

Inclusive Institutions Framework

Executive summary



Introducing the Inclusive Institutions Framework

The Inclusive Institutions Framework (IIF) is a strategic, robust and externally validated approach for embedding equity, diversity and inclusion across an institution.

Designed to help institutions – in the UK and globally – build on and move beyond targeted initiatives to more intersectional, whole-organisation approaches, the IIF supports institutional confidence in an increasingly complex social, political and regulatory environment. It provides a clear and credible way to demonstrate institutional commitment, respond to regulatory duties and track systemic change over time.

Through an evidence-informed, developmental process, the IIF enables institutions to embed inclusion into the systems that drive decision-making – reducing duplication, increasing momentum and enabling change that sticks.

Purpose and benefits of the IIF

Institutions are expected to tackle persistent inequalities, meet a growing set of legal and regulatory obligations, respond to external scrutiny and demonstrate leadership in advancing inclusion. Over the past 10-15 years, the higher education and research sectors have made important progress in advancing inclusion. However, persistent and emerging challenges, and an increasingly complex regulatory environment, mean this work requires a ‘whole institution’ approach and whole-sector vision to achieve greater impact. The IIF builds on this positive progress and helps institutions sustain and enhance these in a challenging environment.

The IIF addresses this challenge by offering a guided, modular process to help institutions:

- strategically align and integrate inclusion work across staff and student agendas
- strengthen governance, accountability and evidence use to embed inclusion into decision-making, risk management and strategic oversight
- set and justify focused priorities to ensure inclusion work is proportionate, transparent and resourced for maximum impact
- enhance implementation and measurable impact through streamlining and evaluating inclusion-related actions to reduce duplication and drive sustainable change
- engage with complexity – including contested beliefs and societal tensions – with confidence, credibility and clarity.

The framework moves beyond compliance or one-off interventions. It helps institutions build the conditions for long-term change, using inclusion as a lens to enhance decision-making, leadership and institutional effectiveness.



Alignment with sector and policy priorities

The IIF supports institutions in meeting a wide range of national and sectoral expectations, including:

- public sector equality duties (general and specific)
- access and widening participation requirements
- sector codes and regulatory obligations (such as OfS conditions of registration, SFC outcomes framework)
- UN Sustainable Development Goals (especially Goals 4, 5, 10 and 16)

It is also aligned with and complementary to existing sector frameworks, including Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter and Gender Equality Plans under Horizon Europe.

Structure of the framework

The IIF is delivered in four sequential modules, each focusing on a different aspect of institutional inclusion work. Institutions typically complete the four modules over a three-year period, supported throughout by Advance HE.

Module	Focus Area	Key outcomes
Foundations	Embedding inclusion into institutional structures, strategies and governance	Alignment, integration, accountability, inclusivity, resilience
Insights	Developing and using high-quality evidence and systems to inform decision-making	Insight, precision, openness, credibility, confidence
Priorities	Setting and testing inclusion priorities based on evidence and strategy	Strategic focus, proportionality, transparency, sustainability, impact
Action	Implementing, coordinating and evaluating inclusion-related action plans	Coherency, agility, efficiency, shared ownership, impact



Each module includes:

- structured self-assessment guided by module-specific competencies
- 1:1 support from a dedicated Advance HE IIF lead
- sector-based cohort learning events (online and in person)
- peer dialogue and reflection opportunities
- developmental feedback from an external reviewer
- conferral of a formal award.

Successful completion of all four modules confers the Inclusive Institutions Framework Award.

Institutions can also benefit from an optional departmental toolkit, designed to support proportionate, aligned and practical inclusion work at the local level. This resource helps faculties, schools and directorates contribute meaningfully to institutional priorities, while tailoring their activity to specific operational contexts. Departments that engage with the toolkit are eligible for formal recognition from Advance HE.

A developmental pathway

The Inclusive Institutions Framework is designed to be developmental, not judgmental – supporting institutions to reflect honestly, act strategically and learn collaboratively. It values local context, lived experience and institutional ambition, providing a practical pathway for embedding credible, efficient, sustainable and impactful inclusion. Through shared learning, structured support and formal recognition, the IIF empowers institutions to turn good intentions into measurable, lasting change.



Contact us

Advance HE welcomes expressions of interest from institutions seeking to join the IIF or learn more about its suitability for their context.

For more information, please contact:

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