragon dances, traditional foods, and cultural performances, drawing diverse audiences (Gössling et al., 2019). Diverse events broaden the appeal of destinations, making them attractive to tourists of different backgrounds, interests, and demographics. Events like Pride parades that champion LGBTQ+ inclusion, alongside film and literary festivals that spotlight underrepresented cultures, play a vital role in fostering more inclusive and globally appealing tourism. Destinations and tourism organisations have successfully embraced diversity and inclusion, leading to higher tourist engagement and positive social impact. Examples of Successful Diverse Tourism Campaigns or Events include:

I. “Everyone’s Welcome” – VisitBritain

VisitBritain launched the "Everyone’s Welcome" campaign to position the UK as an inclusive travel destination. This initiative highlighted accessible attractions, LGBTQ+-friendly events, and multicultural districts, ensuring that visitors from all backgrounds felt represented (UNWTO, 2021). The campaign significantly boosted the UK’s tourism appeal, particularly among tourists from minority communities.

II. Thailand’s LGBTQ+ Tourism Strategy

Thailand actively markets itself as one of the most LGBTQ+ friendly destinations in Asia. The Bangkok Pride Festival and LGBTQ+ exclusive resorts in Phuket have helped establish Thailand as a welcoming destination for LGBTQ+ tourists. The Thai tourism board has also launched initiatives to promote gender inclusivity and equal representation in travel marketing (Thailand Tourism Board, 2025).

III. Indigenous Tourism Canada (ITAC)

Canada has taken important steps to promote and protect Indigenous cultures through tourism. Organisations like Indigenous Tourism Canada (ITAC) support Indigenous-owned businesses, offering tourists genuine experiences such as First Nations storytelling, eco-tourism, and guided cultural tours (Gössling et al., 2019). These initiatives not only generate economic opportunities but also enable Indigenous communities to reclaim and share their stories.

IV. Dubai's Global Cultural Events

Dubai has positioned itself as a multicultural tourism hub, hosting events that celebrate diverse traditions. Global Village, a festival featuring over 75 country pavilions, allows visitors to explore different cultures in one place (Richards, 2018). Additionally, Dubai's food scene reflects its expatriate-rich population, making it a prime destination for culinary tourism.

2.5 Challenges in Achieving Diversity in the Tourism and Events Industry

2.5.1 Industry Barriers

The tourism and events industry face significant barriers to achieving diversity. One of the primary obstacles is the lack of representation in leadership roles. According to a report by McKinsey & Company, only 25% of leadership positions in travel and tourism are held by women, and the percentage is even lower for minority groups (McKinsey & Company, 2021). This lack of representation can hinder the creation and implementation of inclusive policies and practices. Cultural biases and stereotypes also present major challenges. These biases can manifest in various ways, such as the promotion of certain destinations over others based on cultural stereotypes or the marginalisation of specific cultural groups within the industry. Such biases can discourage diverse individuals from participating in or visiting certain destinations. Language barriers and accessibility issues further exacerbate the problem. Non-native speakers and individuals with disabilities often face difficulties in accessing information, booking services, and navigating tourism and event sites. This can limit their participation and enjoyment of tourism and events, ultimately reducing the industry's overall diversity (UNWTO, 2019).

2.6 Economic and Social Factors

Economic and social factors also play a crucial role in hindering diversity in the tourism and events industry. Affordability and inclusivity in pricing are significant concerns. High costs associated with travel, accommodation, and event participation can exclude lower-income individuals and families. This economic barrier limits the diversity of participants and creates an industry that primarily caters to wealthier demographics (Gössling et al., 2018). Discrimination and exclusion persist in certain regions. In some areas, cultural, racial, and

religious minorities face systemic discrimination that can deter them from traveling or participating in events. This exclusion not only affects the individuals directly but also negatively impacts the industry's diversity and inclusivity. Unconscious bias in event planning and tourism marketing further compounds the problem. Marketing campaigns and event plans that fail to consider diverse audiences can alienate potential participants. For instance, advertising that primarily features young, able-bodied, and racially homogeneous individuals sends a message that others are not welcome or valued. This bias can be unintentional, but it has a lasting impact on the industry's inclusivity.

2.7 Lack of Diversity in the Festival Industry

Music festivals often face criticism for a lack of diverse representation in their lineups, both in terms of performers and attendees. Research by Smith et al. (2020) highlights that major festivals in the United States and Europe have predominantly white, male-dominated lineups. This lack of diversity can discourage artists and attendees from underrepresented groups from participating. In response to these challenges, some festivals have initiated efforts to address diversity and inclusion. For example, the Primavera Sound festival in Spain implemented a gender-balanced line-up, ensuring equal representation of male and female artists. Additionally, the AfroPunk Festival celebrates black culture and provides a platform for diverse performers and attendees. These initiatives demonstrate that while challenges exist, targeted efforts can lead to more inclusive and diverse events.

3. Methodology

Although this chapter is conceptual and integrative, it is supported by a systematic approach to evidence gathering and analysis. The methodology includes two main components. First, an integrative literature review was conducted across research on diversity management, organisational performance, tourism and events sector challenges, DEI frameworks in higher education, and emerging technologies that support inclusive learning. This broad, cross-sector review allows the chapter to synthesise insights rather than limit the analysis to a single discipline.

Second, a comparative case study approach was employed to analyse documented examples of DEI practice from both industry and HE, including the IMEX Group, the Berlin Convention Office, the University of Michigan’s Robotics programme, and Kingston University’s Inclusive Curriculum Framework. These cases were chosen for their clear evidence of implementation, varied institutional contexts, and demonstrable outcomes. Each

case is explored through the chapter's theoretical lens and research questions, focusing on how initiatives were designed, implemented, and translated into practice.

4 Results and Discussion

This section presents the main results of the literature and case analysis related to challenges and barriers, including industry obstacles, economic and social inequalities, and the lack of diversity in festival and event contexts.

4.1 Challenges in Achieving Diversity in the Tourism and Events Industry

4.1.1 The Role of Higher Education in Promoting Diversity

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are pivotal in shaping inclusive societies by promoting diversity across student demographics, curricula, and institutional culture. Amid increasing globalisation and social justice advocacy, universities face mounting expectations to address systemic inequities and foster representation in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and ability (Ahmed, 2012). Diversity within HEIs not only serves ethical objectives but is also linked to enhanced learning outcomes, critical thinking, and innovation (Gurin et al., 2023). However, some scholars argue that universities often adopt symbolic or performative diversity policies, failing to address deeper structural issues (Ahmed, 2012; Lentin, 2020).

4.2 Strategic Approaches to Diversity in Higher Education

Promoting diversity within HEIs involves strategic planning, including the formulation of diversity-focused mission statements, demographic audits, and recruitment and retention strategies targeting underrepresented students and faculty (Dumas-Hines et al., 2001). The slow pace of change in this area is often explained through theoretical frameworks, yet effective practices can still be identified (Brown, 2004). As global interdependence deepens, HEIs must redefine their missions to address inequalities within and across societies (Hershock, 2010). A genuine shift from differentiation to meaningful diversification enables universities to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments. HEIs must lead in preparing students for diverse societal contexts (Brown, 2004).

4.3 Comparing Sectoral Approaches: Higher Education vs. Industry

Diversity initiatives differ significantly between higher education and industry. In corporate sectors such as hospitality and tourism, diversity and inclusion efforts are typically implemented through top-down strategies, focusing on standards, resource allocation, and formal training (Ponting & Dillette, 2023). These strategies often achieve demographic heterogeneity among frontline workers but fail to diversify leadership.

In contrast, higher education emphasises institution-level interventions and curriculum reform. According to Nguyen et al. (2024), such initiatives yield better outcomes when implemented holistically at the institutional rather than departmental level. Barrientos-Báez et al. (2021) underscore curricular revision as a key strategy. HEIs commonly use student engagement and institutional branding as performance indicators rather than formal methods of measurement.

4.4 Institutional Impact and Curriculum Integration

Universities play a transformative role in improving societal well-being by embedding inclusive practices into curricula and pedagogy. This includes fostering collaboration, respect, and mutual understanding within academic communities, as exemplified in Spain's tourism education sector (Barrientos-Báez et al., 2021). Recent scholarship advocates the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) competencies across professional programs. Handley and Marnewick (2022) propose embedding cognitive style awareness and teamwork into engineering courses. Similarly, Jordan et al. (2024) describe the inclusion of DEI principles in graduate nursing programs using Delphi methodology. Bay (2022) presents a case study on transforming technical communication courses, while Valley et al. (2020) introduce a model incorporating self-awareness and systemic knowledge in food systems education. These initiatives aim to prepare students for inclusive workplaces and collaborative civic life.

Achieving diversity in tourism and events also requires addressing industry barriers, economic inequalities, and unconscious biases. Proactive efforts are needed to create a more welcoming environment for all stakeholders. Initiatives such as gender-balanced festival line-ups and culturally inclusive tourism campaigns are positive steps, but sustained commitment is necessary to drive meaningful change. The following case studies illustrate the patterns identified in the results section by providing concrete examples of both successful and challenging diversity and inclusion initiatives across sectors.

Case study 1.1 illustrates a robust example of how the events and tourism industry can move from intent to impactful action in fostering diversity. Through thoughtful planning, inclusive design, and collaborative leadership, IMEX Group demonstrates that DEI is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage.

Case study 1.1: Diversity & Inclusion at IMEX Group-Leading by Example in the Global Events Industry.

Overview

IMEX Group organises the globally recognised IMEX Frankfurt and IMEX America trade shows, it is widely regarded as a leader in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the international events industry. The group's commitment to DEI is embedded across its operations, supplier engagement, speaker programming, and partnerships. Through intentional strategies and community-building initiatives, IMEX has emerged as a benchmark for inclusive event management. Below are some of the best practices and initiatives by IMEX Group.

1. **Diverse Speaker Representation**

- **Policy Implementation:** IMEX has an explicit policy requiring diversity among keynote and panel speakers, including gender, ethnicity, disability, age, and geographical representation.
- **Speaker Selection Framework:** They employ a "Diverse Voices Framework" to guide the curation of inclusive educational content, ensuring underrepresented groups are featured as subject-matter experts.

2. **Accessible Event Design**

- **Physical Accessibility:** IMEX events are designed with universal accessibility in mind, including ramps, quiet rooms, sign language interpreters, and on-site support for people with disabilities.
- **Neurodiversity Considerations:** The team has partnered with organisations like **EventWell** to create sensory-friendly zones and facilitate neuro-inclusive experiences.

3. **Inclusive Hiring & Internships**

- **Internship Pathways:** IMEX launched an internship and mentorship program targeting young professionals from minority ethnic backgrounds and lower socio-economic groups.
- **Hiring Practices:** The company reviews job descriptions to ensure inclusive language and partners with diverse talent networks to widen the recruitment pool.

4. **Community and Advocacy Partnerships**

- **Collaboration with Associations:** IMEX collaborates with organisations like **MPI (Meeting Professionals International)**, **PCMA**, and **Black in Events Network** to host DEI sessions and networking events focused on racial equity, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and gender diversity.
- **IMEX She Means Business**: A joint initiative with TW magazine, this forum addresses gender equality and leadership opportunities for women in the meetings industry.

5. **Supplier and Vendor Diversity**

- **Supplier Code of Conduct:** IMEX has created a procurement framework that encourages the inclusion of minority-owned, women-led, and LGBTQ+-owned vendors.

- **Sustainability and DEI Reporting:** All suppliers are encouraged to provide transparency on both environmental and DEI commitments as part of their bid proposals.

The case study shows that DEI success requires clearly stated goals and standards, not just values statements. Inclusion should extend beyond race and gender to encompass disability, neurodiversity, and socio-economic background. It highlights that authentic partnerships and community-led programming yield deeper engagement than performative gestures. Hence, organisations must review internal culture and practices before trying to drive change externally.

Case Study 1.2: University of Michigan Robotics Major-Equity & Excellence in STEM Education

Overview

Recognising that talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not, the University of Michigan built a new undergraduate Robotics major (2022-2023 academic year) that is explicitly centred on equity as well as academic excellence (Jenkins et al., 2023). The program was purpose-built to provide diverse entry points-making it accessible to students regardless of their backgrounds or prior STEM preparation. Students can begin via different routes (e.g., engineering, computer science, related disciplines) and still succeed, meeting equity goals through multiple paths. Over 100 students declared the Robotics major in its first year, and the first two graduates earned their degrees within one academic year. These outcomes reflect an intentional shift to redefine an engineering-dominated field through inclusive academic practices.

Area	**Practice**	**Applicability**
Curriculum Design	Equity-first framing ("Robotics with Respect")	Can be adapted to any STEM major e.g., “Chemistry with Respect”
Pathways Strategy	Multiple access points for diverse academic backgrounds	Works well for any high-demand field requiring strong prerequisites.
Strategic Partnerships	University-Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) collaboration.	Models accessible outreach to underrepresented institutions.
Measurable standards	Tracking enrolment, graduation rates.	Essential for monitoring progress and accountability.

Culture & Messaging	Equitable discourse is embedded in the major's identity.	Shifts student and faculty mindsets across all disciplines.

Table 1: Increasing equity and academic excellence in the higher education

This case study goes beyond surface-level diversity messaging to reshape how an entire discipline is taught. Achieving enrolment and graduation benchmarks in year one demonstrates that systemic redesign can yield immediate results. Thus, other HEIs can draw from this approach, particularly in STEM fields where equity gaps persist.

Case Study 1.3: Embedding Equity Through Data and Design at Kingston University

In the early 2010s, Kingston University London faced a challenge common across many UK higher education institutions: a significant disparity in attainment between white students and their Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) peers. At its height in the 2011–2012 academic year, the difference in the proportion of students achieving a first or 2:1 degree between white and BAME students stood at a staggering 29 percentage points (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Recognising the structural nature of this issue, Kingston University adopted a bold, evidence-based approach to reimagine its curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices through a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens.

A central innovation was the development of the Value Added (VA) standard. Rather than simply comparing raw degree classifications, this tool adjusted for entry qualifications and subject area, offering a more nuanced measure of how students progressed relative to expectations. The use of VA data enabled Kingston University to identify courses or departments where underperformance disproportionately affected students from ethnic minority backgrounds, thus prompting targeted interventions (Office for Students (OfS), 2020).

Parallel to this, Kingston developed the Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF), underpinned by three pillars: *Accessibility*, *Representation*, and *Global Citizenship*. The framework encouraged academic staff to interrogate their curricula through questions such as: "Who is included in our reading lists?" "Whose histories and contributions are centred or marginalised?" and "Are assessment methods inclusive of diverse learning styles and experiences?" (Kingston University, 2017). Importantly, curriculum reviews were not carried out in isolation. Student co-creation was embedded in the process, with BAME students trained as "curriculum consultants" working alongside staff to audit course content and delivery.

This combined strategy of leveraging performance data and redesigning teaching content and methods yielded measurable results. Between 2016 and 2018, the attainment gap at Kingston narrowed significantly, and similar gains were reported by other institutions that partnered with Kingston through its Collaborate project, including UCL, the University of Hertfordshire, and De Montfort University. These partnerships, supported by funding from the Higher Education Funding

Council for England (HEFCE), demonstrated that structural change was possible when equity was placed at the heart of educational design.

The success of Kingston's model had sector-wide implications. Its Inclusive Curriculum Framework informed national policy and institutional strategies, contributing to the work of Advance HE in developing sector guidance on embedding equity in teaching and learning. Additionally, the model was cited as a best practice case study in multiple government and think tank reports on closing the BAME attainment gap (Universities UK, 2019).

Kingston's work illustrates how a data-informed, student-partnered approach to curriculum transformation can deliver tangible DEI outcomes. More than a one-off initiative, it signalled a cultural shift within the institution, positioning equity not as an adjunct but as a foundation of academic excellence.

Kingston University provides a leading example of systemic inclusion in HE through its Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF) and Value Added (VA) metric. The ICF offers a structured approach to designing learning and assessment environments where all students can succeed, while the VA standard provides a data-driven tool to identify and close awarding gaps. Implementation has involved mandatory staff training, curriculum auditing, and cross-university collaboration. Evidence shows that Kingston's efforts contributed to measurable reductions in attainment disparities and increased awareness of inclusive teaching practices. However, challenges remain, including uneven adoption across departments, staff resistance, and the need for ongoing development of data literacy. Kingston's experience demonstrates how structured frameworks and standards can drive institutional change, offering transferable lessons for diversity management in the tourism and events industry.

4.5 Challenges of Inclusion in the tourism industry: Case studies

I. New Zealand-Lack of Implementation Despite Strategy

New Zealand's Disability Strategy has failed to meaningfully improve tourism accessibility due to systemic implementation gaps and a lack of enforceable regulations. Multiple studies substantiate this claim. Gillovic and McIntosh (2015) found that New Zealand's tourism industry "generally fails to acknowledge the importance of the access market" despite strong legislation. Cockburn-Wootten and McIntosh (2020) further confirmed critical gaps, identifying key issues including:

- Lack of understanding of access consumers' expectations
- Insufficient staff training
- Poor information provision
- Inconsistent transport accessibility

The research suggests the strategy's weakness lies not in its design, but in absent enforcement mechanisms, limited funding, and minimal capacity-building efforts. Wiley, (2009) reinforced this, noting that effective disability policy requires increased coordination, workforce development, and community engagement. A key lesson from this case is that policy commitments alone are insufficient without clear implementation frameworks and accountability mechanisms. Remedial strategies should therefore include mandatory accessibility standards, targeted workforce training, dedicated accessibility funding, and stronger collaboration between tourism operators, government agencies, and disability advocacy groups. Establishing national monitoring systems and accessibility certification schemes could also improve consistency and encourage long-term compliance across the tourism sector.

II. Poland (Cracow and Warsaw) – Heritage Constraints vs Historic Preservation

The research was conducted between 2012 and 2015 found that while new buildings must legally accommodate persons with disabilities, practical implementation remains limited. Key barriers include:

- Insufficient visual information (rare Braille or sound-visual assistance)
- Strict heritage conservation regulations preventing extensive modifications
- High costs of accessibility improvements

The authors note that achieving fully "mobile tourism" in historic cities remains an open question, requiring individual approaches and significant compromises (Ostrowska-Tryzno and Pawlikowska-Piechotka, 2016). They recommend a holistic design philosophy and innovative technologies to enhance tourism infrastructure accessibility. The study reveals significant accessibility challenges for disabled tourists in Cracow and Warsaw's historic districts, with nearly 70% of museums and tourist attractions being inaccessible to people with motor impairments.

III. Ethiopia-Community Exclusion in Heritage Tourism

At the Enda-Eyesus battlefield site in Ethiopia, heritage tourism strategies systematically excluded local communities from meaningful economic participation through top-down, non-collaborative approaches. The research by Fetene and Weldesamuel (2020) revealed critical failures in inclusive tourism, including "lack of marketing, absence of infrastructures, and lack of cooperative linking." Community members were not adequately trained or supported to generate income, fundamentally undermining the "inclusive heritage tourism" goal. This finding aligns with broader research showing that heritage tourism can create significant

community marginalisation. Brooks et al. (2023); Wearing and Darcy (2011) further emphasise that such exclusionary practices are detrimental to tourism sustainability, highlighting a systemic problem of ignoring host community needs in tourism development strategies. To address these shortcomings, tourism development initiatives should adopt participatory governance models that actively involve local communities in tourism planning, management, and benefit-sharing processes. Practical remedial strategies could include community-led tourism cooperatives, targeted entrepreneurship and skills-development programmes, local procurement policies, and partnerships with educational institutions and NGOs to strengthen capacity-building efforts. In addition, digital marketing training and community-owned digital platforms could help marginalised groups gain greater visibility and economic participation within heritage tourism markets.

IV. Bangladesh-Heritage Site Accessibility Barriers

At Lalbagh Fort in Dhaka, a heritage-tourism case study found that, despite intentions to improve accessibility, major physical and communication barriers remain (Omi et al., 2024). The research highlighted that core outdoor accessibility elements (e.g., paths, ramps) were inadequately addressed. There was also a lack of staff training: poorly informed staff and limited interpretative resources make the visitor experience sub-optimal for people with disabilities. This case demonstrates that accessibility cannot be achieved through isolated physical adjustments alone. Effective inclusion requires integrated planning that combines infrastructure, staff capability, communication systems, and visitor support services. In contrast to successful examples such as IMEX Group, the absence of structured accessibility planning and continuous staff development limited the effectiveness of inclusion efforts at Lalbagh Fort. To address these gaps, tourism authorities should adopt universal design principles during heritage site development, provide specialised accessibility training for staff, and involve people with disabilities in the co-design and evaluation of tourism experiences. Low-cost digital tools such as QR-enabled audio guides, multilingual accessibility information, and virtual navigation support could also improve visitor experiences while remaining financially achievable for developing tourism destinations.

V. Andalusia (Spain) & Northern Morocco-Digital / Web Accessibility Gaps

Digital accessibility in Andalusia and Northern Morocco remains critically low, with tourism websites and social media failing to provide inclusive online experiences for people with disabilities. The research by Montero et al. (2023) analysed 165 digital contents and revealed significant accessibility gaps. Their study found that public tourist bodies consistently failed to include accessible-tourism information modules, even when legally obligated. The analysis showed no substantial difference between Andalusia and Northern

Morocco, indicating a systemic issue in digital inclusivity. Teixeira et al. (2021) corroborate these findings, noting that web accessibility in tourism remains very low, with primary failures related to connectivity with assistive technologies and navigation difficulties. The research underscores that digital inclusion is not just about physical access but requires comprehensive digital communication strategies that genuinely serve all potential tourists.

4.6 Measuring Inclusion in Tourism and Events

Measuring inclusion in tourism and events requires a combination of quantitative indicators and qualitative assessments that capture both structural conditions and lived experiences. Quantitative approaches often focus on accessibility and representation standards, such as the proportion of venues that meet universal design standards, the availability of multilingual or sensory-friendly services, or the diversity of participants, suppliers, and staff. Visitor and participant surveys can also be used to gather standardised data on perceived inclusion, psychological safety, and satisfaction among different demographic groups. When monitored over time, these indicators allow organisations to track progress and identify disparities that require targeted intervention.

In addition to these numerical measures, qualitative methods play a crucial role in understanding inclusion holistically. Techniques such as accessibility audits, stakeholder interviews, co-design sessions with marginalised groups, and ethnographic observation reveal how inclusive practices are experienced in real contexts. Many tourism boards and event organisers now employ hybrid frameworks combining universal design principles, equity impact assessments, and value-added metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of their inclusion strategies. These approaches enable organisations not only to quantify inclusion but also to assess the depth and quality of engagement, thereby providing a more comprehensive picture of inclusive performance. A good example is VisitScotland. Their national tourism board embeds qualitative methods in its inclusive tourism strategy. They work with AccessAble, who carry out on-site, detailed accessibility assessments by trained surveyors. These assessments use qualitative observations of the visitor journey, not just tick-box checklists. VisitScotland also gathers feedback through the Scotland Visitor Survey, which captures visitors' self-reported experiences, including specific accessibility challenges. Importantly, they design their "Detailed Access Guides" based on input from disabled people, informed by qualitative engagement, which includes understanding the lived experience of access needs rather than just measuring structural compliance (VisitScotland, 2025)

5. Strategies for Embracing Diversity in Tourism & Events: An Evidence-Based Approach

Recent research demonstrates that strategic diversity management significantly impacts organisational success and employee satisfaction in service-oriented industries. This chapter presents evidence-based strategies for implementing effective diversity initiatives in tourism and events organisations. Understanding the Strategic Value of Diversity Research indicates that diversity management initiatives contribute to multiple organisational benefits, including enhanced financial performance and improved service delivery. Studies show that organisations implementing comprehensive diversity strategies experience increased employee engagement, improved job satisfaction, and enhanced service innovation behaviour (Van Knippenberg et al., 2020).

Strategy 1: Implementing comprehensive training programs is essential, as evidence suggests that such programs significantly influence the relationship between diversity initiatives and organisational outcomes. Research by Khassawneh and Mohammad (2025) highlights that well-designed training programs enhance the positive impact of diversity management on organisational performance. To achieve this, organisations should focus on developing targeted diversity awareness programs, implementing cultural competency training, and creating inclusive leadership development initiatives.

Strategy 2: Developing inclusive HR policies is another crucial approach, as research by Van Knippenberg et al. (2020) demonstrates a direct positive relationship between inclusive policies, job performance, and employee engagement. Organisations should prioritise equitable recruitment practices, fair advancement opportunities, inclusive workplace policies, and performance management systems that recognise diverse contributions.

Strategy 3: Encouraging leadership commitment is vital for successful diversity management. Research by Leuhery et al. (2024) indicates that board diversity strengthens the positive impact of diversity initiatives on organisational performance. Organisations should promote diversity at leadership levels, ensure visible management support for diversity initiatives, integrate diversity goals into strategic planning, and establish clear accountability measures.

Strategy 4: Creating inclusive work environments plays a significant role in enhancing employee engagement and organisational performance, as highlighted by Afridah and Muhlishah (2024). To promote inclusion, organisations should promote open communication channels, create supportive team environments, establish employee resource groups, and develop mentorship programs.

Strategy 5: Monitor and Measure Outcomes. Evidence suggests that successful diversity management requires regular assessment and adjustment (Van Knippenberg et al., 2020). Organisations should establish clear performance standards, regularly evaluate program

effectiveness, gather employee feedback, and adjust strategies based on measured outcomes.

Strategy 6: Implementation Considerations. Recent research highlights several critical factors for successful diversity implementation, including the importance of strategic alignment with organisational goals (Leuhery et al., 2024. Smaller tourism and events organisations often struggle to implement diversity and accessibility initiatives due to financial and operational constraints, including the costs of infrastructure changes, assistive technologies, staff training, accessible transport, multilingual communication, and digital upgrades. Phased, scalable approaches can help SMEs prioritise high-impact, low-cost actions while planning for long-term improvements. Support from governments, tourism boards, and industry associations through grants, tax incentives, toolkits, shared training, and collaborative funding can further reduce pressures. Partnerships across public, private, and community sectors also lower costs and encourage wider adoption of inclusive practices. Effective diversity management ultimately requires clear policies, strong leadership, comprehensive training, and regular evaluation. Organisations adopting these evidence-based strategies are more likely to enhance performance and create inclusive environments for all stakeholders.

6. Future Directions for HEIs and Recommendations

6.1 Leveraging Technology for Inclusion

Emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), AI-powered translation, and adaptive learning applications offer promising tools for enhancing accessibility and inclusion. These innovations can support students with disabilities and bridge language barriers. Assistive technologies (AT) play a vital role in enhancing the academic experience and performance of students with physical disabilities within higher education. Tools such as screen readers, Braille displays, and speech-to-text applications have been linked to improved educational outcomes (Haleem et al., 2022). These technologies not only facilitate academic involvement but also support students' social integration and emotional development (McNicholl et al., 2021). Research highlights notable improvements in tasks such as reading, writing, note-taking, exam performance, and studying following the introduction of AT interventions (Malcolm and Roll, 2017). Nevertheless, the successful use of AT can be obstructed by challenges including insufficient user training, technical constraints, and a lack of institutional or peer support (McNicholl et al., 2021). To optimise the benefits of AT, comprehensive training programs are essential (Haleem et al., 2022). Furthermore, using widely available mainstream technologies as assistive tools can encourage inclusivity and help eliminate stigma associated with disability

(McNicholl et al., 2021). Despite variability in AT adoption and support across universities, it remains an indispensable component for ensuring equitable access to higher education for students with disabilities.

6.1.1 Digital Inclusivity Strategies Beyond Website Accessibility

Digital inclusivity in tourism, events, and higher education extends beyond accessible websites and requires a broader strategy that addresses participation, engagement, affordability, and representation across digital environments. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and adaptive digital platforms can help reduce inequalities when implemented through inclusive design principles. AI-powered translation and captioning tools, for example, can support multilingual communication and improve access for international visitors, students, and participants with hearing impairments. Similarly, AI chatbots and virtual assistants can provide real-time personalised support, helping users navigate event spaces, learning platforms, and tourism services more independently.

AR and VR technologies also offer opportunities to enhance inclusion by creating immersive and accessible experiences for individuals who may face physical, financial, or social barriers to participation. Virtual tours, sensory-adapted simulations, and remote event participation can allow people with disabilities, neurodiverse users, older adults, and geographically excluded communities to engage with tourism destinations and events in more flexible ways. In higher education, immersive simulations can create inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse learning styles while also increasing intercultural awareness and empathy.

However, digital technologies can also reproduce inequalities if issues such as digital poverty, algorithmic bias, low digital literacy, and unequal access to devices and internet connectivity are not addressed. Inclusive digital strategies should therefore include affordable access initiatives, staff and user training, ethical AI governance, multilingual content, universal design standards, and participatory co-design approaches involving marginalised communities. Organisations in tourism, events, and HE must move towards a model of “digital inclusion by design,” where accessibility, representation, and equity are embedded into technological innovation from the outset rather than treated as an afterthought.

6.2 Policy Evolution and Long-Term Sustainability

Diversity must be embedded in institutional policies as a long-term commitment rather than a reactive measure. This requires continuous policy review, data-driven accountability, and the

active participation of marginalised groups in decision-making. To bridge the policy-practice gap, organisations and higher education institutions should adopt clear implementation mechanisms that translate diversity and inclusion commitments into measurable action. These include establishing DEI accountability frameworks with designated leadership responsibilities, integrating inclusion targets into institutional strategic plans, and conducting regular diversity audits to monitor progress. Institutions should also implement mandatory staff development and inclusive leadership training, embed co-creation approaches that involve students, employees, and marginalised communities in decision-making, and introduce transparent reporting systems linked to measurable outcomes such as participation, attainment, accessibility, and representation. In tourism and events, organisations should operationalise inclusive practices through accessible event design standards, supplier diversity policies, inclusive recruitment strategies, and continuous stakeholder feedback mechanisms. Furthermore, periodic evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative indicators is essential to ensure that DEI policies lead to sustained cultural and structural change rather than symbolic compliance.

In recent decades, higher education institutions have increasingly prioritised the development and implementation of environmental sustainability policies. While progress has been made, significant challenges persist. Key enablers of successful, sustained implementation include strong leadership, strategic governance, and effective change management processes (Mader, Scott and Razack, 2013). Nonetheless, efforts are frequently impeded by barriers such as competing financial interests, insufficient incentives, and poor communication across institutional levels (Velazquez, Munguia and Sanchez, 2005; Howes et al., 2017). Although many universities have formally committed to global sustainability goals, shortcomings in policy execution have limited their overall impact on environmental sustainability (Howes et al., 2017). In response, some institutions have embraced more comprehensive strategies, embedding sustainability into academic programmes and cultivating students' competencies, values, and environmental awareness (Longhurst et al., 2015). Still, the trajectory of environmental sustainability efforts in higher education remains shaped by both progress and persistent obstacles, underlining the ongoing need to strengthen implementation approaches and achieve more effective outcomes.

6.3 Role of Industry Bodies and Global Collaboration

The future of diversity in the tourism and events industry is set to become more inclusive, equitable, and representative of different cultures, identities, and abilities. As global tourism and events become more accessible and technology continues to advance, businesses

increasingly recognise the need for diverse and inclusive experiences to cater to a broader audience (Makudza et al., 2020). As the industry evolves, this chapter suggests that organisations, such as tourism boards, continue to embrace inclusive marketing strategies by highlighting diverse cultures, festivals, and heritage sites. Organisations like the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) can support HEIs by providing frameworks for global standards in DEI. Collaborations between universities and industry bodies can amplify best practices and foster systemic change.

6.4 Educational Innovation and Reform

A comprehensive literature review by Halabieh et al. (2022) identifies four persistent failings in higher education: quality, relevance, access, and cost. Quality concerns often stem from outdated curricula, inconsistent teaching standards, and insufficient alignment with industry expectations. Relevance points to a growing disconnect between what is taught and the rapidly evolving demands of the global digital economy, leaving graduates underprepared for emerging roles. Access remains a structural barrier, particularly for marginalised and underrepresented communities who face socio-economic, geographic, or systemic hurdles. Finally, the rising cost of higher education continues to deter prospective learners and exacerbate inequalities. In response, the authors advocate for a systemic redesign, one that reimagines curricula, pedagogies, and institutional priorities, to better serve diverse learners and prepare them for a dynamic, interconnected world. Identifying and adapting best practices from institutions actively addressing these challenges is, therefore, not just advisable but essential for meaningful reform.

6.5 Inclusive Ecosystems and Lifelong Mentorship

Facer and Sandford (2010) propose the creation of flexible, networked educational ecosystems that facilitate learning across diverse settings. Their vision includes personal learning records, interoperable systems, and flexible timetables. Establishing a mentoring and networking workforce can support informed decision-making and help mitigate socio-economic disparities.

6.6 Public Forums and Civic Engagement

Public forums for debating the role of education in the context of socio-technical change are essential. These platforms can involve diverse stakeholders, promote civic engagement, and shape educational agendas responsive to future societal needs. Recent studies underscore the increasing impact of digital technologies on the development of higher education policies. Governmental frameworks are especially vital in promoting the digital transformation of learning, particularly within health-focused academic institutions. A culture

of collaboration and pedagogical innovation is essential for effective digital integration in educational settings and for shaping informed policy decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic notably accelerated the shift towards online education, compelling universities to adopt both immediate and strategic responses to strengthen the resilience and adaptability of higher education systems (Tilak and Kumar, 2022). As a result, educational policy reform has facilitated the launch of numerous ICT-driven initiatives such as digital libraries and electronic academic platforms that contribute significantly to enhancing digital literacy within academic environments (Tahir, Mushtaq & Aslam, 2023). Collectively, the chapter highlights the necessity for flexible and forward-thinking policies that can respond to evolving challenges and promote digital competence in higher education.

7 Conclusion

Diversity management has shifted from a compliance requirement to a strategic priority across tourism, events, and higher education. In tourism and events, organisations that embed diversity into leadership, HR practices, and training benefit from higher employee engagement, stronger job satisfaction, and greater service innovation. Board-level representation is especially influential, strengthening the connection between inclusion and organisational performance. To stay competitive in a global market, businesses must integrate diversity with wider goals such as sustainability and innovation, supported by continuous evaluation and adaptation.

In higher education, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are recognised as ethical responsibilities and catalysts for institutional progress. Yet many universities struggle to translate commitments into systemic change. Sector analysis reveal ongoing gaps in leadership representation and disability inclusion, although examples from institutions such as the University of Michigan and Kingston University demonstrate the impact of intentional, well-designed DEI strategies.

Technology is increasingly central to inclusive education, with assistive tools and AI improving accessibility when supported by adequate training and infrastructure. Long-term progress requires policy reform, embedded governance structures, and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Global partnerships, including those with UNWTO and WTTC, help align DEI with international standards. Ultimately, inclusive learning depends on adaptable ecosystems that combine lifelong mentorship, interoperable technologies, and community engagement to address inequalities and prepare institutions for rapid digital and societal change.

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