# Strategies for building an inclusive culture in higher education

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**Abstract**

This study investigates the organizational culture within an inclusive higher education environment, focusing on how institutional values and practices support diversity and social responsibility. Addressing the gap in understanding how inclusive values are embedded in the culture of higher education institutions, the research adopts a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, document analysis, and review of audiovisual materials. Analysis procedures included transcription of interviews, examination of field notes and supporting materials, generation of overarching themes, and interpretation of patterns related to inclusivity. The findings reveal that the organizational culture strongly emphasizes respect for diversity and actively responds to social concerns by establishing dedicated spaces for consultation and support services for individuals with special needs. These practices reflect a commitment to inclusivity not only in policy but also in daily academic and administrative operations. The study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education by highlighting how institutional culture can be intentionally shaped to support equity and access..

*Keywords:* Higher education; inclusion practices; institutional culture; organizational values; qualitative research

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive universities provide a fair opportunity for the community to access educational services regardless of background and physical condition (Korkie et al., 2025; Burningham et al., 2024). Students with normal physical conditions and with special needs can study together in the same classroom and be equally compatible in the employment or productive world (Wang & Wan 2025). Higher education management has gradually shifted from an elitist and exclusive mindset to a more democratic and inclusive mindset (Blessinger, 2016) and is increasingly embedded in various higher education systems in multiple countries (Essex et al., 2021).

Success in building and managing inclusive universities is closely related to organizational culture. Ainscow & Sandill (2010) states that leadership is an important element in building a positive culture in inclusive universities. It directs the education system towards inclusive values and brings about sustainable change (Leal Filho et al., 2025). A strong leader will instill inclusive values into all members of the organization; thus, the leader's values and mindset will direct members to build an inclusive higher education organizational culture.

An inclusive organizational culture is reflected in the inclusive character of the organization, there are no barriers between superiors and subordinates, maintaining good relations between superiors and subordinates, all members of the organization feel involved and have the organization, and all members have equal opportunities in conveying aspirations related to policies and decisions made by institutions (Ryan, 2006). In Indonesia, inclusive universities are still relatively new, and not many institutions have realized them. Therefore, one of the important issues in building a superior inclusive university is an understanding of its organizational culture. An inclusive organizational culture provides space for all members of the organization in an egalitarian manner without discrimination, and encourages the creation of a learning organization (Blessinger, 2016), existing policies are always made systematically and supportively for inclusive education (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015) and the policies always eliminate the boundaries of differences between normal students and special needs to create inclusive relationships between students (Temple & Ylitalo, 2009), and make all members of the organization have a role and be involved effectively in building and developing inclusive higher education organizations (McCauley & Van Velsor, 2004).

However, there are still some obstacles in building inclusive universities in Indonesia, such as physical buildings and infrastructure at some universities that are still not accessible, so that the physical accessibility of students with disabilities has not been fully facilitated by the university (Syafi'ie, 2014; Andayani, 2019). In addition, it is still found that the educational policies made at several state universities in Indonesia have not fully accommodated the needs of persons with disabilities (Soleh, 2014). Some of these problems show that the organizational culture of inclusive universities is not yet fully formed. These problems will not occur if it is understood that to build an inclusive university, the most important thing is to build an organizational culture first.

Previous studies have also shown that building organizational culture through leadership roles is a very important key to encouraging and realizing inclusive organizations (Ashikali et al., 2021; Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Brimhall, 2021; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). An inclusive higher education organizational culture can have a positive effect on the performance and innovation ability of organizational staff (Aboramadan et al., 2022). However, there is still little research on organizational culture at the inclusive tertiary level in Indonesia, especially on what values to build an inclusive university organizational culture.

### 1.1. Conceptual framework

#### 1.1.1. *Organizational culture in inclusive higher education*

The culture of each educational institution is always different. Each institution has a history and expectations/expectations about the institution. Institutional culture is influenced by the way of thinking of leaders and members of the organization, which is then institutionalized to become a culture. When the culture of educational institutions is positive, through innovative pedagogies approaches, the development of the institution towards progress will be easier and faster (Bhuttah et al., 2024). On the other hand, if the culture is negative, for example, it does not have professional learning values, resistance to change, and non-

systemic staff development, then this institution will find it difficult to develop and progress. Thus, it can be concluded that the culture of the institution greatly influences the process of achieving the goals of the institution.

Deal & Petterson (2016) state that the culture of educational organizations includes values, traditions, culture, institutional goals, unwritten rules and assumptions, a combination of rituals and traditions, symbols, and artifacts. Institutional culture is manifested in the behavior patterns of organizational members and social norms in the organization's environment. Howard (2010) states that educational organizational culture includes vision, mission, goals, norms, values, beliefs, assumptions, rituals, traditions, celebrations, architectural history, artifacts, and symbols. Based on these two statements, it can be concluded that institutional culture is very complex, in visible and invisible forms, some are physical and some are non-physical.

While Fullan (2002) explains that organizational culture can be identified from: widespread socialization of organizational values and goals to all organizational stakeholders, norms for continuous development and learning, commitment of teachers or leaders to provide maximum academic services for students, building collaboration and cooperation among members of the organization, open space for staff to develop themselves and share experiences with colleagues. Thus, the existence of a good/positive organizational culture will support, motivate, and build commitment from leaders and members of the organization to work hard, be innovative, and support institutional change for the better. This means that a good/positive culture of educational institutions will create effectiveness and work productivity of educational institutions.

Organizational culture has a very important role in building inclusive higher education organizations. In relation to learning, Hongboontri and Keawkhong (2014) in the conclusion of his research stated that a culture of collaboration between teachers/lecturers in carrying out their academic functions will encourage the creation of quality teachers/lecturers and ultimately encourage the creation of quality universities. In relation to inclusive universities, collaboration between educators and even regular students with disabilities will greatly support the creation of a positive academic atmosphere that can make regular and disabled students study comfortably. This is in line with the results of research conducted by MacNeil et al., (2009) which concluded that a good school culture and climate are positively correlated with student academic and non-academic achievement.

### 1.1.2. *Core values in inclusive higher education*

Values are basic and fundamental beliefs that guide and motivate a person's attitude to act. Values reflect performance, culture, or various other aspects of a service, so that customers are willing to commit to the organization (Mintz, 2018). The values possessed by an organization will form an organizational culture that can influence the way the organization works, organizational life, and various organizational practices in order to achieve organizational goals. Every organization must have a strong value base that has been determined and mutually agreed upon in order to build a strong, solid, and future-oriented institution that is clear and measurable. Robbins et al., (2019) states that organizational values are a reflection of beliefs, hopes to be realized, and goals to be achieved by the organization.

Values are part of the culture of a university. Organizational culture plays an important role in building a superior, inclusive university organization. In learning, Hongboontri and Keawkhong (2014) stated that a culture of collaboration between lecturers in carrying out their academic functions will encourage the creation of quality lecturers, which in turn encourages the creation of quality universities. Collaboration between lecturers and between regular students and students with special needs will greatly support the creation of a positive academic climate so that regular and disabled students can study comfortably. This is in line with the research results of MacNeil et al. (2009) which concludes that a good organizational culture and climate are positively correlated with student academic and non-academic achievement.

### 1.2. Purpose of study

This study aims to determine how inclusive organizational culture is at the State University of Surabaya, Indonesia. The State University of Surabaya is recognized as one of the pioneers of inclusive campuses in Indonesia. This institution has received an inclusive campus award from the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia and plays a founding and leadership role in a consortium of inclusive universities in Indonesia (Sucahyo, 2019).

## 2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This study uses a qualitative research method with the type of case study type to analyze the organizational culture of inclusive universities. A case study is chosen to explore an entity such as an individual, a small group, an organization, or an inter-agency partnership. This study identifies, examines, describes, and understands the study of one organizational entity, namely the State University of Surabaya, with a focus on organizational culture in inclusive universities.

### 2.1. Participants

This research was conducted at the State University of Surabaya, Indonesia. This university is categorized as an inclusive university as evidenced by opening the Special New Student Selection route for Persons with Disabilities (SPKPD) who are graduates of Extraordinary High School (SMALB), Extraordinary Vocational High School (SMKLB), and an inclusive Madrasah Aliyah. In addition, Unesa established the Center for Studies and Services for Persons with Disabilities (PSLD) to develop an inclusive campus environment and provide special services for students with disabilities.

Research informants were selected using purposive sampling. Tisdell et al., (2025) states that purposive sampling emphasizes selection criteria for selected participants where researchers can find, understand, and gain more insight into important issues for research. Research informants consist of the chancellor, vice chancellor, dean, head of department/ study programs, heads of disability service study centers, lecturers, and students who have links with the organizational culture at the State University of Surabaya.

### 2.2. Data collection instrument

Data collection in this study was through semi-structured in-depth interview techniques, observation, document analysis, and audiovisual materials (Tisdell et al., 2025). Each interview session lasted for 60-90 minutes for each informant. The time and date of the interview were adjusted by mutual agreement, with more attention to the schedule given by the informant. In the process of collecting interview data, it was recorded using a smartphone. The in-depth interview format used in this study uses the "The general interview guide approach" approach, which is an interview approach that does not use detailed questions that have been prepared in advance, but is limited to using an interview guide (Gall et al., 2007). Also known as the interview approach. semi-structured.

Data collection through observation was employed to directly assess the process of managing inclusive higher education, encompassing physical interactions, verbal exchanges, and institutional artifacts. Field notes served as a medium for recording observations made during the process. The type of observation utilized was non-participant, wherein the researcher remained an observer without direct involvement in the management processes conducted by the informant. Observed objects included organizational norms, core values, organizational rules, and the organizational climate. Document analysis was employed to obtain secondary data relevant to the organizational culture of inclusive universities. Additionally, audiovisual materials, including video and sound recordings, were analyzed to further explore aspects of the institutional organizational culture.

### 2.3. Data analysis

For data analysis, the researcher started with the process of transcription of interview data, observing field notes from observations and materials in the form of video recordings and documents resulting from examining audiovisual material documents. Then the data that has been obtained is then read and studied so that the general idea (general sense) of the information obtained and reflects its overall meaning is known. Then, the transcripts are carefully read line by line, codified, and divided into themes to be presented. Finally,

interpreting or interpreting the data is done by comparing the research results with information from the literature or theory.

To check the validity of the data, the researcher used a member check by sending back all the data to each informant. Gall et al., (2007)) state that member checking exists when all data transcripts are given back to interviewed informants to ensure that what they say is true. In addition, triangulation was carried out by comparing or cross-checking data from one informant and other informants, and cross-checking data from informants using different techniques. Then an external auditor conducted an audit regarding the entire research process, starting from determining the focus of research, field activities, and at the time of determining data sources, conducting data analysis.

## 3. RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that the organizational culture of inclusive universities at the State University of Surabaya has two main characteristics. First, values and organizational identity; Second, have a concern for the problems of the surrounding social environment.

### 3.1. Organizational value and identity

The culture of each educational institution is always different. Each institution has a history and expectations/expectations about the institution. Institutional culture is influenced by the way of thinking of leaders and members of the organization, which is then institutionalized to become a culture. When the culture of educational institutions is positive, the development of the institution towards progress will be easier and faster. On the other hand, if the culture is negative, for example, it does not have professional learning values, resistance to change, and non-systemic staff development, then this institution will find it difficult to develop and progress. Thus, it can be concluded that the culture of the institution greatly influences the process of achieving the goals of the institution.

The State University of Surabaya has a unique value and identity that is different from other institutions. This is evidenced by several interviews with informants. One of them comes from a statement expressed by the PSLD secretary, who said that:

*"...we have the principle that differences are normal. We should respect the diverse characteristics of children. We show that we have a culture that respects differences. For example, through PKKMB, we are trying to introduce volunteers with disabilities, like yesterday, we introduced all new students from Unesa to sign language. the goal is for new students to understand that our campus is disability friendly. And we introduce that there are students with special needs, if we accept differences by teaching them sign language, and it achieves a muri record."*

This statement is corroborated by the results of examining the following documents. It can be seen in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1**
*Students with disabilities attend a ceremony to commemorate the independence of the Republic of Indonesia.*

Based on the documentation above, it can be concluded that Unesa celebrates the independence of the Republic of Indonesia by showing the superiority of its culture. Unesa shows its characteristics as an inclusive campus. The program that is highlighted is singing the Indonesian national anthem in sign language. This shows that Unesa is very supportive of students with disabilities. This was initiated by the Chancellor of UNESA, Prof. Dr. Nurhasan M. Kes because as a form of gratitude to the Indonesian government for providing full support for the implementation of the teaching and learning system for people with disabilities.

Based on this statement, it can be said that Unesa has a unique value and identity that is different from other institutions. Its value is to respect diversity and difference. In accordance with the flagship program set by the Unesa leadership, which is to become a disability-friendly campus. Therefore, Unesa tries to show the wider community that Unesa has a distinctive feature or advantage, specifically, a disability-friendly campus. in the form of singing the anthem Indonesia Raya during the commemoration of the 73rd Indonesian Independence Day, using sign language and led by students with disabilities. This had received public attention and earned the MURI record.

In addition to these programs, Unesa always commemorates the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (HDI). This program is carried out because it provides identity to the institution that Unesa is truly an inclusive and disability-friendly campus. This HDI warning is one of Unesa's ways to socialize. This is confirmed by the results of interviews with PLB FIP Unesa lecturers, who:

*"...in every activity, Unesa shows the advantages of its program. For example, PKKMB's new students with disabilities are always given a role in a series of activities. On August 17th, they sing the Indonesian Raya anthem in sign language. Then Unesa's anniversary celebrations also always involve students with disabilities. And every year, UNESA always celebrates HDI as proof that UNESA is an inclusive campus. New buildings are being built with accessibility. PSLD can also be entered by other Unesa students. Like students from Unair, people with disabilities sometimes go to PSLD."*

In addition, Unesa also opens equal opportunities for students with disabilities to join Unesa as students. This includes the embodiment of an inclusive institutional identity. This identity is different identity from other universities in Surabaya. Unesa tries to differentiate itself into a campus that excels in three fields, namely arts, sports, and disability. These three excellent programs are not owned by PTNs in Surabaya. This distinction is not owned by PTN in Surabaya in particular, so it is very easy to recognize that Unesa is a disability-friendly campus.

### 3.2. Having concern for the problems of the surrounding social environment

Unesa, as an inclusive university, has a concern for the problems of the surrounding social environment. This is reflected in the statement from the Head of the PLB FIP Unesa Department, which stated that:

*"...on average, students with disabilities have close friends. Usually a classmate. This close friend is unexpected, going all out in accompanying his friend without us needing to encourage him. So, students' awareness has grown greatly in the second year of college. They are aware that studying at PLB is like their job. So, how can we change the mindset that all people are born as unique and different beings?"*

Concern does not only come from normal students to students with disabilities. The entire academic community plays a role in this caring attitude. Even the head of the department has concerns about motivating students to help each other. He also said that we should not be antipasti with children with disabilities. is to take care of them. Currently, they are asked to help each other with their disabled friends. To help them become independent and strong human beings.

The leadership of the University, in this case, the Chancellor and his staff, also has a concern for the implementation of inclusive education at Unesa (UNESA Sustainability, 2021). One of his forms of concern is making policies and allocating part of the budget to inclusive education services. This includes providing postgraduate scholarships to graduates with disabilities. Disability-friendly infrastructure. This statement is reinforced by an examination of the document, which can be seen in Figure 2 below:

**Figure 2**

*Unesa inclusive students help students with disabilities to study*



Based on the above documentation, Unesa's leadership has a concern for wider social and environmental issues (UNESA Sustainability, 2021). This is evidenced by the centralization of the budget for services for students with disabilities. In accordance with the words of the Chancellor, who said that "we have prepared a budget to make bicycles and electric cars specifically for children with special needs, this is a research process so that students with special needs are comfortable with Unesa's products. It can be said that the leader has a concern. Not only in the form of physical facilities, but also academic support, such as postgraduate scholarships for students with disabilities. He said that "we provide free scholarships for students with disabilities to continue their postgraduate studies at Unesa. In this case, it can be said that Unesa has a different institutional identity because of the support of leaders who have a concern for social problems, especially for students with special needs.

Then the form of concern was also shown by the students, namely the existence of the PSLD volunteer community, which showed their empathy for others. It was proven by the total commitment of the PSLD volunteers. As a campus providing inclusive education, Unesa recruited special volunteers to assist students with disabilities. have mobility and physical limitations, as well as other disabilities, and will be accompanied by a special team. So, new students can take part in lecture activities. They are not only assisting in academic matters. They are also non-academic. This concern is not owned only by the leadership. But the various elements have a concern with their respective capacities.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings it shows that the existence of different and unique goals, values, and cultures between universities is called inclusive education institutions. Goals, values, and culture are long-term oriented and cannot be compromised for short-term goals. Organizational culture and organizational structure are developed to support the achievement of institutional goals.

The culture of each educational institution is always different. Each institution has a history and expectations/expectations about the institution. Institutional culture is influenced by the way of thinking of leaders and members of the organization, which is then institutionalized to become a culture. When the culture of educational institutions is positive, the development of the institution towards progress will be easier and faster. On the other hand, if the culture is negative, for example, it does not have professional learning values, resistance to change, and non-systemic staff development, then this institution will find it difficult to develop and progress. Thus, it can be concluded that the culture of the institution greatly influences the process of achieving the goals of the institution.

Based on research findings at Unesa, Unesa has a unique value and identity that is different from other institutions. Unesa has a unique value and identity that is different from other institutions. Its value is to respect diversity and difference. In accordance with the flagship program set by the Unesa Leadership, which

is to become a disability-friendly campus. This advantage is shown in the form of singing the Indonesia Raya anthem during the commemoration of the 73rd Indonesian Independence Day, using sign language and led by students with disabilities. Unesa always commemorates the International Day of Disability (HDI). This program is carried out because it provides identity to the institution that Unesa is truly an inclusive and disability-friendly campus.

The culture that has unique Unesa values is in line with the theory put forward by Deal & Petterson (2016), which states that the culture of educational organizations includes values, traditions, culture, institutional goals, unwritten rules and assumptions, a combination of rituals and traditions, symbols, and artifacts. Institutional culture is manifested in the behavior patterns of organizational members and social norms in the organizational environment.

Research findings at Unesa also show that the Unesa academic community has a concern for environmental problems. Starting from the Chancellor, Dean, Kajur/Kaprodi, lecturers, and students. A master's degree is for graduates with disabilities who want to continue their studies at Unesa. Then the Head of Department gives motivation to students to grow a sense of caring for others. Then, the form of student concern is that the existence of this PSLD volunteer community shows their empathy for others. It is proven by the total commitment of the students. PSLD volunteers help students with disabilities so that they can become more resilient and independent individuals, including in learning.

Organizational culture has a very important role in building inclusive higher education organizations. A culture of collaboration between teachers/lecturers in carrying out their academic functions will encourage the creation of quality teachers/lecturers and ultimately encourage the creation of quality universities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Unesa has an organizational culture that respects culture in the form of values that respect diversity and differences in order to create a disabled-friendly campus. In various official campus activities, Unesa always provides space for the involvement of students with special needs. Unesa also has a culture to care about the problems of the surrounding social environment. The leadership always opens space for people with special needs to consult and obtain services at Unesa.

In an effort to build superior inclusive universities, it is recommended not only to focus on providing physical facilities and infrastructure, but also to build an inclusive mindset, values, and culture for leaders and the entire higher education community. Best practices in building organizational culture at inclusive universities at Unesa need to be recorded so that they can be used as lessons learned for other higher education leaders. For further research, it is recommended to examine other values that play a role in building an inclusive higher education culture, namely leadership, building innovative strategies, and building cooperative relationships.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval**: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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