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Inclusive pedagogies and practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in higher education (HE): An exploratory survey-based study

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion has become a defining marker of quality and equity in higher education (HE), yet its operationalisation in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching remains underexplored. This paper presents the first empirical phase of a multi-stage BALEAP-funded project investigating inclusive teaching practices in EAP. Using an exploratory qualitative survey of 23 EAP practitioners across diverse institutional roles and global contexts, the study captures how inclusion is understood, enacted, and constrained within English-medium HE environments. Thematic analysis identified two overarching domains: *barriers to inclusion*, including limited awareness and training, prescriptive curricula, lack of diversity consideration, time constraints, and prohibitive course costs, and *approaches to inclusion*, encompassing differentiated instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, reflective practice, personalised learning, and cooperative, student-centred engagement. Findings reveal that while inclusivity is widely endorsed as an ethical and pedagogical imperative, its translation into practice is hindered by structural and institutional limitations. EAP educators often navigate tensions between linguistic rigour and equity, highlighting the need for systemic frameworks that recognise inclusivity as a core professional competency rather than an optional enhancement. The study contributes novel empirical evidence by translating existing inclusion theory into an EAP context and extending the focus from individual practices to an organisational ethos, thereby providing a diagnostic foundation for subsequent project phases that develop practical and policy-oriented recommendations. It argues that meaningful inclusion requires coordinated institutional action aligning policy, curriculum, and professional development to position linguistic and cultural diversity as drivers of educational excellence rather than challenges to be managed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

Inclusion in higher education (HE) has been a topic of considerable importance, with implications extending beyond the benefits for individual learners to encompass the social, cultural, and institutional transformation of universities themselves (Fuller et al., 2004; Matthews, 2009; Redpath et al., 2013). As HE systems become increasingly diverse and internationalised, inclusion has moved to the forefront of global educational discourse. It is now recognised not only as a moral imperative but also as a defining indicator of institutional quality and strategic reputation (Baltaru, 2020). While this growing body of literature spans multiple disciplinary and geographical contexts, the studies cited from 2023 onwards constitute a coherent and cumulative programme of empirically grounded research that explicitly situates inclusion within EAP in HE. Collectively, they offer the most current and EAP-specific articulation of inclusion as a multidimensional construct linking educational equity, cultural responsiveness, and pedagogical innovation within globalised HE contexts (Bakogiannis, 2025a; Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025b). As a result, recently published papers by the authors are referenced throughout this article where they provide the most directly relevant, methodologically aligned, and contextually specific empirical evidence for the arguments advanced.

Conceptualisations of inclusion have, however, varied significantly across contexts, reflecting cultural and institutional priorities (Armstrong & Cairnduff, 2012). These have often centred on widening participation through the increased representation of women, greater diversification of student demographics, and improved access for underrepresented groups such as those from disadvantaged socioeconomic, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds and students with disabilities (Collins et al., 2019; Moríña, 2017; O'Shea et al., 2016; Tienda, 2013). Historically, this focus on access and disability has dominated the discourse (Devlin et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Riddell et al., 2007). While this line of research has been instrumental in shaping inclusive policy, it has often failed to account for other, less visible dimensions of exclusion. More recent evidence seems to highlight that exclusion may also occur through linguistic, cultural, and epistemic marginalisation, where dominant academic norms privilege particular language practices or worldviews, limiting full participation by diverse learners (Bakogiannis et al., 2024).

In response, a growing body of work began to reconceptualise inclusion as an ongoing process of systemic transformation rather than a remedial intervention aimed at specific groups (Operti et al., 2014). This transformative model reframes inclusion as a collective pedagogical and institutional responsibility focused on identifying and expanding effective inclusive practices (Messiou, 2017; Phasha et al., 2017; Schuelka & Johnstone, 2012). Applied to HE, this paradigm shift entails moving away from deficit-oriented perspectives towards recognising diversity as a resource that can enrich teaching, learning, and knowledge production (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025b).

This evolving understanding has given rise to calls for more robust mechanisms to evaluate not only access but also the quality of educational provision, student engagement, and learning outcomes. The effectiveness of inclusion, therefore, depends not only on policy articulation but also on the capacity of educators to translate inclusive values into practice. Recent evidence indicates that while inclusion is frequently embedded in university rhetoric, its practical implementation often remains uneven, hindered by limited pedagogical guidance and inconsistent staff training (Bakogiannis, 2025e; Bakogiannis et al., 2024).

Despite growing agreement on the need for inclusive approaches, the term itself remains conceptually diffuse and inconsistently applied across research, policy, and practice. This inconsistency has resulted in what some scholars describe as a persistent “theory-practice gap,” whereby inclusion is celebrated discursively but insufficiently operationalised in daily educational contexts (Bakogiannis, 2025b). Such ambiguity weakens both research coherence and institutional accountability, making it difficult to assess or sustain inclusive outcomes. Addressing this gap requires clarity about what constitutes inclusion in HE and how it can be meaningfully enacted, particularly in contexts where language mediates access to academic participation and success.

1.2. Literature review

While inclusive pedagogy has gained increasing attention within broader HE literature (Ainscow et al., 2006; Hockings, 2010; Advance HE 2021), relatively little empirical research has examined how inclusive principles are interpreted and implemented in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching. EAP occupies a distinctive and influential position within HE, supporting a diverse student population that includes international, multilingual, and home students as they develop the academic literacies required to succeed in English-medium institutions. These courses develop key skills such as academic writing, reading, critical thinking, and disciplinary communication. However, EAP contexts introduce challenges that intersect linguistic, cultural, and epistemological dimensions of inclusion, given the wide range of educational backgrounds, language repertoires, and academic identities represented within EAP classrooms.

Historically, inclusion research in HE has prioritised widening participation for students with disabilities (Fuller et al., 2004; Riddell et al., 2007) and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin et al. 2012). Yet, English learners, particularly international and multilingual students, often encounter distinctive forms of exclusion not adequately captured by these models (Hyland, 2006; Wingate, 2015). Emerging evidence reveals that such learners, including international, multilingual, widening participation, and other socially disadvantaged student groups, frequently negotiate linguistic hierarchies, disciplinary expectations and cultural dissonance, which can undermine their confidence, academic identity and participation (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025a).

Inclusive EAP pedagogy therefore demands an approach that is responsive to the diversity of learners' linguistic repertoires, educational backgrounds, and cultural perspectives. Dominant models of academic English have been critiqued for positioning

multilingual students' language practices as deficient or in need of remediation (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999; Ortega, 2019). Similarly, traditional EAP practices have been challenged for reinforcing Western academic norms that privilege certain epistemologies and marginalise others (Mortenson, 2021; Pennycook, 2002). Contemporary scholarship has begun to reframe this narrative by advocating pedagogies that recognise students' linguistic resources as assets, promote intercultural engagement and embed inclusivity within disciplinary literacy development (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025b).

From this standpoint, inclusion in EAP must move beyond surface-level accommodation toward a more fundamental rethinking of how academic communication, assessment and classroom interaction are structured (García & Li Wei, 2014; Holliday, 2020). This involves integrating culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, decentring native-speaker norms, and fostering dialogic classroom spaces that validate diverse voices (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). However, empirical evidence increasingly points to a persistent mismatch: despite recognition of inclusive aims, many EAP educators report lack of institutional and pedagogical support to enact inclusive practice, leaving them to interpret inclusivity unevenly and often individually (Bakogiannis, 2024, 2025b).

Despite the growing recognition of its importance, inclusive EAP pedagogy remains underdeveloped at policy and institutional levels (Mortenson, 2022). Tensions persist between universities' demands for linguistic proficiency and broader ethical commitments to equity and linguistic justice (Holliday & Amadasi, 2022). This dissonance underscores the need for sustained, evidence-based research capable of bridging conceptual and practical divides by identifying how inclusive pedagogy can be meaningfully realised in EAP contexts (Bakogiannis, 2025b).

At the same time, research from TESOL and critical applied linguistics continues to expose the broader structures of inequality underpinning English language education, including linguistic imperialism, racialised discourses and the epistemic dominance of Anglophone norms (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Von Esch et al., 2020). These perspectives are crucial for understanding inclusion in EAP, where language often functions as both a means of inclusion and a mechanism of exclusion. Emerging discussions suggest that EAP, when underpinned by inclusive and reflexive pedagogical principles, has the potential to act as a transformative space for equity and intercultural understanding, reframing linguistic diversity as a driver of educational quality rather than a challenge to be managed (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025a, 2025b).

1.3. Empirical foundation and research trajectory

This paper represents the first empirical phase of a structured, multi-stage BALEAP funded research project investigating inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2023). It provides foundational empirical evidence on perceptions of inclusion, barriers encountered, and approaches to implementation, representing the first study to explicitly contextualise and empirically explore inclusion within EAP in HE. The findings from this initial phase informed subsequent stages of the project: a focus-group study that generated more in-depth, practice-based empirical insights through extended practitioner dialogue (Bakogiannis et al., 2024); a systematic review that established the theoretical foundation by synthesising and accounting for existing evidence across the wider literature (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025a); and a recommendations report that triangulated evidence from the empirical studies and the review to translate findings into practice- and policy-oriented guidance (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025b). By situating this study as the empirical starting point, the paper not only adds new data to the field but also offers transparency about the research trajectory and the logical progression of inquiry across phases. In this sense, the present study serves as both a diagnostic and exploratory investigation, mapping the existing landscape of inclusive EAP pedagogy and identifying key areas requiring conceptual clarification and pedagogical development. It thus establishes the empirical and theoretical foundation upon which subsequent stages of the research programme were built, positioning inclusion in EAP as an evolving domain of inquiry shaped by practitioner experience, institutional context, and wider discourses of equity in higher education.

1.4. Study aims

Building on this rationale, the current study seeks to systematically explore how inclusion is understood, experienced, and enacted within EAP settings in HE. As the first phase of a wider investigation, it is designed to capture baseline insights into the conceptualisations, perceived importance, and practical enactment of inclusive teaching among those directly engaged in EAP provision. Specifically, it aims to identify the principal barriers that constrain inclusive practice, the strategies educators employ to foster diversity and equity, and the conditions that enable or inhibit meaningful inclusion within EAP classrooms and institutional contexts.

To address these aims, the study gathers perspectives from a diverse range of stakeholders, including frontline educators, course coordinators, and centre directors, each offering distinctive insights into how inclusion is interpreted and implemented across different institutional environments. By bringing these voices together, the study provides a holistic picture of current inclusive EAP practices and highlights areas where pedagogical, institutional, and professional development efforts are most needed.

In doing so, the paper not only responds to ongoing calls in the literature for more systematic and context-sensitive inquiry into inclusive EAP pedagogy but also sets the groundwork for the subsequent research phases. These later stages build directly on the evidence presented here to refine theoretical understanding, deepen practitioner reflection, and translate empirical insight into actionable recommendations for policy and practice (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025a, 2025b).

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This is an exploratory survey-based study that employs a questionnaire, comprising eight open-ended questions hosted on an online/digital platform (Microsoft Forms). It was designed to collect detailed textual data by eliciting comprehensive input and nuanced insights from a range of key stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning of EAP in HE. An exploratory design was selected because limited prior empirical research exists on inclusive teaching practices in the context of EAP, particularly from the perspective of those directly involved in its delivery. This approach allowed the researchers to cast a wide net in capturing diverse experiences, perspectives, and interpretations without being constrained by rigid hypotheses or a fixed framework. By using an open-ended, online format, the study enabled participants to reflect on complex issues in their own time and words, fostering depth, richness, and authenticity in the data gathered.

2.2. Sampling and recruitment

Twenty-three participants were recruited via non-probability convenience sampling from The Global Forum of EAP practitioners (BALEAP) JISC mail list. The JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) Mail list is a trusted, UK-based electronic mailing list service widely used in academic and professional sectors to facilitate communication and information sharing among specialised communities. It was selected in this study because it serves as a centralised and credible platform for reaching a large, active network of EAP professionals affiliated with BALEAP, currently comprising over 1600 registered members. The BALEAP JISC Mail list is specifically tailored for discussions, updates, and professional exchange related to EAP in HE, ensuring that recruitment efforts targeted participants who were both contextually relevant and professionally engaged with the field. This approach provided access to a knowledgeable, experienced, and diverse range of key stakeholders, enhancing the relevance and rigour of the study's participant sample.

In this study, "a range of key stakeholders" refers specifically to EAP professionals occupying a variety of roles within higher education institutions. The participant sample included (1) staff with exclusively teaching responsibilities, such as EAP tutors and student success tutors; (2) staff with combined teaching and research responsibilities, such as lecturers and professors actively engaged in scholarly work related to EAP; and (3) staff in leadership and senior management roles, such as Centre coordinators and EAP directors. All participants were active members of the EAP professional community and, crucially, had direct teaching experience in EAP at some point in their careers, ensuring a strong, practice-informed perspective across different institutional roles. This targeted sampling strategy allowed the study to draw on diverse professional insights while maintaining a clear and consistent focus on individuals with relevant expertise and hands-on experience in EAP teaching, thereby enhancing the relevance and depth of the findings.

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were defined as any EAP practitioner or member of BALEAP - The Global Forum for EAP Professionals - who was registered with the BALEAP JISC Mail list and had either current or previous experience teaching EAP in HE. This criterion was established to ensure that all participants could provide informed, practice-based insights into inclusive EAP teaching, irrespective of their current role. Members without any direct teaching experience of EAP in HE, such as administrative staff, support coaches, library advisors, were excluded from the sample of eligible participants, as they would not have been able to contribute meaningfully to its focus on pedagogical practices.

While the final sample comprised 23 participants and is therefore not large, it is methodologically appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as it supports depth of analysis and richness of data rather than statistical representativeness.

2.3. Ethical approval

The study protocol, including all participant-facing materials such as the participant information sheet, consent form, and survey instrument, was reviewed and approved by the Teesside University Research Ethics Committee [Reference No: 7080, March 2022]. Ethical approval ensured that the research complied with institutional and national guidelines for conducting research with human participants. All participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study and gave informed consent prior to participation.

2.4. Data collection and preparation

Data were collected in April and May 2022 through a self-administered online qualitative survey, comprising eight open-ended questions presented in a fixed and standard order; completion took approximately 35-40 min on average. The survey aimed to elicit and record perspectives and attitudes of EAP practitioners towards inclusive learning and teaching of EAP in HE. The questions explored the concept, main features, importance/benefits, implementation strategies (steps and processes) and the required qualities and roles of the teacher. For example, participants were asked to describe what inclusive practice means in their EAP context; to explain why inclusion is important in EAP; to identify the main features of inclusive practice; to outline the steps or processes involved in implementing inclusion; to reflect on challenges encountered; and to discuss the qualities EAP practitioners need in order to implement inclusion effectively. In addition to the core qualitative questions, the survey included a brief set of opening items designed to capture participant demographics, including gender, years of EAP practice, current professional role, and country and institutional context. Given the relevance of language, culture, and professional norms to the focus of the study, this information was collected to contextualise the participant sample and to describe the range of settings represented. However, these demographic variables were

used descriptively and quantitatively only and were not incorporated into the qualitative coding or analysis. Their inclusion therefore served to demonstrate the breadth and diversity of perspectives informing the study, rather than to shape or differentiate the qualitative findings, thereby strengthening the credibility and transferability of the results.

The data collection method has been selected as qualitative surveys 'seek to harness the potential qualitative data offer for nuanced, in depth, and sometimes new understandings of social issues such as that of inclusive education (Braun et al., 2020, p. 1). Qualitative surveys require participants to use their own words, rather than selecting from pre-determined options, therefore rich and complex accounts of meaningful sense-making data can be produced which is of critical interest to qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

An online qualitative survey was deemed more appropriate than interviews for this study because it enabled the researchers to reach a wider and more diverse sample of participants from across the EAP professional community, many of whom are based in different institutions and geographic locations. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the range of roles held by participants (including tutors, researchers, and senior leaders), the flexibility and accessibility of an online qualitative survey allowed participants to reflect and respond at their own pace, in their own time, and in their own words. This method also helped to mitigate the logistical and time-related constraints that would have likely limited participation had individual interviews been required. While interviews are often associated with depth, qualitative surveys can still yield rich, detailed insights when well-designed, particularly when the open-ended questions are framed to encourage thoughtful reflection and elaboration, as was the case in this study.

Data were exported on a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel offering a visual summary of the data set which allowed for commonalities, differences, and patterns to be identified and explored.

2.5. Data analysis and procedures

Qualitative data analysis was performed using Thematic Analysis and followed an inductive approach, which means that codes and themes were derived from the data itself rather than being imposed by a predefined theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen because the study was exploratory in nature and aimed to capture a wide range of practitioner perspectives on inclusive EAP teaching without being constrained by pre-existing assumptions or models. Given the limited prior empirical research specifically focused on inclusive practices in EAP, an inductive strategy allowed for a grounded and open-ended exploration of the data.

The analysis process began with immersion in the data through repeated reading of all survey responses to identify salient ideas and recurring patterns. Initial coding was conducted line by line, generating descriptive labels that captured participants' own language and perspectives. These codes were then iteratively reviewed, grouped, and refined into broader categories, from which initial themes began to emerge. This iterative process of constant comparison enabled the identification of relationships, contradictions, and patterns across the data set.

The analysis was undertaken by the research team through an iterative and collaborative process, with emerging codes and themes discussed reflexively to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations. In line with a reflexive thematic analysis approach, formal inter-rater reliability measures were not employed, as analytic rigour was established through sustained engagement with the data,

Table 1
Characteristics of study participants.

Characteristics	Value ^a
Gender:	
Male	8 (34.8)
Female	15 (65.2)
Years in practice:	
Less than 1 year	0 (0)
1-5 years	4 (17.4)
6-10 years	9 (39.1)
More than 10 years	10 (43.5)
Professional Role:	
EAP Tutor	7 (30.4) ^b
Student Success Tutor	2 (8.7)
Associate/Teaching Fellow in EAP	2 (8.7)
Lecturer in EAP	6 (26.1)
Professor in EAP	1 (4.3)
EAP Coordinator	2 (8.7)
EAP Deputy Director	1 (4.3)
Learner/Language Development Advisor	2 (8.7)
Country of Institutions:	
UK	12 (80.0) ^b
Kazakhstan	1 (6.7)
Argentina	1 (6.7)
USA	1 (6.7)

^a Data are given as numbers (percentage) of study participants.

^b Percentages may not amount to 100% due to rounding.

reflexive dialogue, and transparency of the analytic process rather than coder agreement. Thematic maps were developed and repeatedly refined to support theme development and ensure analytical coherence. Thematic maps were developed and repeatedly refined to support theme development and ensure analytical coherence.

To increase trustworthiness, an audit trail was catalogued, to monitor and retain a record of techniques used throughout the data analysis process. To ensure explicit and comprehensive reporting, the COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research) checklist was used (Tong et al., 2007). Direct quotations, edited for ease of understanding, were selected to illustrate views and perceptions that were either dominant or contrary to the majority.

Participant demographic data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency counts) to summarise information such as gender, years of experience, professional role, and country of institution (see Table 1). This descriptive analysis was conducted separately from, and prior to, the qualitative analysis and was used solely to contextualise the participant sample. This analysis was conducted solely for the purpose of sample description, to illustrate the diversity and background of participants, and did not inform the coding, theme development, or interpretation of the qualitative dataset. This approach ensured that the integrity of the inductive thematic analysis was preserved, while still providing contextual information about the participants to support the credibility and transferability of the findings.

Additional background, design rationale, and procedural details can also be found in the previously published research protocol (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2023), which complements but does not replace the methodological information presented in this paper.

3. Findings

Table 1 presents an overview of participant demographics, including gender, years of experience, professional role, and country of institution. Most participants identified as female, and most had over five years of experience teaching EAP, indicating a high level of professional expertise. Participants held a range of roles, from frontline educators to senior managers, reflecting the varied stakeholder perspectives captured in the study. Although participants were affiliated with institutions across multiple national contexts, these affiliations were concentrated within four countries, with the majority based in UK HE institutions. Country of institution is reported to indicate participants' professional location at the time of the study rather than national representativeness. This diversity of background and professional positioning enriches the dataset and helps ensure the findings are grounded in a broad, contextually relevant set of practitioner experiences.

Two overarching themes were identified, i.e., barriers to inclusion and approaches to promoting inclusion, each comprising a series of sub-themes. This thematic structure was purposefully developed to align with the central aim of the study: to uncover both the obstacles that hinder inclusive EAP teaching and the practical strategies that support it. Organising the data in this way enabled a clear distinction between the challenges practitioners face and the pedagogical responses they adopt or propose in response. The 'barriers' theme captures systemic constraints operating across individual, departmental, and institutional levels that collectively obstruct inclusive practice, while the 'approaches' theme highlights practices and principles, such as differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and reflective practice, that practitioners perceive as effective or necessary for fostering inclusive learning environments. Together, these themes provide a coherent analytic framework (see Table 2) for addressing the study's dual focus on diagnosing problems and identifying solutions within the landscape of inclusive EAP pedagogy.

3.1. Barriers to inclusion

As per Table 2, participants cited a lack of awareness or knowledge of inclusive teaching and insights of how this could be put into practice within HE as a key barrier to inclusive education. This could be further mitigated by a lack of teacher training and understanding of the importance of inclusivity in HE. It was highlighted that subject tutors may not realise how to best support academic literacies development and may need further training in areas such as developing strategies for supporting, for example, students

Table 2
Results framework.

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	REPORTED BY (No of Participants)
BARRIERS TO INCLUSION	• Lack of awareness, knowledge, and training	6
	• Prescriptive delivery	6
	• Lack of consideration of diversity	8
	• High cost of EAP courses	11
	• Lack of time	2
APPROACHES TO INCLUSION	• Inclusive Curriculum	16
	• Promoting Equality & Diversity	18
	• Cooperative learning structures/collaboration	15
	• Personalised learning & competency-based progression	11
	• Student autonomy	10
	• Supportive Classroom	15
	• Differentiated Instruction	16
	• Culturally Responsive Teaching	16
	• Reflective Practice	16
	• Procedure for conflict resolution	5

affected by trauma (Box 1, Quote 1).

Prescriptive teaching which may follow a written ‘academic’ structure or focus on assessment scores and/or ‘correctness’ was also highlighted as an important barrier to inclusive education. Participants felt that constraints may also be imposed by institutions regarding materials, timetables and mode of delivery and may, therefore, be reluctant to promote inclusive teaching. This could be further exacerbated by the difficulties in the ability to communicate and collaborate with subject specialists to discuss student needs due to a proliferation of part-time contracts. One participant pointed to the neoliberal, marketised university system (Box 1, Quote 2).

Not considering diversity and adhering to a ‘one size fits all approach’ rather than recognising learning differences and adapting teaching practices to meet student needs was perceived as another key barrier to inclusion. Additional barriers comprised the lack of consideration of diversity, deficient ideologies regarding international students and their cultural background, as well as institutional constraints, including gatekeeping requirements of pre-sessional courses and/or lack of resources (Box 1, Quote 3).

Lack of time was a barrier expressed by almost half the participants. This included time to create accessible material from an inclusive and differentiated perspective, and to build relationships with students to become more aware of individual educational needs. The focus on assessment, pressure to get through the syllabus and teach-to-test on short intensive courses were perceived to lead to a more standardised experience, not allowing space for promoting inclusive teaching practices (Box 1, Quote 4).

Finally, unequal fee structures and the high cost of EAP courses were viewed as barriers to international students from low-income backgrounds, hindering access to HE and, as such, opportunities for education and social integration and inclusion (Box 1, Quote 5)

3.2. Approaches to inclusion

As per Table 2, most participants stressed that an inclusive curriculum could reduce the impact of academic norms and expectations i.e., normalisation and marginalisation, in various ways including i. Adapting materials to be less homogenous and more relevant; ii. focusing more on academic literacies by teaching language as a facilitating component rather than teaching EAP with the focus on language; iii. exploring the experiences and understanding of the diversity of the world; and iv. being flexible to allow changes to course materials and assessment procedures throughout the course (considering student feedback). Collaboration throughout a lesson, variety, and creativity in carrying out learning tasks and sharing knowledge; transparency in objectives, activities, instruction, and engaging materials and lessons were viewed as producing better teaching, engagement with the course material and achievement of learning outcomes. Embedding graduate attributes into the curriculum were thought to include linking EAP with the wider purpose of HE and acting as a bridge in terms of culture - this was suggested by two participants. Activities linked to work prospects and life skills were also thought to be useful, as learning with a purpose was deemed easier (Box 2, Quote 1).

Advocating for equality and diversity was regarded as ensuring that diverse identities, voices, perspectives, and beliefs are respected, included, and valued. Learning and development should be accessible to a diverse range of students who should all have the same opportunity to learn, progress and succeed. Most participants felt that education is a human right and should be accessible to all. Student differences should be acknowledged by teachers and promoted across departments and universities, with diversity being recognised as adding value to study programmes. Within the classroom, equality and diversity can be promoted by fostering an equitable and fair classroom environment and promoting and establishing equality between tutors and students. One participant felt that social and pastoral dimensions are important aspects of the student EAP experience (Box 2, Quote 2).

Box 1 Barriers to Inclusion	
Sub-theme (N)	Quotes
Lack of awareness, knowledge, and training	Quote 1: Educational institutions should provide training on this to better support teachers' understanding and provide practical suggestions to help them create an inclusive environment [P16, Teaching Fellow in EAP]
Prescriptive delivery	Quote 2: The influence of IELTS English Language Test and certain aspects of ELT English Language Teaching over EAP e.g., viewing language from the perspective of “correctness” rather than a meaning-making and communicative resource [P10, EAP Tutor]
Lack of consideration of diversity	Quote 3: The English Education system is a good example where many students, with particular learning needs, miss out because the school does not have the resources to accommodate them. This could be computers, scribes, readers, individual invigilators, or a lack of diagnosis e.g., autistic spectrum/ADHD/dyslexia [P14, EAP Coordinator]
Lack of time	Quote 4: It's hard to do in some of my EAP teaching because I don't get a chance to find out about my students' contexts, I feel a little bit like I'm parachuting in and ‘delivering’ a session [P9, EAP Tutor]
High cost of EAP courses	Quote 5: High cost of EAP courses is a great barrier to students from low-income backgrounds [P11, EAP Tutor]

Box 2

Approaches to Inclusion

Sub-theme (N)	Quotes
Inclusive Curriculum	Quote 1: Inclusivity needs to go beyond teaching if it is to be effective. There needs to be inclusive enrolment, inclusive assessment, inclusive admin support, inclusive curriculum, etc. All teachers should have some basic special education knowledge [P8, EAP Tutor]
Promoting Equality & Diversity	Quote 2: Education is a basic human right. Only through education for all can we ensure that social, cultural, and economic justice prevails [P14, EAP Coordinator]
Cooperative learning structures/ collaboration	Quote 3: Allowing students to learn in their own way not imposing a particular learning style on them [P12, EAP Coordinator]
Personalised learning & competency-based progression	Quote 4: Problem solving approach everyone on the same level but try to be alert to differing student needs and expectations (based on personality) tasks (discussion vs. reflective, etc. [P7, Lecturer in EAP]
Student autonomy	Quote 5: ... encouraging (but not insisting on) students taking ownership of tasks and topics and materials [P23, Student Success Tutor]
Supportive Classroom	Quote 6: Creating a supportive classroom environment in which students help each other and every student feels like they belong, showing that everyone is valued and that different perspectives are encouraged [P4, EAP Tutor]
Differentiated Instruction	Quote 7: Quote 8: "Varied, with a range of interaction patterns and task types so that different learning needs and preferences can be catered for [P5, Lecturer in EAP]
Culturally Responsive Teaching	Quote 8: They (materials) should have real world value to engage students and should be culturally appropriate [P14, EAP Coordinator]
Reflective Practice	Quote 9: See the course, materials, and assessment through my students' eyes. What can be unclear, unnecessary, or inaccessible? What are the barriers to engagement, how can I address these? [P18, Lecturer in EAP]
Procedure for conflict resolution	Quote 10: Inclusive teaching should start with 'house rules' though to ensure the classroom is a place where we learn and discover together but do so respectfully [P18, Lecturer in EAP]

This was viewed as an opportunity to allow teachers to partner with students in the design, evaluation and re-design of the learning materials and environment - leading to students and teachers feeling more confident, learning more, and benefitting the students as a group. This would foster opportunities for learning from others, seeing different viewpoints, developing inclusive mind sets and increased shared understanding (Box 2, Quote 3). Encouraging participation in group discussions can lead to risk taking, stimulate engagement and cooperation which can increase the learning and well-being of students. Discussions which do not produce consensus but reach compromise, are also useful communicative tasks. Participants felt that feedback on tasks and language should be varied and a key element to achieve this is to include peer support, while the importance of engaging students in pair and group work tasks was also highlighted. Establishing relevance encourages all students to use their voice and creates opportunities for students to work together to explore issues that are relevant to them while learning to build and understand their emerging academic identities.

There was an emphasis on ascertaining students' individual learning needs, through Needs Analysis and individual tutorials. This personalised learning tool was felt to lead to identification of areas each student will need to focus on and areas where adjustments can be made. This would ideally be performed at the start of the course but can also include feedback on individual tutorial sessions during the course to further identify learning needs and preferred ways of working, specific areas of their subject course, specific needs, and what areas they would like to develop. Recognising students as individuals was deemed to increase learner motivation, creating the conditions in which every student can learn to the best of their ability. Personalised learning techniques can be a useful precursor to competency-based progression where participants cited problem solving, problem-based learning (PBL) and scaffolding as effective techniques (Box 2, Quote 4). This was regarded as including discussion and reflection, involving students and tutors, to create common understanding through structured cumulative questioning and discussion. As an example, PBL could be used to challenge students to interact with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. These techniques can motivate students to learn in a variety of ways and enable all students to demonstrate some success, allowing students to make progress from whatever their starting point is.

Participants felt that it was important for students to have autonomy/choice over what they learn and how they are assessed, how they work i.e., individually or in groups, and choice of participating or opting out. Creating student ownership of activities, discussion, ideas, conclusions, and outcomes imbues learners with a sense of ownership and responsibility for learning for themselves and their peers, especially if mutual feedback is included (Box 2, Quote 5). This can create a positive learning experience for teachers and students, enabling students to fulfil their potential, engage more enthusiastically and invest more in activities and discussions, by having a stake in the process. Four participants noted that it should not be assumed that all should be active in the classroom i.e., not

forcing personalisation and reducing pressure to speak, giving time to gather thoughts and prepare contributions to the class.

A supportive classroom was deemed to provide a safe learning space where everyone feels valued and included, where students can feel comfortable and at ease with each other and the environment. It seeks to generate a positive and co-operative learning atmosphere, creating a sense of belonging and respectful mutual learning where students are encouraged to use their voices as they are in a safe and unthreatening space (Box 2, Quote 6). It was thought that sharing experiences, opinions and giving positive feedback to show the value of peer contributions, help to develop a supportive social surround. Classes may be more fun with better group cohesion and better peer support. Creating a sense of community in the classroom allows students to take risks and experiment and can lead to progress in confidence, capability, and self-empowerment. Other benefits of a supportive classroom were viewed to include positive effects on wellbeing and self-esteem, students feeling valued, increased motivation and self-worth and happier students who fulfil their potential, vibrant, positive learning environment, and outcomes.

It was concluded that differentiation included providing a diverse range of techniques, methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate students' learning preferences and needs i.e., not taking a 'one size fits all' approach (Box 2, Quote 7). For example, using group work or kinesthetic activities, negotiating questions/materials with students, using grading levels for materials appropriate for the group, adapting pre-written materials accordingly for specific needs of individuals and groups, allowing students to access materials in their own ways, flexible task cycles to allow student strengths to emerge, supporting the least proficient students while stretching the most proficient - it was felt advisable to identify student needs pre-course or within the first few classes. The benefits of differentiation were seen as increasing the effectiveness of student learning when variance, readiness levels and learning preferences were addressed, enabling more students to access education, differences being embraced and respected, all students given appropriate support and more focus on tasks when specific needs and preferences have been addressed. One participant employs trauma-informed pedagogy in EAP classes for refugee-background students, taking the time to discover their challenges (via need analysis).

Culturally responsive teaching was identified as recognising, respecting and being responsive to students' previous educational and cultural experience and unique lived experience. It considers a variety of diverse perspectives, examines preparedness for academic discourses and conventions and acknowledges that there is more than one variety of English. Being aware of different needs and expectations based on cultural backgrounds, and designing lessons in multiple ways that allow all, not only the 'traditional student', to engage, understand and evidence learning can foster a positive environment where individual differences are accepted, and there is a higher level of engagement and success. It can also enable students and tutors to develop empathy, instil confidence in performing different activities and enrich education by fostering the exchange of knowledge, experience and mutual respect (Box 2, Quote 8). It may be useful to be sensitive to and discuss different cultural approaches to learning and the needs of students' culture i.e., physical exhaustion of students observing Ramadan. One participant believed hidden curriculum or cultural assumptions should be addressed.

Reflective practice was regarded as consideration of the process of teaching and learning from the students and teachers' point of view and being prepared to make changes - identifying barriers, expectations and needs for participation in learning. Collecting feedback of student experience can be accomplished through observing, learning from, and getting to know students, ongoing dialogue regarding concerns and preferences and listening to their perspectives (Box 2, Quote 9). Reflective tasks for both teacher and student were deemed useful to check on what is or is not working. It was regarded as important to recognise ideas that may meet with challenges from students. It was also regarded as important for a teacher to challenge their own assumptions and bias. Continued professional development (CPD) included engaging with literature, the latest research and best practice, self-education and 'unlearning', in-house training, and PIM events. Reflections on the impacts of teacher interventions can be produced through observing students' progress and using a variety of methods to monitor student responses with a view to incorporating these into practice. Requesting feedback from Module Leaders and engaging with colleagues are useful reflective tools. Reflective practice can impact students' education and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, enhance innovation and provide clearer, more successful learning outcomes, provide a balanced view of a topic, motivate teachers, and inspire a sense of satisfaction. By becoming more innovative and learning in a wider range of ways, students may view learning as more fun and interesting.

Finally, it was deemed important to have a process to tackle possible discordance sensitively - perspectives and hierarchies may require challenge. The discussion and negotiation of classroom etiquette with students, including the importance of mutual respect, should ensure the classroom is a safe and inclusive space (Box 2, Quote 10).

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of main findings

The study identified several barriers to inclusive EAP teaching in HE. Tutors often lacked sufficient awareness and training in inclusive pedagogies, relying on rigid, one-size-fits-all methods that overlooked students' diverse backgrounds, learning needs, and preferences. Time constraints and prescriptive curricula limited opportunities for adapting instruction to foster inclusion. The curriculum itself was seen as narrow and unrepresentative, excluding diverse voices and contributing to student marginalisation. Institutional inaction on promoting equality and diversity, unclear participation expectations, and the high cost of EAP courses further hindered equitable access and inclusion.

To address these challenges, participants highlighted a range of inclusive teaching strategies. These included differentiating instruction, using competency-based progression, and adapting materials to support varied learning styles and abilities. Tutors were encouraged to reflect critically on their teaching, foster open and respectful communication, and implement fair conflict resolution processes. Promoting student voice, autonomy, and cultural responsiveness were also seen as essential for creating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.

4.2. Comparison with existing literature

Many of the barriers to inclusive teaching practices identified in this study, such as limited staff awareness and training, time constraints, prescriptive curricula, and the high cost of EAP provision, have been echoed widely in previous research on inclusive education. However, most of this literature has emerged from broader educational contexts, often focusing on disability or special educational needs and less frequently on HE or EAP specifically (Chhabra et al., 2010; Forlin et al., 2008, 2013). The present study extends these discussions by illustrating how these familiar systemic barriers take on new forms in EAP environments, where the interplay of language, culture, and academic expectation creates distinctive pressures for both students and teachers. In EAP classrooms, linguistic hierarchies intersect with dominant epistemic norms, such that particular language practices are treated as legitimate carriers of academic knowledge; for example, students who are less familiar with dominant academic genres or standardised forms of English may be positioned as less authoritative contributors in seminar discussion or assessed writing, thereby shaping who is able to participate and whose contributions are recognised as credible (Bakogiannis et al., 2024). By revealing these dynamics empirically, this study demonstrates that inclusion in EAP requires a re-examination of how access, pedagogy, and assessment intersect through language.

While earlier studies have shown that instructors across disciplines often feel underprepared to implement inclusive practices (Glazzard, 2011; Idol, 2006), the findings of this research confirm that this challenge is particularly acute in the EAP context. As others have noted, EAP instructors are frequently positioned as language gatekeepers, expected to uphold academic English norms while simultaneously supporting multilingual students who are navigating new discursive, cultural, and institutional terrains (Benesch, 2001; Hyland, 2006; Mortenson, 2021). Participants in this study articulated the difficulty of balancing these dual roles, a struggle not of intention but of structure, as they sought to uphold both inclusivity and institutional language expectations. Recognising inclusion, therefore, demands moving beyond calls for teacher initiative alone toward a coordinated institutional response that aligns policy, curriculum, and professional development.

The subsequent phases of this research programme offered valuable confirmation and elaboration of these patterns, revealing how educators conceptualised inclusion more as a principle to aspire to than as a clearly operationalised practice (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025a, 2025b). The focus-group study highlighted that the absence of explicit inclusivity criteria within professional frameworks and institutional policies leaves teachers uncertain about how to translate inclusive ideals into daily practice. This lack of structural clarity fragments implementation and leads to inconsistent approaches across programmes. Together, these insights suggest that professional recognition of inclusivity must be embedded within formal competency frameworks and teacher development schemes, ensuring that inclusion is treated as a core dimension of pedagogical expertise rather than a voluntary enhancement. In other words, developing inclusive EAP practice requires structural recognition of inclusion as a professional standard, supported by reflection, training, and institutional accountability.

In alignment with recent calls for systemic change in EAP (Holliday & Amadasi, 2022; García & Li Wei, 2014), participants in this study further advocated for the design of curricula that are not merely supplementary adjustments but inherently inclusive, dialogic, and co-created with learners. Their emphasis on structural rather than superficial change resonates with the broader trajectory of this research programme, where findings across phases consistently demonstrated that inclusion can only be sustained through coordinated action across micro (classroom), meso (departmental), and macro (institutional) levels (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025b). The data collectively indicate that inclusive teaching must be viewed as a shared institutional responsibility, supported by clear policy guidance, sustained professional development, and a culture of pedagogical reflection. This progression from individual effort to collective responsibility marks a key conceptual shift, one that reframes inclusion as an organisational ethos rather than a series of isolated pedagogical interventions.

Participants also emphasised the need to challenge deficit models of multilingualism and to acknowledge the intellectual and cultural value of students' full linguistic repertoires, a perspective reflected across different themes such as Promoting Equality & Diversity, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Inclusive Curriculum. Rather than adopting compensatory approaches focused on remediation, they promoted differentiated instruction, personalised learning, and culturally responsive pedagogy, strategies increasingly recognised as central to equitable language education (Tai et al., 2022; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). These findings align with emerging arguments in critical applied linguistics and decolonial scholarship, which contend that inclusive EAP should not merely accommodate linguistic difference but actively interrogate the power relations that shape knowledge production and communication in academic spaces (Canagarajah, 1999; Ortega, 2019). The emphasis here is on transforming the epistemic landscape of HE itself, repositioning linguistic diversity from the periphery of institutional concern to the centre of educational quality.

Another recurrent theme in this study was the importance of cultivating supportive classroom environments built on mutual respect, autonomy, and reflective dialogue. Although these principles are long established within inclusive education, they hold particular resonance in EAP, where international and multilingual students frequently experience marginalisation, cultural dissonance, or a diminished sense of belonging (Lee et al., 2014). Participants consistently described the value of cooperative learning structures, peer collaboration, and multimodal engagement in promoting participation and intercultural understanding. Such practices are not merely pedagogical techniques but mechanisms for constructing inclusive learning communities in which all students can claim legitimacy as knowers and contributors (Hockings, 2010; Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Madriaga et al., 2010). Later research within this project further reinforced that inclusion flourishes where relational pedagogies are coupled with institutional support, such as mentoring networks, reflective forums, and collaborative professional cultures that normalise critical dialogue about inclusion (Bakogiannis et al., 2024; Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2025b).

Taken together, the findings of this study, when read alongside subsequent phases of the research programme, reveal a multi-layered understanding of inclusion as both a pedagogical process and a structural condition. Barriers and enablers operate

simultaneously across individual, institutional, and systemic dimensions, meaning that meaningful inclusion cannot depend solely on educator goodwill or isolated initiatives. Rather, it requires coherent institutional frameworks, inclusive professional standards, and sustained reflection that embeds equity within the culture of EAP teaching.

4.3. Implications for policy and practice

The study's findings have important implications for both educational practice and policy. Addressing barriers to inclusion requires institutions to invest in ongoing training and professional development for EAP practitioners. Policies should support awareness-raising and equip educators with the tools to adopt inclusive, student-centred approaches, potentially through incentives for diversity and inclusion training. However, professional development must be conceived not as a one-off intervention but as an ongoing, iterative process of reflective engagement, where educators critically examine their assumptions about language, culture, and academic norms. Creating spaces for professional dialogue, peer observation, and mentoring can foster the reflexivity needed for sustained inclusive practice.

Inclusive practice also calls for rethinking curriculum design. Policymakers should prioritise culturally responsive content and flexible assessment methods that reflect diverse learner needs. Curricula should be designed to embed inclusion from the outset rather than retrofitted as an afterthought, ensuring that diversity is positioned as a pedagogical resource rather than a challenge to be managed. Promoting student autonomy and personalised learning can be achieved by encouraging adaptable teaching strategies and support systems. This includes integrating multimodal and collaborative approaches that empower students to draw on their full linguistic and cultural repertoires, thereby fostering both engagement and ownership of learning. Such approaches require a reorientation of curriculum goals, from conformity with dominant linguistic norms toward the cultivation of academic confidence and voice across diverse student groups.

At the classroom level, policies should foster respectful, inclusive environments by offering guidance on conflict resolution and classroom management. Building on EAP's established contributions to intercultural awareness, institutions should further encourage a relational model of teaching in which inclusivity is enacted through empathy, intercultural understanding, and dialogic interaction. Embedding reflective tools, such as learning journals or collaborative feedback mechanisms, can help both students and teachers identify and address barriers to participation as they arise. Reducing financial barriers, such as the cost of EAP courses, may require dedicated funding or targeted scholarship programmes to improve access. Financial inclusion is not peripheral to educational inclusion: when students face economic or structural barriers to language support, their academic participation and sense of belonging are equally constrained. Thus, equitable funding models must be treated as a key component of institutional inclusion strategies.

Beyond individual classrooms, these implications point to the importance of strategic coherence across institutional levels. Inclusion should be integrated into quality assurance processes, staff recruitment, and promotion criteria, reinforcing that inclusive pedagogy is a shared responsibility rather than a discretionary practice. Aligning teaching, assessment, and policy structures can help ensure that inclusion is embedded in institutional identity and everyday operations.

Ultimately, these findings underscore the need for a systemic, whole-institution approach to inclusion: moving beyond policy statements toward meaningful, sustained action that supports both educators and learners. Achieving this requires an ethos of collective accountability, where inclusion is not merely a moral or professional ideal but a measurable and integral dimension of educational excellence.

4.4. Strengths and limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first online qualitative survey to explore inclusive teaching practices in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) within HE. The online format enhanced accessibility and enabled participation from a geographically diverse pool of EAP practitioners in the UK and internationally (Evans & Mathur, 2018; Wright, 2017). Respondents were able to complete the survey in their own time and environment, potentially fostering more candid responses, particularly on reflective and personal topics. This flexibility was especially beneficial for busy professionals, and the asynchronous nature of data collection eliminated the logistical demands of scheduling interviews. Moreover, the online approach proved to be cost-effective, reducing the need for physical presence and manual data entry.

However, this method also presents limitations. Online qualitative surveys may lack the depth and interactional nuance characteristic of interviews or focus groups, with variation in the quality and detail of responses potentially impacting data richness (Andrade, 2020; Carter et al., 2021). There is a risk that some participants may respond superficially or not engage as seriously as they might in a real-time setting. Additionally, the absence of nonverbal cues limits contextual interpretation, and opportunities for follow-up or clarification are constrained.

For the present study, these limitations mean that the findings should be interpreted as providing breadth of perspective rather than fine-grained interactional analysis, and as capturing participants' reflective accounts of inclusive practice rather than situated classroom interaction. To mitigate these constraints, the survey was designed to allow respondents ample time and space for extended responses, and many participants provided detailed, experience-based accounts. The credibility of the findings is further supported by the consistency of themes across a substantial proportion of responses, as indicated in the results framework, and by the transparent and systematic analytic procedures employed, including iterative coding, reflexive theme development, and the maintenance of an audit trail.

Furthermore, this online survey constitutes Phase 1 of a broader mixed-methods research programme, and its findings informed the design of Phase 2, which comprised follow-up focus group discussions with selected participants to explore emergent themes in greater

depth and generate richer, more contextualised insights. Taken together, these methodological decisions support the trustworthiness of the findings and position this study as a robust exploratory foundation for the wider research trajectory.

4.5. Conclusion

This study offers timely insights into the barriers and enablers of inclusive teaching in EAP within HE. Drawing on the experiences of diverse EAP practitioners and stakeholders, the findings reveal that inclusion is often hindered by structural, pedagogical, and institutional challenges, ranging from limited training to rigid curricula and resource constraints. At the same time, the study highlights promising strategies such as personalised learning, culturally responsive teaching, and reflective practice, which can empower educators to better meet the needs of multilingual and diverse student populations.

To move forward, inclusion in EAP must be reframed not as an optional enhancement, but as an essential and systemic commitment. Institutions should invest in sustainable professional development, flexible curricula, and equitable access strategies. For meaningful change to occur, these efforts must be embedded across teaching, policy, and institutional culture.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

A. Bakogiannis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **S. Lorrimer:** Formal analysis. **E. Papavasiliou:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Disclaimer

The views, opinions, and arguments expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of BALEAP - The Global Forum for EAP Professionals. Responsibility for the content lies solely with the author(s).

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT-4o (Open AI) to improve language clarity and check for grammatical and structural accuracy. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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