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THE LEVEL OF INCLUSIVENESS IN POLISH UNIVERSITIES COMPARED TO SELECTED EUROPEAN COUNTRIES – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to identify and compare the level of academic inclusiveness, measured across two dimensions – belongingness and uniqueness – among students from selected European countries.
Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted using an original questionnaire developed on the basis of the inclusiveness model proposed by Shore et al. (2011) and validated by Chung et al. (2020). The instrument was designed to measure two dimensions of the inclusiveness experience: belongingness and uniqueness. The sample used for the purposes of this article comprised students from Poland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France (N = 1084). A comparative analysis was conducted to identify differences and similarities in the perception of academic inclusiveness across national groups.
Findings: Students from Spain and Portugal achieved the highest scores in areas related to emotional bonding, perceived care, and overall sense of group belonging. Polish students consistently obtained lower scores across these three constructs, indicating a weaker sense of integration within the academic environment. The key factor differentiating levels of academic inclusiveness is the sense of belonging, which remains statistically significantly lower among Polish students compared to their Spanish counterparts. This may indicate a less communal character of academic relationships and a more reserved communication style.
Research limitations/implications: The main limitations of the study include the non-representative sampling based on the snowball method and the unequal distribution of respondents across countries, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the use of a self-report measurement instrument entails the risk of response subjectivity.
Future research should employ more representative samples, incorporate additional contextual variables.
Practical implications: The results highlight the need to strengthen the sense of belonging within academic environments, particularly in Poland, through initiatives that foster integration, collaboration, and open communication.
Social implications: They emphasize the importance of inclusiveness for developing social competencies and effective functioning in diverse societies.
Originality/value: The study's value lies in combining a well-established theoretical framework with a comparative perspective across multiple European higher education contexts,

contributing to a deeper understanding of both universal and culture-specific determinants of academic inclusiveness.
Keywords: academic inclusiveness, belongingness, uniqueness, cultural diversity, higher education.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

In the coming years, organizations will be compelled to transform their modes of operation in ways that account for increasing social and demographic diversity, creating collaborative environments that enable the coexistence of different lifestyles, values, needs, and forms of participation (Władarczyk, 2025). Contemporary organizations operate within an increasingly diverse social environment – both culturally and demographically. Diversity management, a subject of scholarly interest for over four decades, is progressively shifting toward inclusive management, the aim of which is to promote integration and to value diversity (Nishii, 2013). This shift reflects a growing awareness that addressing the challenges arising from diversity requires the active creation of inclusive environments (Holvino et al., 2004).

This issue is particularly significant in the academic context. An inclusive environment not only enhances students' well-being and engagement and contributes to equal opportunities in higher education, but also prepares individuals to function effectively in a diverse society. Experiences of collaboration and dialogue in diverse – especially cultural and social – contexts foster the development of intercultural competencies, empathy, and communication skills (Gurin et al., 2002). Students who feel accepted and represented within the academic environment demonstrate higher levels of engagement, motivation to learn, and overall satisfaction with their studies (Strayhorn, 2019). In the long term, inclusive academic environments contribute to the development of more open-minded, reflective, and socially responsible citizens (Steward, 2023).

With the increasing socio-cultural diversity among students – resulting, among other factors, from migration, the internationalization of education, demographic changes, and the development of equality policies – higher education institutions face the challenge of creating spaces that not only provide access to education but also ensure that each individual experiences a sense of belonging, fair treatment, and opportunities for development (Thomas, May, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019). Despite a growing number of initiatives aimed at promoting equality and diversity, there remains a relative scarcity of comparative studies examining how inclusiveness is perceived and implemented across different national contexts. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to determine the level of inclusiveness among Polish students in comparison with students from selected European countries. Inclusiveness was measured based on two dimensions – belongingness and uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011; Chung et al., 2020).

2. Inclusiveness in the Academic Environment – Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

Inclusiveness is a multidimensional concept which, depending on the research context and the adopted theoretical framework, may assume different meanings. From a socio-political perspective, it is analyzed in relation to social justice and civil rights and is understood as the possibility of active participation of all individuals and social groups in public life, regardless of characteristics such as social status, gender, origin, sexual orientation, or religion (Young, 2000). From a managerial perspective, inclusiveness is defined as the process of creating conditions that enable the full participation of all organizational members, regardless of their affiliation with minority groups. In organizational terms, inclusiveness refers to policies and practices that simultaneously promote diversity and equality (Shore et al., 2011), as well as the creation of a work environment in which differences are valued rather than marginalized. From a psychological perspective, inclusiveness is perceived as a state in which an individual feels both accepted and authentic (Brewer, 1991). Both the meaning and implementation of inclusiveness may vary depending on cultural and institutional contexts. Consequently, the level and structure of inclusiveness may be experienced differently depending on the country and the higher education system.

The appeal of inclusiveness lies in its positive orientation, focusing on the recognition and appreciation of individual differences (Ferdman, Deane, 2014). It assumes equal opportunities for members of socially marginalized groups to participate in and contribute to the organization, while also ensuring that individuals from non-marginalized groups can engage authentically. Inclusive environments are grounded in value systems that respect all perspectives represented by their members and enable different groups to support one another in striving for full participation at all levels (Shore et al., 2018). The extent to which these assumptions are realized may vary depending on cultural norms and dominant styles of social relations, which distinguishes inclusive environments from exclusionary ones, where all participants are expected to conform to pre-established organizational values and norms (Shore et al., 2011).

Although research on inclusiveness is still in its early stages, the importance of creating inclusive environments is becoming increasingly recognized – not only due to rising levels of diversity (Nishii, Rich, 2014), but also because of the benefits observed within organizations. Among the most frequently reported outcomes are higher organizational commitment (Brimhall et al., 2017), satisfaction of psychological needs (Paolillo et al., 2021), reduced employee turnover, fatigue, and burnout (Panicker, Sharma, 2020; Behnke et al., 2022), as well as an overall decrease in negative behaviors (Luo et al., 2022; Santarpia et al., 2023). Although most of these studies have been conducted in organizational settings, it can be assumed that similar mechanisms operate within academic environments, where social and institutional relationships play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences.

The literature on inclusiveness has evolved over recent decades. In its initial phase, it was perceived as a means for organizations to capture the benefits of diversity (Cox, Blake, 1991). However, inclusiveness extends beyond diversity itself. The mere recognition of diversity is insufficient to unlock an organization's potential for innovation, effectiveness, and well-being. What is crucial is how diversity is integrated and experienced by members of the organization (Guillaume et al., 2014).

Pioneers in the systematic measurement of inclusion include Mor-Barak and Cherin (1998), who proposed a scale comprising the following sub-constructs: participation in work groups, roles in decision-making processes, and access to information and resources. The scale was later updated and, building upon existing constructs, enabled data collection at multiple organizational levels (Mor-Barak, 2017). However, a key concept for understanding inclusiveness, according to the authors, is Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) (Brewer, 1991), which represents one of the most important frameworks integrating the psychological social needs of individuals. This theory emphasizes that individuals prefer groups that allow them to simultaneously experience a sense of belonging and maintain their individuality. According to ODT, individuals engage in group relationships not only to gain acceptance and a sense of belonging, but also to affirm their individuality. The need for belonging reflects a universal desire to be part of a community, to draw support from it, and to shape one's social identity. In contrast, the need for uniqueness is associated with the desire to be a distinct individual, differentiated from others, which supports the development of personal identity and autonomy. Although these needs may appear contradictory, they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the most satisfying social identity develops when individuals are able to simultaneously fulfill their need for belonging and their need for distinctiveness. This state of balance, referred to as "optimal distinctiveness," represents a psychological ideal in which an individual can remain true to themselves while being part of a community. Inclusiveness is defined in a similar way by Shore et al. (2011) – as the degree to which an individual perceives themselves as a valued member of a group through treatment that satisfies their needs for belongingness and uniqueness. The model proposed by Shore and colleagues, subsequently operationalized by Chung et al. (2020), is based on the optimal balance between belongingness and uniqueness.

Although, since the publication of ODT (Brewer, 1991) and the model by Shore et al. (2011), there has been debate as to whether the components of belongingness and uniqueness are interrelated or independent, it is generally accepted that they should be conceptualized as coexisting rather than opposing dimensions (Chung et al., 2020). Individuals can belong to a group while simultaneously maintaining their uniqueness (Jansen et al., 2014), and an increase in the sense of belonging does not necessarily entail a loss of individual distinctiveness (Hornsey, Jetten, 2004).

Building on ODT, the Mor-Barak scale, and the framework developed by Shore et al., the concept of inclusion expands the understanding of integration in the workplace by arguing that accepting and valuing individuals for their unique characteristics – rather than despite them – enhances group dynamics. According to this perspective, belongingness and uniqueness constitute the foundation of inclusive workplaces. Similarly, Czerniawska (2010) points out that the needs for belonging and distinctiveness coexist in both individual and cultural development, and that inclusiveness entails the ability to harmoniously integrate these needs. The inclusion framework, illustrating different combinations of belongingness (and exclusion) and uniqueness (and conformity), is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Inclusion framework

	Low level of belonginess	**High level of belonginess**
Low level of uniqueness	**Exclusion** The individual is not treated as a member of the organization with unique value for the workgroup. They do not feel part of the team and do not perceive their distinctiveness as valuable – their presence in the workplace is marginalized.	**Assimilation** The individual is integrated into the team, but this occurs at the expense of expressing their distinctiveness – there are strong expectations to conform to established group norms and to downplay one's uniqueness.
High level of uniqueness	**Differentiation** The individual is not treated as a full member of the organization; however, their unique characteristics are perceived as valuable and necessary for achieving group success.	**Inclusion** The individual feels fully part of the team while being able to remain authentic – individual characteristics are recognized and valued.

Source: Shore et al., 2011.

Inclusiveness undoubtedly constitutes a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which, in the academic context, is further intensified by cultural and institutional diversity resulting from student mobility (Filippou et al., 2025). Scholars point out that the majority of existing research has overlooked countries of Eastern and Southern Europe, focusing predominantly on countries of the Global North. Moreover, inclusiveness has most often been analyzed along single dimensions (e.g., disability), thereby neglecting the complex ethnic, linguistic, and identity-related determinants that increasingly shape the academic reality.

There is also a noticeable lack of comparative analyses in the literature that would allow for an assessment of whether particular dimensions of academic inclusiveness exhibit similar levels of cross-cultural variation, or whether the dimension of belongingness is more susceptible to cultural context than the dimension of uniqueness.

3. Research methodology

The aim of the presented study was to determine the level of academic inclusiveness among Polish students in comparison with students from selected European countries. Inclusiveness was understood as the simultaneous fulfillment of two key psychological needs: the need for belongingness (being an accepted member of a group and perceiving that caring relationships have been established and maintained within the group) and the need for uniqueness (the ability to express one's identity and distinctiveness, as well as the perception that one can differ from other group members, hold different views, and that these differences are recognized and respected by others) (Shore et al., 2011).

To measure academic inclusiveness, an original questionnaire was employed, developed on the basis of the two-dimensional model of inclusiveness proposed by Shore et al. (2011) and operationalized by Chung et al. (2020). Within each subscale (dimension), five constructs were examined (see Table 2). Responses were provided using a five-point Likert scale (level of agreement: 1 – "strongly disagree"; 5 – "strongly agree"). Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which individual statements reflected their experiences related to functioning within the academic environment of their home institutions.

Table 2.
Items used in the belongingness and uniqueness subscales

	Item
Belonginess	B1: I am treated as a valuable member of my workgroup.
	B2: I belong in my work group
	B3: I feel a strong bond with my group at the university.
	B4: I feel that my student group is a place where I am meant to be.
	B5: I feel that students in my group care about me.
Uniqueness	U1**:** I am able to contribute unique characteristics and skills to my student group that distinguish me from other members.
	U2: Other students in my group listen to me, even when my views differ from theirs.
	U3: During classes, I feel comfortable expressing opinions that differ from those of my group.
	U4: I am able to share my thoughts on various issues, even when they differ from the views of other students.
	U5: When my group's perspective becomes too narrow, I am able to introduce a new point of view.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Shore et al. (2011).

In line with the adopted research assumptions, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There are statistically significant differences in the level of experienced academic inclusiveness among students from European countries.

H2: The dimension of belongingness exhibits greater cross-cultural variation than the dimension of uniqueness in the perception of academic inclusiveness among students from selected European countries.

The study was conducted in the first quarter of 2025 using a quantitative research method – an online survey (CAWI). The questionnaire was prepared in electronic form and distributed via the Google Drive platform. The survey link was disseminated with a request for further sharing (snowball sampling method). The sampling procedure was non-probabilistic and non-representative.

The article attempts to analyze respondents from selected European countries – Poland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and France. The criterion for selection was the highest response rate to the questionnaire in these European countries. Ultimately, 1,084 questionnaires were included in the analysis. The structure of the research sample is presented in Table 3.

Table 3.
Structure of respondents

Country of origin	Number and structure of respondents	
	(N)	(%)
Poland	535	49.35
Spain	438	40.41
Portugal	65	6.00
Italy	24	2.21
France	22	2.03
Total	1084	100

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conducted research.

The data collected in the study were subjected to statistical analysis using Statistica 13.1 software. To verify the research hypotheses, a set of quantitative analyses was applied. In the first stage, descriptive statistics were used (arithmetic means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for each item of the inclusiveness scale, as well as for the overall scale and its two subscales: belongingness and uniqueness). This enabled a descriptive overview of the distribution of results and their variability across individual regions.

In the subsequent stage, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test (allowing for comparisons among more than two independent groups) was applied. The analyses were conducted for the overall inclusiveness scale and its two components: belongingness and uniqueness. In cases where statistically significant differences were identified, Dunn's post hoc test with Bonferroni correction was performed to determine which pairs of groups differed significantly. Additionally, to assess the magnitude of the observed effects, the effect size coefficient r was calculated, allowing for an evaluation of the practical significance of the results.

The results of the reliability analysis indicate high internal consistency for both the overall scale and its two subscales. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale was 0,8998; the belongingness subscale achieved a value of 0,8586, while the uniqueness subscale reached 0,8374. All of these values fall within the 0,8-0,9 range, which is considered indicative of high reliability. This suggests that the constructed questionnaire consistently and accurately reflects the two key dimensions of academic inclusiveness and is suitable for further comparative analyses.

4. Analysis of results and discussion

In order to identify differences in the perception of academic inclusiveness among students from selected European countries, an analysis of responses to the ten items of the inclusiveness scale was conducted (see Table 4 and 5).

Table 4.
Differences in the evaluation of inclusiveness scale items depending on respondents' country of origin – part 1

Subscales	Poland		Spain		Portugal		Italy		France	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
B1	3.66	1.03	3.63	1.09	3.71	1.11	3.50	1.25	3.41	1.01
B2	3.60	1.15	3.63	1.10	3.42	1.24	3.71	1.16	2.91	1.31
B3	3.11	1.17	3.70	1.13	3.62	1.13	3.58	1.14	3.14	1.28
B4	3.24	1.12	3.63	1.06	3.42	1.26	3.58	1.06	3.09	1.06
B5	3.21	1.15	3.64	1.09	3.62	1.25	3.50	1.32	3.14	1.08
U1	3.59	1.08	3.56	1.06	3.45	1.16	3.50	1.18	3.27	0.98
U2	3.53	0.99	3.72	1.08	3.49	1.15	3.79	1.14	3.50	0.96
U3	3.41	1.13	3.61	1.11	3.63	1.23	3.75	1.07	3.50	1.10
U4	3.62	0.99	3.61	1.08	3.40	1.26	3.50	1.10	3.41	1.22
U5	3.49	1.00	3.61	1.07	3.40	1.20	3.58	1.18	3.23	1.23

M - mean, *SD* - standard deviation.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conducted research.

Table 5.
Differences in the evaluation of inclusiveness scale items depending on respondents' country of origin – part 2

Subscales	H	P	r
B1	2.26	0.692	0.051
B2	7.76	0.100	0.053
B3	66.43	0.000	0.241
B4	30.25	0.000	0.156
B5	36.62	0.000	0.174
U1	3.04	0.551	0.052
U2	11.63	0.020	0.079
U3	9.69	0.056	0.047
U4	2.14	0.710	0.051
U5	5.76	0.218	0.056

H – Kruskal–Wallis test statistic, p – statistical significance (p significant when < 0.05), r – effect size coefficient.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conducted research.

The highest value of the H statistic (66,43) was recorded for the belongingness item related to experiencing a strong bond with the group. The p-value indicates statistically significant differences between countries; according to the post hoc analysis, Polish students experience a significantly weaker bond with their group compared to students from Spain and Portugal. No significant differences were observed among the remaining countries. This result suggests that, for these two national groups, the relational component of belongingness is sensitive to

national and institutional contexts, which is consistent with the assumptions of ODT (Brewer, 1991).

Similarly, the analysis of the item "I feel that my student group is a place where I am meant to be" revealed statistically significant differences. Post hoc analysis indicated that, as in the case of experiencing a strong bond with the group, Spanish students reported a significantly stronger sense of belonging to their student group than Polish students. The remaining differences, although observable at the level of means, did not reach statistical significance. This suggests that the sense of "being in the right place" within a student group is more strongly socially conditioned than individually determined, which is supported by the literature on belongingness as a relational need.

The final construct within the belongingness dimension in which statistically significant differences were observed concerns the sense of mutual care (B5). Here as well, Polish students reported significantly lower levels than Spanish (and Portuguese) students. This finding reinforces the interpretation of belongingness as a dimension closely linked to the quality of interpersonal relationships and norms of social support, as emphasized in research on organizational inclusiveness (Shore et al., 2011).

In summary, the analysis of the items constituting the belongingness dimension indicates that three constructs – emotional bond with the group, sense of belonging to the group, and perceived care from fellow students – exhibit statistically significant differences across nationalities. Polish students achieved the lowest scores in each of these three areas, suggesting a weaker sense of connection and belonging compared to students from other countries. These results are consistent with hypothesis H1 and confirm the existence of variation in academic inclusiveness among students from different European countries.

The highest scores in these constructs were observed among students from Spain and Portugal, which may indicate stronger interpersonal relationships and a greater role of social support within their student groups. Italy and France occupy intermediate positions – the results of students from these countries are moderate, yet generally slightly higher than those observed in Poland. Although the differences are statistically significant, the effect size indicator r (respectively 0,241 (B3); 0,156 (B4); 0,174 (B5)) suggests a small to moderate effect size, indicating the need for cautious interpretation of their practical significance.

The analysis of responses related to the second component of inclusiveness – uniqueness – revealed statistically significant differences in only one item. Significant differences were found regarding being listened to despite holding different views (U2). Post hoc analysis identified differences between students from Spain and Poland, with Spanish students more frequently declaring that their opinions are taken into account. This difference may reflect variations in academic communication styles; however, due to the small effect size, its practical significance should be interpreted with considerable caution.

Tables 6 and 7 presents a comparison of the overall level of academic inclusiveness and its two components – belongingness and uniqueness. This approach allows for a more general analysis of differences between groups and facilitates the identification of consistent patterns within the main dimensions of the studied variable.

Table 6.
Comparison of academic inclusiveness results, including constructs, among students from selected European countries – part 1

Constructs	Poland		Spain		Portugal		Italy		France	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Inclusiveness	3.45	0.80	3.63	0.78	3.51	0.91	3.60	0.76	3.26	0.60
Belonginess	3.36	0.93	3.65	0.84	3.55	0.96	3.58	0.93	3.14	0.83
Uniqueness	3.53	0.84	3.62	0.82	3.47	0.96	3.63	0.79	3.38	0.57

M - mean, *SD* - standard deviation.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conducted research.

Table 7.
Comparison of academic inclusiveness results, including constructs, among students from selected European countries – part 2

Constructs	H	p	r
Inclusiveness	14.86	0.005	0.1171
Belonginess	24.22	0.001	0.149
Uniqueness	3.840	0.428	0.060

H – Kruskal–Wallis test statistic, p – statistical significance (p significant when < 0.05), r – effect size coefficient.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conducted research.

The analysis of the overall level of inclusiveness indicates the presence of statistically significant differences. The lowest level was observed among students from France, while the highest was recorded in Spain. Polish students ranked just above their French counterparts. Post hoc analysis revealed differences between Polish and Spanish students – the overall level of inclusiveness within the academic community is lower among Polish students compared to Spanish students. This result further supports hypothesis H1.

The inclusiveness construct in which statistically significant differences were observed is belongingness. Post hoc analysis indicated a lower level of belongingness among Polish students compared to Spanish students, which is consistent with the earlier analysis of individual items within both constructs.

The analysis of the second inclusiveness construct – uniqueness – indicates that although differences in its level exist, they are not statistically significant. This may suggest a relative stability of this component of inclusiveness across different national contexts, which is consistent with the assumptions of ODT, according to which the need for uniqueness has a more individual and less context-dependent character (Brewer, 1991; Shore et al., 2011). At the same time, the lack of significant differences in the uniqueness dimension at the subscale level confirms hypothesis H2.

In summary, students from Spain and Portugal demonstrate a significantly higher sense of inclusiveness than students from Poland, which may result from differences in integration practices, communication styles, and academic cultures. Countries of Southern Europe may be characterized by a more relational and community-oriented model of education, with greater mutual support and more open communication. These findings align with the literature indicating that belongingness is the component of inclusiveness most sensitive to cultural context, whereas uniqueness remains relatively consistent across cultures.

The findings of this study may serve as a basis for reflection on higher education policies in Poland, particularly in terms of fostering openness, collaboration, and a sense of belonging within student groups. This is especially important given that belongingness is identified as a key component of academic success, psychological well-being, and student retention, particularly among marginalized individuals, students with disabilities, and first-generation students (Allen et al., 2023). Students with a higher sense of belonging are also more likely to engage in activities that contribute to the development of the university community (Masika, Jones, 2016).

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to compare the level of experienced academic inclusiveness among Polish students with that of students from selected European countries. The statistical analyses conducted allowed for the confirmation of hypothesis H1, indicating the presence of statistically significant differences between countries both in the overall level of academic inclusiveness and in one of its key components – belongingness. At the same time, no statistically significant differences were found within the dimension of uniqueness.

The obtained results also confirmed hypothesis H2, according to which the belongingness component exhibits greater cross-cultural variation than the uniqueness component. Analyses conducted at both the subscale and individual item levels indicate that the sense of belonging to the academic community is more susceptible to the influence of cultural, social, and institutional factors than the sense of uniqueness. These findings are consistent with the assumptions of ODT and the inclusiveness model proposed by Shore et al. (2011), according to which the need for belongingness has a more relational and context-dependent character, whereas the need for uniqueness demonstrates greater individual stability.

Despite providing valuable empirical insights, the study has certain limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the sampling method, based on snowball sampling, and its non-representative nature limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader student populations in the respective countries. Additionally, the analysis covered only selected European countries, which does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of

academic inclusiveness across the entire European context. Unequal sample sizes across countries may also have affected the statistical power of the tests and the detectability of effects. Furthermore, the use of the CAWI method and an exclusively self-report measurement instrument entails the risk of response subjectivity and social desirability bias, which may lead to inflated assessments of inclusiveness.

Future research should consider incorporating additional differentiating variables, such as gender, level, mode, and field of study, as well as employing more balanced and randomized sampling procedures. Important directions for further analysis may also include comparative studies that take into account characteristics of educational systems, as well as longitudinal studies enabling the observation of changes in inclusiveness over time, including the impact of academic experiences and implemented educational interventions.

In conclusion, the conducted study makes a meaningful contribution to the literature on academic inclusiveness by highlighting the importance of cultural context in shaping students' sense of belonging and emphasizing this component as a key dimension of inclusiveness in European higher education.

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