

EPFL without barriers

Final self- evaluation report

Executive Summary,
January 2024¹

Context and aim

EPFL wants every member of its community to be fully and equally included in his or her studies, work and campus social life. We attach particular importance to the diversity of our community, which contributes to our intellectual, scientific and cultural strength.

The accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities is a key element of an egalitarian and sustainable society. These values are reflected in the legal framework that applies to EPFL. Education, and in particular secondary and tertiary education, is a central tool for achieving the goal of equal participation of people with disabilities in all areas of society.

With this in mind, and with a view to making life on campus more equitable, EPFL set out to identify the barriers currently



encountered by people living with physical or sensory disabilities, chronic illnesses, neurodiversity or psychological disorders.

Organization and procedure

The "EPFL without Barriers" project was launched in February 2023, with the aim of taking stock of the accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities at EPFL, both among the student population and among the scientific, the administrative and the technical staff, and drawing up recommendations. The project is part of the Equality & Diversity Action Plan for the period 2021-2024, and also meets EPFL's *Convention d'objectifs* for this period.

Supported by a Steering Committee, the project team was organized into thematic working groups, made up of delegates from the vice-presidencies, associate vice-presidencies and directorates concerned. Coordination was provided by VPT-EGA. The assessment covered the following areas:

¹ This summary is based on the report drawn up by the coordinators and members of the project team, adopted by the Steering Committee on December 20, 2023 and presented to the Executive Board on January 30, 2024. Project team members : Clémence Bachmann, Master SB student ; Nathalie Bui, Master SB student ; Isabelle Cahour, AVP-E GE ; Manuel Cubero-Castan, VPT-DUR ; Maureen Décosterd, Mediacom ; Helene Füger, VPT-EGA (coordination) ; Matteo Galli, APR ; Hervé Hirt, Mediacom ;

Natalie Meystre, VPO-DSI ; Sonja Moghaddari, VPT-EGA (coordination) ; Marie-Noëlle Morais, VPO-SE SIS-SEC ; Damien Quaglia, AVP-SAO SAE ; Jessica Pallie, VPO-DRH RHPP ; Gaël Revelin, VPA-SIS BE ; Claire Saout, VPT-DUR ; Alexandre St-Amour, VPT-DUR ; Barry Stanton, VPO-DC CNST ; Cristiano Trevisin, ENAC doctoral student and member of DO@ENAC ; and two other people directly concerned who wish to remain anonymous.

- Digital accessibility
- Institutional approach
- Construction, buildings, safety, orientation, purchasing
- Employment and work
- Outdoor spaces and mobility
- Studies and teaching
- Event management

For the self-assessment, the project team drew inspiration from similar approaches at other universities, including ETHZ, the University of Geneva and the University of Zurich. It drew on various guides and checklists developed by specialists at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, the Swissunibility network and the Federal Office for Equality for People with Disabilities. External specialists supported the process with workshops and training courses. The needs of people with disabilities were gathered through a call for testimonials, and the involvement of people with disabilities in the project team.

Overall findings

Overall, the self-evaluation concludes that at EPFL a rather reactive approach to accessibility and inclusion prevails, and that individual situations are dealt with on a case-by-case basis. This approach is often necessary and effective for ad hoc solutions, but in the long run it is likely to generate additional costs and not reach all the people who would need accommodation. Furthermore, there is still a lack of awareness of the issues, needs and specific rights related to disability, as the people concerned in particular have testified.

Recommendations and priority measures

With the aim of reinforcing equity and autonomy for all members of the community, the recommendations and measures outlined in the project report propose an institutional approach based on the principles of "universal design". The working group reports bring together 25 objectives and some 70 measures. The prioritization of measures recommended for implementation as of 2024 or as of 2025-2028 takes into account the impact/urgency and the resources required for implementation. The priority measures, recommended for implementation from 2024, aim to:

- Strengthen and coordinate in-house competencies.
- Define an institutional approach and sector guidelines for accessibility and inclusion.
- Integrate these guidelines right from the start of a project, master plan or process, including in purchasing and calls for tender.
- Implement appropriate training and awareness-raising measures in various fields.
- Identify priority mobility routes on campus and ensure their accessibility.

These measures will strengthen EPFL's ability to respond to the needs identified in the community, with benefits for the whole of EPFL.

Conclusions and recommendations of the thematic working groups

Institutional approach

The institutional approach at EPFL currently is largely reactive. A solid, clear accessibility and inclusion strategy is needed to develop proactivity. Although there is a unit in charge of student accommodation, and now a point of contact in the event of discrimination, there is still insufficient awareness of the issues, needs and specific rights associated with disability, as evidenced in particular by the people concerned.

Recommendations: (1) define an institutional policy on inclusion and accessibility, and organize its implementation; (2) foster a more inclusive work and study environment through in-house skills development; (3) systematically involve people with disabilities in the accessibility process.

Digital accessibility, media and communication

EPFL's level of engagement with e-accessibility is limited. EPFL does not incorporate specific criteria when selecting IT products, nor systematic tests when designing or deploying them, even though some existing services partially meet these needs.

Recommendations: (1) intervene as early as the selection and design phase of new IT products to guarantee their accessibility; (2) raise awareness and support the EPFL community, in particular those responsible for content and applications, in order to make digital content more accessible; (3) improve the accessibility of existing EPFL websites and applications.

Construction, buildings, security, orientation, purchasing

EPFL is highly efficient in terms of responsiveness, thanks in part to the Emergency Response Centre (*Centrale d'alarme et d'engagement*), which enables any request or problem to be redirected to the right people at a single number. However, the buildings do not meet all the needs of our population.

Recommendations: (1) define guidelines for more inclusive construction; (2 and 3) improve accessibility and orientation on our campus through an analysis of the main routes and traffic axes; (4) raise awareness in our community; (5) propose new types of inclusive spaces. Above all, the members of the working group invite decisionmakers to engage with the people concerned, as their experience will lead to improvements for the entire EPFL community.

Employment and work

Feedback from the call for testimonials highlights the disproportionate burden placed on individuals as a result of the need to adapt. Feedback also points to a lack of information among managers and the need for support and mentoring.

Recommendations: (1) foster an inclusive working environment; (2) develop a recruitment process that facilitates access to employment for people with disabilities, with awareness-raising among line managers and the HR team. It is also recommended to collaborate with ETH Zurich to share best practices.

Outdoor spaces and mobility

VSS and SIA standards on accessibility for people with disabilities do not cover all observed needs. EPFL listens to the needs of its community and carries out analyses and layouts on a case-by-case basis. As a

result, facilities are heterogeneous, with some areas being highly accessible while others represent barriers.

Recommendations: set up a group of specialists to define and implement guidelines adapted to the EPFL community for the universal design of outdoor facilities and inclusive traffic routes.

Studies

EPFL's approach, while responding to the majority of proven disability situations, is reactive rather than proactive.

Communication on possible measures could be improved, both for the people concerned and for the various bodies. A UDL (Universal Design for Learning) approach would be appropriate.

Recommendations: (1) define guidelines in terms of inclusive teaching, on which other existing or future measures could be based; (2) improve awareness of and access to the range of accessible study options, through proactive communication; (3) ensure that existing facilities are adequate; (4) train and raise the awareness of the teaching community.

Events

Organizations are fairly proactive in the measures they put in place to make their events accessible and adapted, and the majority of events can rely on the School's usual existing infrastructures.

Recommendations: (1) improve communication of the actions undertaken; (2) better coordinate and unify the measures put in place to establish a charter aimed at making events more inclusive and accessible; (3) reduce their impact during set-up and dismantling; (4) train and sensitize the teaching community.

Events

Organizers are fairly proactive in the measures they put in place to make their events accessible and adapted, and the majority of events can rely on the School's usual existing infrastructures.

Recommendations: (1) improve communication of the actions undertaken; (2) better coordinate and unify the measures put in place to establish a charter aimed at making events more inclusive and accessible; (3) reduce their impact during set-up and dismantling.

Cross-functional objectives

- Define a strategy, guidelines and institutional processes for integrating inclusion and accessibility.
- Creation and coordination of internal competencies: appointment of reference persons in all areas relevant to accessibility and inclusion, with cross-functional coordination.
- Involvement of those concerned: "Nothing about us without us".
- Training and awareness-raising.