

Inclusive Institutions Framework

Embedding inclusion strategically, sustainably and systemically across your institution.



A new, strategic approach to inclusion

Staff and students increasingly expect their institutions to demonstrate meaningful progress on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Yet many institutions find their efforts spread across multiple initiatives, legacy commitments and competing priorities.

The Inclusive Institutions Framework (IIF) offers a clearer, more coordinated way forward. It brings all aspects of inclusion into a single, evidence-led model, helping institutions embed inclusion more effectively, sustainably and systemically.

Designed with institutions in the UK and internationally, the IIF offers a structured pathway that strengthens systems, builds shared understanding and supports long-term, organisation-wide change.

Why choose the Inclusive Institutions Framework?

The Inclusive Institutions Framework helps institutions turn commitment into coordinated action. By joining the framework, institutions can:

Create a more joined-up approach

Bring EDI, access, wellbeing and strategic priorities into a single, coherent picture.

Improve efficiency and reduce duplication

Streamline activity across teams, reducing repetition and improving alignment.

Strengthen evidence and insight

Develop a clearer view of staff and student experience to inform proportionate, impactful decisions.

Shape priorities that fit your context

Identify what matters most for your institution, built on data, consultation and local needs.

Demonstrate credible progress

Work through a structured, externally validated process with recognition at key stages.

Who is it for

The Inclusive Institutions Framework is designed for higher education and research institutions globally.

It is relevant for:

- **Executive leaders** shaping institutional strategy.
- **EDI and professional service teams** coordinating inclusion activity.
- **Academic leaders** responsible for staff and student experiences.
- **Faculties, schools and directorates** seeking alignment with institutional priorities.

An optional departmental toolkit is available for institutional sub-units (departments, faculties, directorates, etc) who want to progress local inclusion work and contribute to institutional goals in a light-touch, self-driven manner.

What you'll gain

Institutions participating in the IIF benefit from:

1. A whole-organisation, intersectional approach

Move beyond characteristic-based activity to coordinated, cross-cutting strategies.

2. Greater efficiency, clarity and alignment

Reduce bureaucracy, duplication and confusion across teams and workstreams.

3. Evidence-based priority-setting

Build decisions on robust data and insight, creating focus and coherence.

4. A clear and communicable narrative

Confidently articulate your direction, progress and ambition.

5. Support and recognition throughout the journey

Benefit from expert guidance, peer learning and staged recognition as you progress.



A framework shaped by the sector

The IIF has been developed through one of the most extensive EDI consultations undertaken in higher education, including:

- Engagement with 279 stakeholders across surveys, interviews and events.
- Input from 29 UK institutions, contributing over 70 hours of in-depth discussion.
- Roundtables with global institutions across Ireland, Canada, Australia and beyond.
- Refinement led by a 19-institution co-development group.

The message was clear: institutions want a strategic, efficient and holistic way to drive inclusion. The IIF is a direct response to that need.

How the framework works

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 three to four years, 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

Delivery and participation

- Available as an add-on to Advance HE membership.
- Delivered through cohorts of up to 10 institutions.
- Typically completed over three years.
- Designed to align with Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter.

Our pathfinder cohort

This group began engaging with the Inclusive Institutions Framework from January 2026, marking the start of a new collaborative phase focused on delivering measurable progress in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).



Why institutions are adopting the framework

*“The Inclusive Institutions Framework offered a **structured yet flexible model** that aligned well with our ambitions. Its focus on **institution-wide change**, rather than isolated initiatives, was particularly compelling.*

*It is already helping to bring **greater clarity** to how a structured and effective approach to inclusivity could be implemented at UCB. It is **providing a framework** for thinking about EDI in a **more systematic and institution-wide way**.”*

Haroon Bashir, Head of EDI, University College Birmingham

*“The Inclusive Institutions Framework gave us a way to record and assess our progress across all areas of inclusion and equality work. Its **holistic and context-specific nature** means it will be beneficial to any institute that takes the time to fully engage with the process.*

*We hope the IIF will help us take a more **structured, strategy-driven** approach to our inclusion work, resulting in a clear, ambitious but achievable EDI action plan, co-designed with input from all stakeholders and incorporating sector best practice adapted to our context.”*

Dr. Siobhán Dorai-Raj, Inclusion, Diversity, Equality and Accessibility Manager, Earlham Institute

*“As an inclusive university, we need to adapt and innovate across our ever-changing student and staff populations and the Inclusive Institutions Framework gives us the **structure** to do exactly that, helping us challenge and **celebrate existing practices** in equal measure.*

*Ultimately, the IIF will help us improve at every level, whether for an individual student or staff member, or a whole-scale institutional process. Whatever the scale of the change, it pushes us to become **more tolerant, more caring and more responsive** to the needs of the people we serve. Our student population is rapidly changing; this framework helps ensure we are changing with them.”*

Luke Millard, Vice Principal Learning and Teaching, Abertay University

*“Its **flexible, developmental approach** is enabling the kind of honest conversations and reflection that more traditional, prescriptive approaches often fail to generate.*

*With support from AdvanceHE and peer institutions, each institution has the ability to tailor the IIF to its own context, making it a **powerful and innovative approach** for driving inclusion work.”*

Mark Hall, Strategic Projects and Data Manager, Canterbury Christ Church University

Inclusive Institutions Framework Team

Dr Ruth Gilligan

Deputy Director of Inclusive Institutions

Dr Ruth Gilligan is Deputy Director of Inclusive Institutions at Advance HE. She is responsible for the strategic leadership of the Athena Swan Charter for gender equality and the Race Equality Charter which operate in the UK and internationally.



Dr Gilligan on the Inclusive Institutions Framework

“The Inclusive Institutions Framework is a strategic, evidence-based approach to EDI that works across all protected characteristics and institutional contexts. It enables the demonstration of transparent, coherent progress across the full range of equality considerations whilst actually reducing the resource burden on the organisation.”



Tinashe Verhaeghe

Senior Adviser, Inclusive Institutions

Tinashe Verhaeghe's career in higher education spans over 15 years with roles including research services, educator development, inclusive education and student admissions and experience amongst other functions. Before joining Advance HE, she was the Business Manager to the Provost at the University of Exeter.

Sally Baden

Head of Athena Swan (Interim)

Sally Baden is currently interim Head of Athena Swan at Advance HE, where she supports higher education institutions in the UK and globally to advance gender equality, working with sector stakeholders. She joined Advance HE's Equality Charters Team in October 2021 as Senior Adviser.



Tara Leach

Senior Adviser, Inclusive Institutions

Tara has over twenty years of experience leading Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives across higher education. Her work spans research, policy, project management, staff development and student support, with a strong focus on creating more inclusive environments for students and colleagues.

Richard Stewart

Senior Adviser, Inclusive Institutions

Richard has over a decade of experience in higher education, specialising in equality, widening participation, student engagement, and disability inclusion. He has also developed advice, advocacy, and engagement programmes to help remove barriers for disabled people.



FAQs

What about existing Charters such as Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter?

For institutions continuing with the charters due to strategic priorities, the IIF complements existing frameworks by providing an institution-wide structure that reduces duplication and encourages cross-cutting approaches.

Can we do Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter and IIF?

Yes. You can continue with Athena Swan and/or REC, move fully to the IIF scheme, or run both in parallel.

How long will it take to complete the IIF?

Institutions will typically complete all four modules over 3 years, with each module taking around nine months.

How much work is involved in the IIF?

The IIF is designed to streamline inclusion work by using existing structures such as EDI governance groups. A core team will drive work forward and participate in IIF engagement activities. Submissions are concise (3–5 pages / 1,000–1,500 words).

Is IIF suitable for small teams and institutions?

The IIF is suitable for institutions of all sizes, including those with limited budgets, small teams, or highly specialist missions.

Is it suitable for international institutions?

Yes. The IIF accommodates different regulatory, cultural and regional contexts.

What recognition will we receive?

Institutions receive certificates for completing modules and an award upon completing the framework.

What does it cost?

~~£3,900 per annum (2025/26) as an add-on to Advance HE membership.~~

Ready to take a more joined-up approach to inclusion?

The Inclusive Institutions Framework supports institutions to move from commitment to coordinated, evidence-led action. Designed to work across different missions, sizes and contexts, it offers a structured yet flexible way to embed inclusion strategically, sustainably and institution-wide.



What happens next

- Explore whether the Inclusive Institutions Framework is right for your institution.
- Discuss how the IIF can align with your existing priorities, strategies and commitments.
- Understand what joining a cohort looks like in practice, including timescales and support.

Talk to us

To learn more about the Inclusive Institutions Framework, contact: iif@advance-he.ac.uk

You can also speak with your Charters Adviser or Head of Membership at Advance HE.