



Inclusivity in focus: reimagining competency frameworks

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Abstract

Inclusivity has become a cornerstone of contemporary higher education (HE), reflecting a growing commitment to creating equitable and accessible learning environments for all students. However, many professional competency frameworks for educators, including the widely recognised BALEAP Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (BALEAP, 2008), seem to lack dedicated guidance on inclusion, a gap that persists despite increasing recognition of the importance of inclusive practices in addressing diverse learner needs. This opinion essay argues for a revision of this framework to incorporate a section dedicated to inclusivity. Building on insights from a BALEAP-funded research project, it proposes essential competencies in differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, inclusive classroom strategies, equitable assessment, and the use of adaptive technologies. Although focused on EAP practitioners, the essay emphasises the relevance of these competencies across disciplines and educator roles, including learning developers and frontline educators. By situating this call for revision within the broader context of inclusivity in education, it aims to inspire updates to other professional frameworks and promote a more inclusive approach to teaching and learning at all levels.

Keywords: inclusion; higher education; English for Academic Purposes; competency framework.

Context and rationale

Inclusion is a fundamental principle in higher education (HE), ensuring equitable access, participation and success for all learners (Andrade, 2006; Messiou, 2017; Martins, Borges and Gonçalves, 2017). It aligns with global initiatives such as the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality education; SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions), which position education as a catalyst for social justice and equity (United Nations, 2023). By addressing barriers to learning and fostering environments where all students can thrive, inclusive teaching enhances institutional quality and contributes to broader societal progress (Singh, 2011; Redpath et al., 2013; Baltaru, 2020). Moreover, diversity in classrooms enriches learning, fostering collaboration, critical thinking and innovation. The shift from deficit models of education - which focus on remediation - to asset-based approaches underscores the necessity of embedding inclusion within all facets of HE (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013; Operti, Walker and Zhang, 2014; Phasha, Mahlo and Dei, 2017). Despite this recognition, a systemic approach to inclusion in HE teaching remains fragmented, largely due to its inconsistent representation within competency frameworks that guide professional standards and development.

Competency frameworks serve as the foundation for HE teaching, defining the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for effective pedagogy. They provide clear benchmarks for teaching quality, professional development and institutional accountability, ensuring alignment with national and international education standards (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Structurally, these frameworks typically consist of domains that categorise different aspects of teaching (e.g., instructional design, assessment, student engagement), competencies that outline specific skills and knowledge within each domain, and performance indicators that establish measurable criteria for proficiency. Many frameworks also differentiate between levels of expertise, ranging from novice to expert, allowing educators to track professional growth over time (Advance HE, 2023; BALEAP, 2022). In addition to outlining pedagogical competencies, these frameworks incorporate expectations for research-informed teaching, leadership in education, and digital pedagogy, ensuring educators remain adaptable in evolving HE landscapes (BALEAP, 2022; Advance HE, 2023).

While competency frameworks play a crucial role in shaping teaching in HE, there seem to be some that do not adequately integrate inclusivity as a measurable and actionable component. The UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), launched in 2006 and revised in 2011 (Advance HE, 2011), did not embed inclusivity within its broad professional values, offering only general commitments to diversity. Fully revised and streamlined, the UKPSF 2023 (Advance HE, 2023) emphasised effectiveness, impact and, for the first time,

inclusion and context as fundamental aspects of practice. However, it does not provide explicit competency indicators for inclusive practice, leaving its implementation largely to institutional discretion. Similarly, the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) Professional Recognition Scheme (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education, 2025a); and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework, currently in development, integrate inclusivity as a core value/guiding principle (Association for Learning Development in Higher Education, 2025b); however, it does not specify, explain or provide possible indicators of inclusivity in practice, leaving its interpretation and implementation largely to individual practitioners.

Without structured competency indicators addressing inclusivity, HE institutions risk fragmented and inconsistent approaches to equity and diversity in teaching, which may result in a failure to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. Competency frameworks, therefore, must be revised to explicitly incorporate inclusivity as a core domain, ensuring that all educators are trained to create equitable and accessible learning environments.

One framework that exemplifies this issue is the BALEAP Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), introduced in 2008. As a benchmark for professional standards in EAP education, it covers key domains such as academic practice, curriculum development and programme implementation (BALEAP, 2008). However, despite its focus on intellectual rigour and pedagogical expertise, it does not explicitly incorporate inclusivity as a core competency, limiting educators' ability to support diverse student populations effectively.

Findings from a BALEAP-funded research project highlight the urgent need for a more systematic integration of inclusive teaching practices, advocating for transformations at individual, departmental and institutional levels (Bakogiannis, 2024). Such transformations require educators to engage in continuous professional development to enhance their cultural competence, while higher education institutions implement inclusive policies, curricula and assessment methods. A dynamic, multi-directional approach involving collaboration, open dialogue, and shared decision-making among all stakeholders is essential, ensuring adaptability, continuous feedback and educator autonomy to tailor teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of students. This need, however, goes

beyond BALEAP, as the gaps identified in this framework are symptomatic of a broader challenge in HE competency frameworks, which often fall short of adequately preparing educators for increasingly diverse classrooms.

To address this, a broader reimagining of competency frameworks is required, with inclusivity embedded as a fundamental and measurable component. The revision of the BALEAP Competency Framework serves as an opportunity to model how inclusion can be systematically incorporated into professional standards, offering guidance for other frameworks to follow suit. This means moving beyond vague commitments to diversity and instead establishing clear, actionable competencies related to inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, decolonial approaches, reflexivity, and student support (Bakogiannis et al., 2024).

While this paper focuses on the BALEAP framework as a starting point, the implications extend across HE, providing a model for embedding inclusivity into competency frameworks globally. By rethinking how professional standards define and measure inclusive teaching, HE institutions can move towards more equitable and effective learning environments.

This essay builds on existing research (Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou, 2023) to argue for the urgent revision of competency frameworks to include explicit inclusivity standards. It proposes inclusion-related competencies that align with established structures – knowledge and understanding, practical ability and performance indicators – ensuring that the shift toward inclusivity is both comprehensive and actionable. By embedding inclusivity within professional standards, revised competency frameworks will empower educators, enhance student learning experiences, and reinforce HE's role as a driver of social justice and educational equity.

Proposed competencies relating to inclusion

The proposed inclusion-related section of the competency framework (see Appendix 1) focuses on five interconnected domains, ensuring that EAP practitioners are equipped to support diverse student populations effectively. These domains include differentiated

instruction, culturally responsive teaching, inclusive classroom strategies, equitable assessment and adaptive technologies.

To start with, differentiated instruction emphasises the importance of tailoring teaching methods and materials to accommodate varied learning preferences and needs, making it a cornerstone of inclusive education (Santangelo and Tomlinson, 2009; Turner, Solis and Kincade, 2017; Lindner and Schwab, 2020; Onyishi and Sefotho, 2020). By employing scaffolding techniques, multimodal resources and adaptive technologies, educators can create engaging lessons that are accessible to all students. For example, integrating visual aids, text-to-speech tools or alternative formats for materials not only enables students with disabilities or language barriers to fully participate in the learning process but also benefits the wider student body by presenting content in diverse and engaging ways. These strategies ensure that no student is left behind, reinforcing the principle that education should adapt to students rather than forcing students to adapt to rigid educational systems. Furthermore, differentiated instruction encourages active learning and self-efficacy, essential components for fostering a sense of accomplishment and inclusivity in diverse classrooms.

Building on the principles of differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching takes this inclusivity further by integrating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Samuels, 2018; Ashrafova, 2024; Abdalla and Moussa, 2024). This approach fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect by incorporating culturally relevant texts, examples and case studies. Additionally, it promotes dialogue that validates and celebrates diversity, encouraging students to share their perspectives. Open discussions dismantle stereotypes, empower students to contribute their unique voices, and enhance the richness of classroom dialogue. For instance, using examples from students' home cultures or highlighting global perspectives not only fosters inclusivity but also broadens the horizons of all learners, creating a classroom environment in which diversity is celebrated as a driver of innovation and collaboration.

In tandem with culturally responsive teaching, inclusive classroom strategies emphasise the creation of supportive, respectful and equitable learning environments (Lee et al., 2014; Ainscow, 2020). By conducting thorough needs analyses, educators can identify linguistic, cultural and academic gaps, enabling them to develop targeted support plans

that address specific challenges. Furthermore, offering flexible participation methods - such as verbal, written or digital options - ensures that all students can engage meaningfully while reducing anxiety for those who may struggle with traditional forms of participation. Establishing clear norms of respect and inclusivity strengthens this dynamic, cultivating a classroom community that values mutual respect and collaboration.

Equally significant are equitable assessment practices, which are essential for reducing bias and ensuring fairness in diverse classrooms (Scott et al., 2013; Ajjawi et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2023). By designing assessments that consider cultural and linguistic diversity, and offering varied formats to cater to different learning preferences, educators create more inclusive evaluations. Inclusive rubrics, iterative feedback and opportunities for self-assessment empower students to reflect on their progress and take ownership of their learning, ensuring their efforts are recognised equitably.

Finally, adaptive technologies provide a vital bridge for addressing accessibility gaps, further reinforcing these inclusive strategies (Gevorgyan, 2024; Tariq, 2024). Tools such as closed captions, bilingual glossaries and assistive technologies enable students to engage with content in ways that meet their individual needs. By integrating these tools thoughtfully, and refining their use based on student feedback, educators demonstrate a commitment to innovation and inclusivity.

Broader applicability of inclusion competencies

While contextualised within the context of EAP, using the BALEAP Competency Framework as an example model, the proposed inclusion-related competencies hold significant relevance across a wide array of disciplines and professional roles. They offer a robust framework that can guide learning developers and other frontline educators in enhancing their practices. By embedding these principles within existing competency frameworks, institutions can ensure that their pedagogical priorities align with the needs of modern, inclusive education.

Moreover, these competencies provide a strategic foundation for developing new frameworks in contexts where none currently exist. By establishing clear benchmarks, they not only set rigorous standards for practice but also embed inclusivity and equity at the

core of educational development. Without such structured guidance, institutions risk reinforcing outdated pedagogical models that fail to accommodate the realities of increasingly diverse and globalised learning environments.

A well-defined competency framework ensures that inclusivity is not treated as an optional consideration but as an essential, measurable component of teaching excellence. Their impact extends far beyond traditional classrooms, shaping training and professional development across corporate, technical and interdisciplinary settings to meet the evolving needs of diverse learners. As industries and educational sectors continue to integrate digital transformation and multicultural collaboration, these competencies serve as a vital tool for preparing educators and practitioners to navigate complex, interconnected learning spaces. More than just a set of guidelines, these competencies drive holistic growth in both educators and learners, ensuring alignment with global educational standards while fostering a more inclusive, adaptable, and future-focused learning landscape.

Conclusion and call to action

Embedding inclusivity within competency frameworks is therefore essential for fostering equitable and effective learning environments in HE. By integrating competencies in differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, equitable assessment and adaptive technologies, these frameworks can better prepare educators to meet the diverse needs of students. This shift is not merely an enhancement but a necessary evolution, ensuring that teaching standards align with contemporary educational challenges and the principles of accessibility and equity.

The BALEAP Competency Framework serves as a compelling example of how inclusivity can be systematically incorporated into professional standards. While originally developed for EAP practitioners, its gaps in addressing inclusivity reflect broader issues within HE teaching frameworks. The proposed revision demonstrates how competency models can be adapted to prioritise inclusivity, offering a structured and scalable approach applicable across disciplines. However, the responsibility for this transformation extends beyond BALEAP. HE institutions, accreditation bodies and faculty developers must take an active role in revising competency frameworks to explicitly define and assess inclusivity as a core professional standard.

This paper calls on HE practitioners and policymakers to embed measurable inclusivity competencies within teaching standards, moving beyond abstract commitments to tangible, actionable practices. The reimagining of BALEAP's framework provides a model for initiating this change, but the need for reform spans all areas of HE. Ensuring that inclusivity is not just an aspirational value but a concrete expectation within competency frameworks is critical to shaping equitable and responsive educational practices. Inclusive education is not a choice – it is a shared responsibility and a defining benchmark for excellence in a diverse and evolving higher education landscape.

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Appendix: competencies relating to inclusion

An EAP teacher will understand the importance of creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment and be able to adapt teaching methods, materials and assessments to accommodate diverse student needs, foster belonging and support academic and personal development.

Knowledge & understanding of	Ability to	Possible Indicators
Principles of adapting materials, tasks and methodologies to suit diverse student needs.	Plan and deliver lessons that use scaffolding and multimodal resources (e.g., text, visuals, audio) to ensure meaningful engagement for all students.	Lesson plans include a variety of tasks and materials designed to address different learning needs and preferences. Evidence of using adaptive technologies like text-to-speech or visual aids Use of formative assessments to adjust instruction dynamically.
Methods for integrating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the curriculum to validate diverse identities.	Foster an inclusive classroom atmosphere by encouraging open dialogue, mutual respect and collaboration among diverse learners.	Integration of cultural references and examples relevant to the student cohort. Evidence of culturally diverse case studies or readings in teaching materials Classroom activities that encourage students to

		share their cultural perspectives.
Practices that create safe, respectful and supportive learning environments, including trauma-informed approaches.	Conduct needs analyses to identify and address linguistic, cultural and academic gaps, tailoring tasks, and support plans accordingly.	Regular implementation of diagnostic tools, such as interviews and surveys, to inform personalised learning pathways. Establishment of clear classroom norms promoting respect and inclusivity. Use of flexible participation methods (e.g., oral, written or digital).
Principles of designing assessments that account for multilingual and cultural diversity to ensure fairness and accessibility.	Utilise a range of assessment formats and provide iterative feedback to accommodate different learning preferences and reduce cultural or linguistic biases.	Evidence of student participation in varied forms (e.g., verbal, written, multimedia) reflecting accessibility and inclusivity. Use of rubrics that minimise linguistic bias while valuing content understanding. Opportunities for student self-assessment and iterative improvement.
Tools and resources that support students with varying needs, including disabilities, language barriers and learning preferences.	Reflect on and challenge personal biases, using student feedback to continuously improve	Adjustments to teaching strategies or materials based on observed participation patterns and feedback from students.

	inclusive teaching practices.	Evidence of integrating technology such as closed captions or bilingual resources in lessons. Availability of alternative formats for teaching materials (e.g., large print, audio).
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Knowledge and understanding of: This section outlines the foundational concepts, theories and principles that educators should be familiar with in relation to the competency.

Ability to: This section specifies the practical skills and applications that educators should be able to demonstrate.

Possible indicators: This section provides measurable examples of how the competency can be observed in practice.