



## Beyond recommendations: The emotional and relational foundations of inclusion

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### ABSTRACT

Inclusion has become a defining concept in higher education (HE), shaping pedagogical discourse and institutional strategy. Within English for Academic Purposes (EAP), however, inclusive practice is often approached procedurally rather than experientially. While a growing body of evidence-based research provides comprehensive recommendations for inclusive teaching across classroom, programme, and institutional levels, their successful implementation depends on two interdependent and frequently overlooked dimensions: emotionality and relationality. This opinion essay argues that inclusion in EAP cannot be achieved solely through structural reforms or policy commitments; it must be emotionally and relationally grounded. Emotionality recognises the affective realities of teaching and learning, while relationality concerns the human connections that sustain inclusion as a lived experience. These dimensions transform inclusion from a policy to a practice, from a framework to a feeling. Only when educators and institutions attend to the emotional and relational foundations of their work can inclusion move beyond rhetoric to become an embodied commitment to belonging and equity in higher education.

**Keywords:** inclusion, emotionality, relationality, English for Academic Purposes; higher education

### Introduction

Inclusion has become a touchstone of contemporary higher education, signalling institutional commitments to equity, access, and belonging. In English for Academic Purposes (EAP), where language, culture, and identity intersect, these commitments acquire particular urgency, because questions of participation and legitimacy are acutely negotiated through linguistic practices. The literature is clear: inclusive education must move beyond access to reshape pedagogical relationships and challenge hierarchies that reproduce inequity (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Recent evidence provides comprehensive guidance pertaining to differentiated instruction and assessment, co-designed curricula, reflective collaboration, and institutional alignment (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025). Yet frameworks alone cannot humanise educational life. Too often, inclusion becomes a checklist, a compliance culture that obscures the relational and emotional dimensions of belonging (Hockings, 2010). This essay advances a critical argument: inclusion in EAP will remain fragile unless it is emotionally and relationally grounded. Emotionality names the affective conditions – safety, trust, recognition – that underwrite engagement (Zembylas, 2005, 2024). Relationality names the quality of interpersonal and institutional connections that sustain inclusion over time (Noddings, 2013). Together, they convert inclusion from policy into practice, from framework into feeling.

### The emotional dimension of inclusion

EAP learning is never purely cognitive. It is lived through emotions that shape participation and perception, especially for students working in an additional language, who often experience vulnerability, self-doubt, or fear of inadequacy (Gkonou et al., 2020; Pavlenko, 2005). These affective states mediate how students interpret feedback, take risks, and claim a voice in academic discourse. Ignored, emotion becomes a barrier; recognised and supported, it becomes a bridge to engagement.

An emotionally inclusive pedagogy therefore cultivates psychological safety and attunement. It treats care as ethical labour rather than an optional extra (Zembylas, 2024). Pedagogically, this means privileging growth-oriented feedback and opportunities to revise, approaches shown to bolster motivation more effectively than error-focused correction alone (Ferris, 2020). Strategically, it means designing activities that normalise productive struggle, validate identity, and invite agency.

Crucially, emotional inclusion is bidirectional. EAP teachers undertake significant emotion work, balancing empathy, and evaluation amid institutional pressures of standardisation and performativity (Benesch, 2017). When this labour is invisible, burnout follows; when it is recognised through equitable workload models, reflective supervision, and collegial support, teachers' capacity for flexible, humanising pedagogy expands. Emotional inclusion thus requires institutional legitimisation of emotion as a professional competence, not a private sentiment. In short, emotionality is the affective infrastructure that makes inclusive principles livable.

### The relational dimensions of inclusion

If emotionality explains how inclusion feels, relationality explains how it functions. Inclusion is realised through relationships that connect micro-level classroom practices to macro-level culture, a social and ethical ecosystem sustained through ongoing human connection (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Noddings, 2013). At the pedagogical level, relational inclusion reframes EAP as collaborative rather than corrective. Dialogic classrooms invite students to co-construct knowledge, affirming agency and validating linguistic and cultural identities (Hyland, 2022). This shift disrupts deficit framings of "correct academic English", replacing them with reciprocity, shared responsibility, and mutual growth. Authority becomes relational, not unilateral.

Relationality also structures professional life. Inclusive EAP rarely thrives in isolation; it depends on cross-boundary collaboration among EAP practitioners, academic developers, and disciplinary colleagues (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025; Morgan, 2009). Mentoring, shared inquiry, and co-design are not ancillary; they are the infrastructural practices by which inclusion becomes a programme ethos rather than a series of isolated acts.

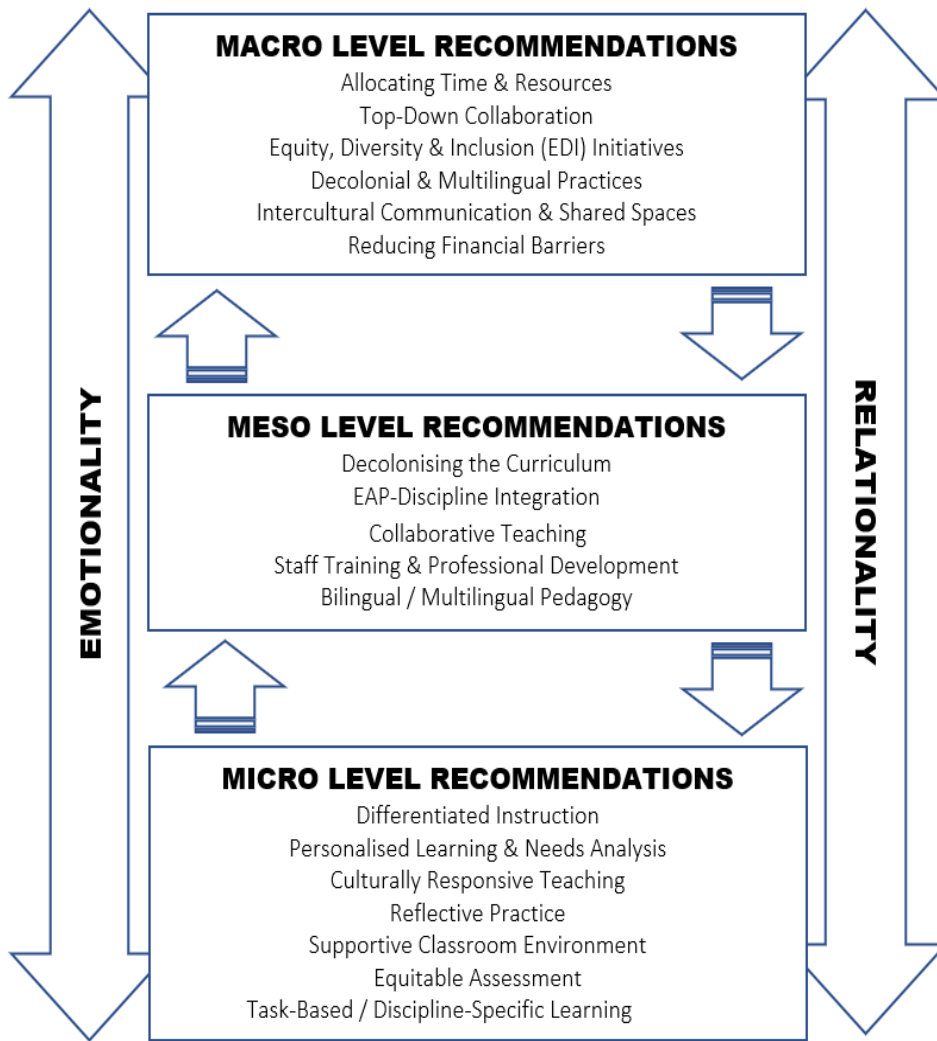
Institutionally, relationality must be structurally valued. Policies that recognise teamwork, reward relational labour, and embed collaboration in promotion and workload frameworks signal that human connection is constitutive of academic excellence. Without such reinforcement, inclusion devolves into moral heroics by individuals (Ahmed, 2012). Finally, relationality carries epistemic weight: it challenges linguistic hierarchies by treating meaning-making as negotiated and shared, repositioning EAP from remedial support to epistemic bridge across diverse ways of knowing (Canagarajah, 2012).

### Why evidence-based recommendations need emotional and relational grounding

The growing body of evidence-based research in inclusive EAP pedagogy offers valuable recommendations for systemic change. These include differentiated and formative assessment, co-designed curricula that centre student voice, decolonised and plurilingual pedagogies, and institution-wide strategies integrating EAP into the academic ecosystem (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025). Collectively, such initiatives articulate what inclusion should entail. Yet, as the literature increasingly reveals, their implementation falters not because these recommendations are flawed, but because they often lack emotional and relational grounding.

Emotionality and relationality are the conditions of possibility for inclusion. They determine whether evidence-based strategies are internalised as values or performed as compliance. Differentiated assessment may promote flexibility, but without emotional sensitivity it can reinforce deficit perceptions. Co-designed curricula may promise empowerment, but without relational trust they risk tokenism. Similarly, partnerships between EAP practitioners and disciplinary academics, so often heralded as best practice, cannot succeed without relational integrity and mutual respect (Morgan, 2009). When institutional cultures privilege autonomy over collaboration or when disciplinary hierarchies devalue EAP expertise, inclusion becomes aspirational rather than achievable. At the macro level, inclusion policies may articulate belonging, yet their impact dissipates when everyday interactions contradict their principles. A policy can legislate inclusion but not empathy; it can codify equity but not connection (Ahmed, 2012). When emotional climates are shaped by competition, fear, or exhaustion, inclusion remains symbolic. Sustainable inclusion, therefore, depends not only on frameworks but on the affective and relational climates that animate them.

To capture this dynamic, the updated, proposed framework (see Figure 1) adapted from Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou (2025) visualises emotionality and relationality as the core of inclusive EAP across three systemic levels, micro (individual), meso (departmental), and macro (institutional). These foundational dimensions support pedagogical strategies (e.g., differentiated instruction), programmatic mechanisms (e.g., interdisciplinary collaboration), and institutional commitments (e.g., multilingual and decolonial practices). By positioning emotionality and relationality at the heart of inclusion, the model reframes inclusion as a human process rather than a bureaucratic ideal.



**Figure 1** The emotional–relational framework for inclusive EAP

This reorientation invites a paradigm shift: inclusion must not only be planned and implemented but also felt and sustained. Institutions must therefore invest in emotional literacy, relational capacity, and the ethical imagination necessary to humanise academic life.

### Conclusion

Inclusion in EAP cannot be secured by frameworks and policies alone. It requires the emotional awareness that makes inclusion authentic and the relational connection that makes it endure. Without these foundations, inclusive practice risks becoming performative, structurally sound yet emotionally hollow. With them, inclusion becomes transformative: a human project of building belonging through feeling, relationship, and care. Inclusion that is not felt cannot endure. Inclusion that is not relational cannot transform. To make inclusion real in higher education, we must first make it human.

## Biographies

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