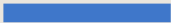


Inclusive Sussex

Culture, Equality and Inclusion Framework 2025-35

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Introduction

The Sussex 2035 Strategy, [*Creating Progressive Futures - flourishing, sustainability and progress for the whole world*](#), was launched in autumn 2025. It outlines the University's ambitious vision, mission, values, foundational principles and transformational themes for the next ten years. At the same time, the previous Inclusive Sussex Strategy reached the end of its lifespan. We have, therefore, developed a new Inclusive Sussex Framework, building on the Inclusive Sussex Strategy, and aiming both to align with the new Sussex 2035 strategy and meet the needs of an evolving legal and policy landscape.

As Sussex 2035 states, we aim to become a university in which every student and member of staff can feel that they are in the best place to realise their goals, where they can develop, be themselves, and do their best work, and where we fully embrace diversity of background, identity, belief, thought, discipline, and method. In the context of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and organisational culture, this means an ambition to identify and eliminate discrimination and harassment wherever they occur, to ensure reasonable adjustments, and to move towards the full inclusion of all members of the University community.

We live in a challenging time for EDI initiatives and work, which have come under increasing scrutiny and contestation across the globe. In the UK specifically, the legal context and framework for EDI are evolving as a result of case law and new regulatory obligations, including strengthened requirements to secure and promote freedom of speech. Along with many other universities, Sussex has found itself at the heart of some of these tensions and challenges. In this context, it is especially important that we explain what we mean by equality, diversity, inclusion, culture and related concepts, our approach to advancing them, and that we underline our commitment to ensuring freedom of speech, academic freedom, and to meeting all legal and regulatory obligations. This Inclusive Sussex Framework outlines our approach to culture, equality, and inclusion, the

areas of EDI work on which the University will focus, and the organisational structures that support and progress EDI work at Sussex. It also elaborates on our commitments to freedom of speech and academic freedom, and how we will ensure that they are maintained, whilst also complementing our commitment to EDI. It describes how these elements together contribute to an organisational culture that supports everyone in the community to flourish.

There is no obligation on any members of the University community to adopt any of the viewpoints or beliefs expressed in the framework. We recognise that there are a wide range of beliefs held and expressed both inside and outside the University community on these issues, and we welcome open and respectful dialogue and disagreement.



Introduction (continued)

Several three-year strategic plans for the University, its constituent parts and each of the core and enabling themes describe activity for the first period of the strategy. They set out the specific actions and activities that will help us to achieve the vision outlined in Sussex 2035. Among these are the People and Culture Strategic Plan, that for the Human Flourishing Transformational Theme, the Education and Student Life Strategic Plan, and the Infrastructure Strategic Plan. These detail how we will achieve related goals in Sussex 2035, including the following:

We will support students from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences to access education at Sussex, and we will enable all students to flourish whilst here and beyond. (Education and Student Life Goal 1).

We will develop Sussex's operations, infrastructure, and people to enable the flourishing of the university community, the city, region and the whole world. (Human Flourishing Goal 3)

We will design the transformation and maintenance of our physical and digital infrastructure and services to meet the diverse, changing, and specialist needs of our whole community, developing state-of-the-art scientific facilities, and driving inclusion and accessibility for all. (Infrastructure Goal 2).

We will enable every member of our diverse community to flourish in their working lives by providing an equitable and inclusive environment, in which everyone can be themselves, and where they are supported to develop their skills and capacities to do their best work and realise their ambitions. We will focus on addressing entrenched inequalities and processes of marginalisation. (People and Culture Goal 1).

These are some of the top-level Sussex 2035 goals relating to culture, equality and inclusion. The People and Culture, Human Flourishing, Education and Student Life, and Infrastructure strategic plans will help us to achieve them. Meanwhile, this framework seeks to elaborate how EDI and organisational culture work will contribute to making the Sussex 2035 vision a reality over the next ten years. The framework aims to help members of the University community understand the work that we do in this area and how they might contribute to it.

The Inclusive Sussex approach

The Inclusive Sussex Framework has three distinct principles that guide the University's approach to culture, equality and inclusion. Our work in this area will be structural and systemic, evidence-led, and universalist and relational. These principles will help us achieve the vision set out in Sussex 2035 in relation to EDI and organisational culture.

Structural and systemic

Inclusive Sussex takes a structural and systemic approach to understanding inequality. Structural and systemic inequality occurs when exclusion and disadvantage are embedded in, and reproduced by, an institution's policies, processes, practices, and organisation, and therefore potentially exist in its curriculum, culture, and environment. Structural and systemic inequalities give rise to unequal status, power, and benefits between different groups of people. Framing inequality as structural motivates us to focus on institutional change, and not just on individual behaviour or experience, while at the same time ensuring more positive outcomes for individuals. Our [Dignity, Respect and Inclusion Policy](#) sets out our expectations for how we treat each other, complementing the structural change that we aim to bring about.

Evidence-led

By working with our community, we use an evidence-led approach to understand the specific challenges and barriers faced by members of underrepresented, disadvantaged and minoritised groups. We work with stakeholders to develop quantitative and qualitative sources of sector and institutional evidence: staff survey results, data from our HR systems and student reporting systems, and feedback, engagement and co-development with staff networks and student representatives. We also draw from equality analyses to understand how our policies and practices affect people across all protected characteristics. Workstreams and activities that form part of Inclusive Sussex are designed to address the identified barriers and we seek to learn from each activity to allow for continuous improvement.

Universalist and relational

Our approach to disadvantage and identity is universalist and relational. This means that we take as a starting point the common dignity and humanity of all in our community. We recognise that people have different identities, backgrounds and viewpoints, and that responses to these shape the advantages or disadvantages they may face. These experiences are created by historically evolved social systems and relationships, not just by individuals themselves in the here and now. Because of this, Inclusive Sussex focuses on improving structures, practices, and processes, rather than judging or labelling people. We also understand that no one person can speak for an entire group. Our goal is to build a collegial community in which everyone can flourish together.

Drivers for Inclusive Sussex

Sussex 2035 sets out six core interrelated values of collaboration, courage, inclusion, integrity, kindness and openness. These values drive the work of Inclusive Sussex, particularly inclusion and openness. Inclusion requires that we embrace the diversity of our students, staff, alumni, partners, and stakeholders, actively address underrepresentation and disadvantage, and consciously create the conditions for belonging to our community. Openness entails being open to each other, to the world, and to our city and region, welcoming and listening to people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and identities. As well as these values, there are four distinct drivers for Inclusive Sussex, as set out below.

Ethical relations

Ethical relations is a foundational principle of Sussex 2035. Sussex 2035 says: "Sussex is a diverse community of staff, students, and alumni, embedded in, and interdependently entangled with, wider local and global communities, and with the natural environment. As an organisation, we will seek to relate ethically to each other, to external stakeholders and partners, and to the natural environment."

We endeavour to identify and challenge all forms of discrimination and structural disadvantage in how we operate as a university. Our proud history as a progressive university is reflected in Sussex 2035. This history and our quest for ethical excellence underpin the other three drivers.

Meeting legal and regulatory obligations

The University has statutory obligations as set out in the Equality Act 2010 (including anti-discrimination and public sector equality duties) and in evolving related legislation (concerning human rights, freedom of speech and academic freedom, employment, criminal and other areas of law). Universities are also subject to a [higher education regulatory framework](#) that specifies requirements to widen participation (Condition A1) and address sexual misconduct and harassment (Condition E6).

Freedom of speech and academic freedom

At Sussex, [freedom of speech and academic freedom](#) are foundational commitments, and are complemented and enabled by our commitment to EDI. We are committed to securing and promoting academic freedom and freedom of speech, including by providing an environment for the respectful and peaceful exchange of diverse viewpoints that can be scrutinised and explored with civility. By facilitating the free expression of lawful diverse views, we can ensure that all voices, including those of the most marginalised, can be heard. The free exchange of beliefs and opinions can also increase openness towards those with different viewpoints.

Enhancing business and operational outcomes

Operational considerations reflect the principle that EDI work supports and enhances an organisation's core activities, which for Sussex are education, research and innovation, and global and civic engagement. In general, equal, diverse, inclusive, open and accessible organisations are better places to work and more successful in achieving these outcomes.

Inclusive Sussex workstreams

While progress toward EDI, openness and accessibility should benefit everyone in our community, we nevertheless recognise that there are specific axes along which marginalisation and discrimination operate. The Equality Act 2010 specifies nine “protected characteristics”: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

These characteristics may not function independently, but can overlap and intersect. For instance, the experiences and challenges faced by Black women may not be captured by looking through the separate lenses of race and sex or gender. At Sussex our EDI activities are organised through the following workstreams, but we nevertheless understand the importance of identifying and addressing intersectional disadvantage.

In addition to those workstreams relating to protected characteristics, a broad Dignity, Respect and Inclusion workstream addresses a variety of issues related to harassment, bullying, victimisation and violence.

Disability

The Equality Act definition of [disability](#) encompasses physical and mental impairments. Disabled people are a heterogeneous group who may face a wide variety of barriers and disadvantages. For example, the experiences associated with visible disabilities (for instance, wheelchair use) are likely to differ from those associated with invisible or less immediately visible disabilities (for instance, dyslexia, cancer, or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME). The disability workstream also encompasses those who are neurodivergent, some of whom may identify as disabled and some of whom may not, which is also the case for those who are hearing-impaired and those with some other conditions. The University seeks to use the social model of disability: this recognises that people are generally rendered disabled by their environment (physical and digital), policies, practices and procedures, and social structures and attitudes, aside from any limitations arising from their impairments.

Disabled staff and students at Sussex may face physical barriers to participation in University life, such as wheelchair inaccessible areas on campus. They may also face barriers to communication and interaction through poor digital accessibility or other forms of inaccessible communication. Reasonable adjustments and workplace flexibility (both in the form of anticipatory action and response to individual needs) can help to mitigate and redress some of these challenges. There is also ongoing important work to be undertaken around attitudinal barriers facing disabled staff and students.

The University currently uses the government’s [Disability Confident scheme](#) to guide its work toward disability inclusion, and is also in the process of applying for the [University Mental Health Charter](#).

LGBTQ+

[The LGBTQ+ workstream](#) broadly corresponds to two protected characteristics in the Equality Act: sexual orientation and gender reassignment. LGBTQ+ identities and experiences may extend beyond the bounds of these characteristics. The workstream encompasses minoritised sexualities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, asexual and others) and trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming members of the University community, including those who may not be specifically protected by the Equality Act 2010.

LGBTQ+ people are at risk of homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic discrimination and harassment, stereotyping, assumptions and sometimes estrangement from family members. LGBTQ+ people may not be comfortable being out in the workplace or classroom, which can be stressful or upsetting. Trans and non-binary people may face specific issues such as time off for medical appointments relating to transitioning, uncertainty regarding facility use, being misgendered or deadnamed (having a former name be used for them, whether deliberately or inadvertently), and stress or anxiety about being perceived as their lived gender in the workplace or classroom. Trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming staff and students also face an uncertain legal environment and increasing hostility and challenge across the globe, including in the UK, which can cause significant distress.

Feedback from the LGBTQ+ Staff Network at Sussex indicates a desire for greater awareness of different sexual orientations from managers, improved workplace culture for LGBTQ+ people, positive messaging from the University about LGBTQ+ people, and building trust with University leaders, including through attendance at key events. Staff survey results and direct feedback from trans and non-binary members of the University community reveal low levels of trust in senior leadership, as well as a high degree of anxiety and apprehension about the implications of recent legal developments. There are also persistent issues around University systems deadnaming trans students, which we continue to work towards resolving.

Currently, Sussex uses [Stonewall's Proud Employers Accreditation](#) as a tool to benchmark and evaluate our work toward LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Race

[Race](#) is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 and includes "colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins".

At Sussex, work in this area is currently coordinated through the [Race Equality Charter \(REC\)](#) and is grounded in our [anti-racist pledge](#) made in 2021. The University achieved a Bronze REC award in 2023, marking the first institutional recognition of our commitment to tackling racial inequalities. The REC process identified several priority issues. For staff, these include underrepresentation of racially-minoritised colleagues at senior levels, reliance on fixed-term contracts, and ethnicity pay gaps (with Black women experiencing the highest gaps). For students, challenges include awarding gaps, particularly affecting Black students, and lower levels of a sense of "belonging" compared with White peers. REC Culture Survey findings in 2021 also pointed to experiences of racism on campus, alongside low trust that the University will act effectively on feedback or incidents reported.

Alongside REC, Sussex has developed single-focus initiatives that acknowledge and respond to structural disadvantage. Examples include the Black at Sussex programme and the University's dedicated workstream on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) inclusion. These complement REC commitments by combining systemic action with targeted responses in areas where inequalities are most acute.

The [Black at Sussex](#) project launched in 2022. It aims to improve the experience of Black students and staff at Sussex, through ongoing research, events and initiatives. Its objectives are to celebrate Black culture among current and former students and staff, establish and develop collaborative partnerships with Black-led organisations, and promote the University to Black students and staff.

Religion and belief

[“Religion and belief”](#) is a broad characteristic under the terms of the Equality Act. Everyone is protected on the basis of either having a religion or philosophical belief or not having one. However, we can nevertheless point to specific areas where disadvantage, exclusion, and marginalisation can arise.

Some religions can face particularly high degrees of prejudice and hostility, which may intersect and overlap with forms of racism. Antisemitism and Islamophobia/anti-Muslim discrimination emerge as particular concerns in this context and in the present moment. More generally, those who hold religious beliefs or practise a religion may face assumptions, stereotypes and a lack of understanding in an increasingly secular society. Practical concerns may also arise regarding accommodations such as time off for significant religious events, or requirements to pray at certain times or places.

The question of protected philosophical beliefs has come to the fore in recent years, with beliefs on various contested issues being established as protected by case law if they meet the “*Grainger* criteria”. Veganism, gender-critical beliefs and anti-Zionist beliefs are examples that case law has established as meeting these criteria and there is a growing list of others as the courts consider specific cases. Some protected philosophical beliefs touch on deep-rooted and existential questions. This makes navigating debates and discussions particularly challenging, and particularly important to facilitate with the University’s values in mind. Some people report feeling unable to express their beliefs openly and our foundational commitment to freedom of speech and academic freedom requires us to address this. One way through which the University has been doing this is through the Open Listening Programme.

Sex and gender

Sex is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, covering both women and men. This is encompassed by the [gender equality workstream](#) at Sussex. The protected characteristic of sex has been determined by the Supreme Court to refer to biological sex, which has generally been taken to mean sex as recorded at birth. By referring to gender, which is not itself a protected characteristic, we mean the social constructions (often contested) of what it means to be a woman or a man.

Sussex currently uses [Advance HE’s Athena Swan charter](#) as a tool for advancing gender equality. The University currently holds an institutional Athena Swan Bronze award, and all Schools also hold individual awards. These local awards surface School and Faculty-level issues and provide valuable insight into staff and student experiences.

Key issues for staff include gender pay gaps, unequal career progression into senior roles, lack of career support, and challenges faced by parents and carers in balancing workload with career development. Data show that these issues continue to affect women more than men, particularly academic mothers. They may furthermore be compounded or complicated for same-sex, trans and non-binary parents. Men often experience stigma regarding taking parental leave or accessing wellbeing support, as well as more limited policy provision. This in turn reinforces the perception that caring and wellbeing are primarily women’s issues, which anchors inequality in progression and pay.

Key issues for students include lack of representation, as well as awarding and outcome gaps across disciplines. Women often achieve better degree outcomes but remain underrepresented in STEM subjects as students and staff.

An intersectional lens also highlights how multiply-marginalised identities can compound barriers to equity, not just in an additive way but by creating distinctive experiences. For example, Black women academics may experience distinct obstacles in progression and recognition distinct from those faced by Black men or white women.

Dignity, Respect and Inclusion

The University wants all members of the community to feel that they belong at Sussex, to be treated fairly and with [dignity and respect](#), and to have the opportunity to contribute and thrive, free from bullying, harassment, victimisation, violence, or discrimination.

Incidences of harassment and bullying, discrimination, victimisation and violence are taken seriously and addressed through the appropriate procedures and support routes. We know that these behaviours can affect members of our diverse community differently, and that such behaviours can be particularly associated with individual identities and protected characteristics. We also know that some members of the community have low trust in the systems and processes in place to address these issues, resulting in underreporting and a consequent reduction in the University's ability to effect meaningful change. Building understanding of our reporting mechanisms, including the use of Report+Support, and improving our response to reports are priorities in this context.

Activity in this workstream focusses on policy, practice and training, reporting and support routes and ongoing engagement with stakeholders to build trust. It also includes work to ensure compliance with the Office for Students E6 Condition of Registration relating to eliminating harassment and sexual misconduct.

Open Listening

[The Open Listening Programme](#) seeks to build the individual and collective capacity of staff and students for engaging with difficult conversations and 'hot topics' and to develop a culture of listening and understanding across different life experiences and identities. Open Listening is an experiential process that includes theory and practice.

In 2023, we developed and launched a pilot Open Listening Programme. The pilot aimed to foster inclusive listening approaches, helping colleagues learn how to work effectively with interpersonal conflict and build stronger relationships based on respecting differences. The results of the pilot were overwhelmingly positive and further experiential and practical workshops were provided in 2023 and 2024 to explore conflict theory and open listening spaces.

The Open Listening Programme includes introductory workshops, an applied programme of training, and thematic interventions on specific issues and topics in the University such as the Israel/Palestine conflict and questions of sex and gender.

Culture, Equality and Inclusion organisational structure

The University has a number of roles and teams that engage in culture, equality and inclusion work. The current structure may evolve over the course of the framework, according to changing priorities and organisational capacity.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Culture, Equality and Inclusion) has overall executive responsibility, although aspects of this responsibility may be shared, for example with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students) in respect of inclusive curricula, access and participation, and inequalities in students' experiences and outcomes, and with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation) in respect of research culture. Each Faculty has an Associate Dean (Culture, Equality and Inclusion) who is responsible for furthering EDI work in that Faculty. EDI leads and EDI Champions in Schools and Professional Services divisions liaise with staff, organise grass-roots activities, advocate for EDI, and (in Faculties) report to the Associate Deans to ensure joined up thinking across the University.

The EDI Board, chaired by the PVC (CEI) and reporting to the University Executive Board (chaired by the Vice-Chancellor) is the key channel for the review, development, and approval of initiatives and proposals that align with Sussex's commitments to EDI for both staff and students.

The EDI Unit, which sits within the Human Resources Division, is the Professional Services team responsible for EDI work. It is led by the Assistant Director of HR, Culture Equality and Inclusion, and includes several EDI Consultants and Project Managers who lead on specific workstreams, as well as an EDI Coordinator.

Each main area of work is overseen by a steering group: the Race Equality Charter Steering Group, the Gender Equality Steering Group, the Disability Equality and Inclusion Steering Group (which also encompasses neurodiversity inclusion work), the LGBTQ+ Steering Group, and the Religion and Belief Forum. These Steering Groups monitor and contribute to action plans in their area, and feed back to the University on relevant issues.

Sussex has several staff networks for staff with specific characteristics: the Ethnic Minority Staff Network, the Parents and Carers Staff Network, the LGBTQ+ Staff Network, the Trans and Non-Binary Staff Network, the Disability Staff Network, and the Neurodiversity Staff Network. These networks are self-organised (although are recognised by the University) and offer supportive spaces, activities, and events as well as providing feedback to the University on relevant consultations. They collaborate with, and are supported by, the University, and feed into University structures and consultations.

The University of Sussex Students' Union has its own organisational structure and approach in relation to furthering EDI work, and we work with them to progress institutional priorities relating to students. Students' Union representatives standardly sit on the steering groups detailed above.

As required by the Office for Students, we have an [Access and Participation Plan](#), which sets out our measures for promoting equality of opportunity for underrepresented home undergraduate student groups.

We have a team of Disability Advisors who provide support and guidance for disabled students at Sussex.



Conclusion

This framework will span ten years, to align with the Sussex 2035 strategy. Over this time, we expect and hope to see considerable progress in addressing structural and systemic disadvantage at the University. A more detailed account of our planned and undertaken activities to progress culture, equality and inclusion work and to become Inclusive Sussex can be found both in the Strategic Plans and in our EDI Annual Report. We will continue to draw on evidence to grow our understanding of the University community and the barriers faced by those with distinct identities, backgrounds and viewpoints, and we will adjust our work accordingly. In this way, we hope truly to become Inclusive Sussex.

Appendix: key concepts and terminology

Accessibility addresses physical, procedural or attitudinal barriers so that everyone in a community can fairly work and study. At Sussex, we aim to provide equal and inclusive access to excellent learning, research and employment opportunities for all with particular regard to disability, while also recognising the needs of those with other protected characteristics.

Culture refers to the behaviour, beliefs, attitudes and norms of a particular people, society, or organisation. Workplace culture is reflected in an organisation's purpose, leadership, values, traditions and beliefs, and the behaviours and attitudes of its people.

Dignity and Respect mean having due regard for the feelings, wishes and rights of others as fellow human beings.

Disability is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on someone's ability to do normal daily activities.

Diversity refers to the differences of background, belief, identity and viewpoint that may be present in a society or organisation and the value that this brings. At Sussex, we are firmly committed to creating and sustaining a positive environment that promotes diversity for the benefit of all.

Equality is here understood primarily through the legal concept of equality as fairness, which incorporates both equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. At Sussex, our work toward equality means that we aim to ensure equality of opportunity and to reduce structural gaps in representation, experience, progression, success and reward.

Gender reassignment is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as a process of changing physiological or other aspects of sex. Someone is protected

under the characteristic of gender reassignment if they are intending to transition, are undergoing transition, or have transitioned.

The '**Grainger criteria**' are a five-part legal test established in *Grainger plc v Nicholson* (2010) that establish whether a belief is protected under the Equality Act 2010. To meet the criteria, the belief must be 1) genuinely held; 2) a belief and not an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available; 3) a belief as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour; 4) attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance; and 5) be worthy of respect in a democratic society, be not incompatible with human dignity and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others

Inclusion means that we will embrace the diversity of our students, staff, alumni, partners, and stakeholders, actively address under-representation and disadvantage, and consciously create the conditions for belonging in our community.

Openness concerns being open to each other, to the world, and to our city and region, welcoming and listening to people of all backgrounds, beliefs, identities and viewpoints. We will share our knowledge, data, and the products of our research as widely as possible, valuing open minds and seeking open dialogue.

Race is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as encompassing colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins.

Religion or belief is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as meaning any religion and any religious or philosophical belief. These both include a lack or absence of belief.

Sex is defined in the Equality Act 2010 using the terms "man" and "woman". In April 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that "sex" in the Equality Act refers to "biological" sex, which is usually understood as a person's sex at birth.

Sexual orientation is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as a person's sexual orientation towards people of the same sex, people of the opposite sex, or people of either sex.

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