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INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY AT SCALE: A MODEL FOR BUILDING CAPACITY THROUGH DIGITAL TRAINING AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive model for building institutional capacity in inclusive pedagogy using digital training and cross-border collaboration. Drawing on the experience of the Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans (IDEA) project, this paper explores how a structured, multi-phase digital training program empowered higher education institutions (HEIs) in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro to institutionalise inclusive teaching practices. The initiative addressed long-standing challenges in supporting students with disabilities (SwD) and students with learning difficulties (SwLD) through a strategically coordinated capacity-building model. The program incorporated expert-led workshops, hands-on virtual visits, localised policy development, and feedback mechanisms rooted in real-time digital monitoring. By leveraging accessible technologies and fostering collaboration between Western Balkan and EU institutions, the project scaled inclusive pedagogy across diverse institutional and national contexts. The paper outlines the training design, digital delivery methods, and feedback systems, and evaluates their effectiveness in sustaining pedagogical change through policy implementation and continuous professional development.

Insights into institutional ownership, content localisation, and policy alignment highlight key lessons for future digital capacity-building efforts in higher education.

Keywords*:* Inclusive pedagogy, digital training, higher education, assistive technology, policy implementation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive pedagogy is increasingly recognised as a critical pillar of equitable and high-quality education in higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in contexts marked by systemic disparities and limited access to resources. Defined broadly, inclusive pedagogy refers to teaching strategies, institutional practices, and learning environments designed to engage and support a diverse range of learners, especially those historically marginalised due to disability, socioeconomic background, or learning differences (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Recent research emphasises the role of inclusive pedagogy in promoting social justice and participation in tertiary education (Spratt & Florian, 2015; Moriña, 2017). However, embedding inclusive practices across institutions is often hindered by structural, cultural, and pedagogical barriers, especially in regions such as the Western Balkans, where legal frameworks may be in place. However, implementation capacity remains limited (Zgaga et al., 2013). Digital transformation in education has opened new pathways for building inclusive environments at scale. Emerging evidence suggests that online tools, asynchronous modules, and cross-institutional virtual collaboration can accelerate pedagogical change, foster professional development, and improve inclusivity when thoughtfully aligned with institutional policies and local contexts (Laurillard, 2012; Ainscow, 2020). However, the success of these models relies on sustained capacity building, strong leadership, and systems for feedback and accountability (UNESCO, 2020). The IDEA project (Inclusive Tertiary Education in the Western Balkans) responded to these challenges by developing a scalable, digitally enabled training model for inclusive pedagogy. Funded by the European Commission and implemented across Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, IDEA sought to empower HEI staff through targeted training, policy development, and the establishment of accessibility units supported by assistive technologies.

This paper explores the IDEA project as a case study in digitally supported capacity building. It examines the structure and delivery of IDEA's training program, the integration of inclusive pedagogical principles into institutional practices, and the digital tools used to monitor and sustain change. Through this lens, we propose a replicable model for embedding inclusive pedagogy at scale within higher education systems facing similar constraints.

II. INTRODUCTION

This paper applies a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, drawing on best practices in educational program evaluation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Greene, 2007). The purpose is to explore both the structural and experiential dimensions of capacity building in inclusive pedagogy, specifically within the digital training environment fostered by the referred project. The first component was a systematic desk review of core project materials, including training curricula, policy briefs, accessibility protocols, and quality assurance documentation. This approach enabled detailed mapping of the project's capacity-building architecture, including pedagogical frameworks and the evolution of digital delivery formats (Bowen, 2009). Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic, managerial, and administrative staff involved in the IDEA project. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a broad range of perspectives across partner institutions in Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. The interviews explored participant experiences with the training sessions, digital tools, perceived pedagogical impact, and institutional support systems. Data were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling interpretation of patterns and critical reflection on implementation processes. Third, a descriptive quantitative analysis was used to triangulate findings. Key performance indicators (KPIs) were drawn from internal reports and monitoring tools developed within IDEA, including the number of staff trained, feedback ratings, policy adoption milestones, and the operational status of Accessibility Units. While not intended for statistical generalisation, this data provided valuable corroboration of training uptake and institutional responsiveness.

Together, these methods allowed for a contextualised evaluation of how digital training interventions can foster inclusive pedagogical transformation at scale. The use of mixed methods aligns with Greene's (2007) advocacy for methodological complementarity, offering both the depth of qualitative insight and the structure of performance-based evidence.

III. TRAINING DESIGN AND DIGITAL DELIVERY

The IDEA project's training program was developed as a structured, multi-tiered capacity-building initiative designed to institutionalise inclusive pedagogy across a diverse set of higher education institutions. Recognising the complexity and variation in readiness levels across participating institutions, the program was structured into three iterative and complementary phases: Foundation, Development, and Application, each with specific objectives and delivery formats tailored to support sustainable change.

In the *Foundation Phase*, expert universities such as Masaryk University, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and the University of Limerick led synchronous virtual workshops

to establish a common understanding of inclusive education, student diversity, and assistive technology. These workshops established a baseline for shared terminology, a pedagogical vision, and institutional commitment, fostering cross-border dialogue and shared expectations. Building on this base, the *Development Phase* transitioned participants into a mixed-delivery model that blended asynchronous modules with live virtual coaching. Recorded lectures, institutional policy guides, and pre-reading materials were combined with synchronous discussion sessions and facilitated peer exchange. This format encouraged critical reflection, adaptation to local institutional realities, and collaborative problem-solving. Institutions were supported in contextualising their learning, sharing practices across borders, and gradually embedding inclusive teaching concepts into departmental routines. Finally, the *Application Phase* marked a shift toward hands-on implementation and policy integration. Participants were guided in conducting pilot initiatives within their own institutions, ranging from revised course designs and inclusive assessment methods to the operationalisation of Accessibility Units. This phase was characterised by real-time quality monitoring and feedback, coordinated through the project's Quality Assurance structures. Participating institutions were expected to enact policy-level changes, revise internal procedures, and support staff in applying newly acquired competencies within their teaching and administrative functions. Throughout all phases, digital infrastructure enabled continuity, adaptability, and reach.

Platforms such as Zoom, Moodle, and Google Workspace were instrumental in bridging geographic distances, allowing more than 300 academic and administrative staff from 10 HEIs to engage consistently.

These tools also served as knowledge repositories and collaborative spaces, extending the learning experience beyond formal training events. Notably, the digital approach proved resilient even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforcing the potential of technology to facilitate inclusive pedagogy at scale.

The model's progression from conceptual awareness to policy-backed implementation illustrates a holistic, digitally mediated pathway for institutional change. It exemplifies how carefully scaffolded training, supported by strategic use of technology and continuous feedback, can enable HEIs to transform educational practices in support of diverse learners.

Training Phase	Focus	Delivery Mode
Foundation Phase	Introduce core concepts and build shared understanding	Synchronous virtual workshops (e.g., via Zoom)

Development Phase	Foster reflection, peer learning, and contextual adaptation	Asynchronous + synchronous blended model
Application Phase	Support implementation of inclusive pedagogy through pilots and policy	Hands-on projects, policy adoption, and QA feedback

Table 1. IDEA Training Model Overview

Source: Based on the data collected by the authors (2025)

IV. LESSONS LEARNED AND SUSTAINABILITY

The implementation of the IDEA project surfaced several lessons critical to the broader discourse on inclusive pedagogy and institutional transformation. One of the most prominent insights was the scalability of digital training methods. By leveraging virtual platforms and asynchronous content, the project delivered high-quality pedagogical training to over 300 staff members across 10 institutions, overcoming geographic and logistical limitations. This proved especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating that a resilient digital infrastructure can act as a catalyst for wide-reaching educational reform. Similar conclusions have been echoed in literature evaluating digital inclusivity projects in the Global South (UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow, 2020). Equally important was the principle of localisation. While the training was delivered within a common European framework, its effectiveness hinged on adapting its content to the context. Language, institutional readiness, and legal frameworks differed across Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, requiring flexible training models that could respond to national policies and local practices. Institutions that took the initiative to contextualise tools, examples, and pedagogical strategies were better positioned to embed inclusive practices meaningfully into their operations. This finding is consistent with studies such as Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), which stress the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in driving sustainable change. A third lesson relates to policy integration. Sustainable change in pedagogy was not achievable through training alone; it necessitated structural support. Institutions that linked the IDEA training outputs with formal governance, such as academic senate approvals, updated quality assurance procedures, or revised teaching protocols, were more successful in institutionalising inclusive education. This highlighted the need for vertical integration, where institutional mandates and regulations reinforce learning outcomes from capacity-building initiatives. As noted in Moriña's (2017) review of inclusive education frameworks in Europe, policy alignment significantly enhances the longevity and depth of inclusion practices.

Perhaps most critically, the project revealed the power of institutional ownership. Participating universities that embraced a participatory approach, incorporating the voices of students and staff into training design, evaluation, and implementation, reported stronger engagement and more profound institutional transformation.

Ownership fostered trust, motivated change agents, and enabled internal alignment to sustain reforms beyond the project's lifecycle. The sustainability of these efforts is maintained through several channels: continued peer-to-peer exchange among regional institutions; formalised requirements for annual inclusive pedagogy training; and the preservation and use of digital platforms and learning repositories established during the project. In this way, IDEA's model transcends one-time intervention and moves toward creating a durable, system-level culture of inclusive teaching and learning.

V. CONCLUSION

The project demonstrated that achieving sustainable, inclusive pedagogy in higher education requires a systematic, integrated approach that goes beyond individual training events or technical interventions. The project's success stems from the thoughtful alignment of pedagogy, digital infrastructure, and institutional governance across multiple national contexts. Through its carefully structured, phased training model, the initiative provided a practical, scalable solution for building inclusive teaching capacity, anchored in principles of equity, collaboration, and institutional ownership. A key achievement of the project lies in its ability to translate pedagogical principles into actionable institutional strategies. By combining expert-led virtual workshops, peer-driven learning, and localised application, the program successfully created a feedback-rich environment where inclusive practices could be developed, tested, and institutionalised. The participatory design of training content, contextual adaptation of learning resources, and embedding of policy reforms, such as the establishment of Accessibility Units, ensured that inclusivity was not merely a theoretical objective but a lived institutional reality. Moreover, the project proved the viability of digital means as both a delivery mechanism and a sustaining force. In the face of pandemic-related disruptions and regional infrastructure disparities, IDEA's use of digital platforms enabled consistent engagement, broad participation, and transnational knowledge sharing.

This highlights how, when supported by intentional design and robust quality assurance mechanisms, digital tools can democratise access to professional development and support long-term institutional transformation.

It is important to emphasise that the project also surfaced the conditions under which inclusive pedagogy can be maintained post-project. The emphasis on policy integration, institutional

commitment, and continuous peer learning created a replicable framework for sustaining change. This model resonates with the broader European and global push for lifelong learning, universal design for learning (UDL), and inclusive institutional cultures in higher education.

Finally, initiatives like this one present a timely and transferable example of how digital transformation can be harnessed to promote pedagogical innovation and systemic inclusion. As higher education institutions globally face increasing expectations to accommodate diverse learners and operate across digital ecosystems, the IDEA approach offers a robust, evidence-based, and context-responsive model for scaling inclusive pedagogy. It affirms that strategic alignment between training, technology, and institutional policy is not only feasible but essential to leading educational change with integrity and impact.

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