



**TRANSFORMING THE 'WHOLE SYSTEM'
TO ACHIEVE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
Key Lessons from La Pampa, Argentina**



Karen Van Rompaey, Rosa Pingo & David Towell

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David Towell writes:

This year marks the 30th anniversary of an important world conference at Salamanca, hosted by the Spanish government and UNESCO. The *Salamanca Statement* defined inclusive education as the way ahead for special education, working towards the end of segregated school provision. Subsequently this vision has received high level reaffirmation, notably in the 2006 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (Article 24) and its General Comment Nr. 4 (2016) as well as the 2015 *UN Sustainable Development Goals*. SDG 4 puts quality, equity and inclusion at the heart of improving education and one part of attaining sustainable development worldwide.

National responses to these global aspirations have since been disappointingly mixed. Some countries have made great strides forward, notably in Europe, Italy (which passed a law in 1977 closing all special schools) and Portugal which now has a comprehensive legal framework for inclusion. In federal countries, education is often mainly a responsibility of provincial government. Since the 1980s, for example, the Canadian province of New Brunswick has been a global pioneer (a [story](#) I have told with Gordon Porter, a teacher who has been a leader in this movement for more than 30 years).

In Latin America, similar examples are hard to find. It is more than 50 years since Paulo Freire published, in *Pedagogy Of the Oppressed*, an outstanding analysis of how education can be an instrument of development in very unequal societies. Education remains a priority for most governments and civil society. In recent years there have been national policy and legal changes in several countries that give more emphasis to inclusion. There are quite a lot of schools, including in the private sector, that are demonstrating aspects of inclusive practice. UNICEF, among other international agencies, has sponsored projects addressed to advancing inclusion in clusters of local schools (for example the [Mas Inclusión](#) initiative in Perú and the *Escuelas Mandela* in Uruguay).

But sustainable advances in inclusive education require 'whole (education) system' transformation. Families need a choice of local schools. Students should move through a school career - pre-school, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education, training and employment - requiring continuity across a range of educational settings. This can only be achieved for all students where education policy, school practice, teacher training and family participation are all aligned towards inclusive goals.

Argentina is a federal country in which education is primarily a provincial responsibility. Within Latin America, the Argentine province of **La Pampa** has been gaining a reputation as one large area where there has been substantial progress in addressing this 'whole system' agenda. Uruguay is a close neighbour. In June, 2024, a team of national educational leaders from Uruguay gained international funding

(from the Iberoamerican Disability Programme) to make a study visit to La Pampa with the aim of drawing lessons for improving education in their own country. This visit was coordinated by the Iberoamerican Disability Programme technical unit and Karen Van Rompaey (from the Uruguayan Social Development Ministry). They generously invited me and my Peruvian colleague, Rosa Pingo (who acted as my interpreter) to join them.

The study team comprised nine people: six from Uruguay, including a civil society representative; the Programme's coordinator; Rosa and me. We spent an intensive three days in La Pampa as guests of the Ministry of Education. We visited six schools (two each of pre-school, primary and secondary) and two inclusion support centres. There and in the Ministry, we met a large number (more than 100 between us) of participants in the education system: civil servants, especially in the cross-Ministry Directorate for Inclusive Education, school leaders and teachers, support teachers for inclusion and other support staff, students and family members. In the schools we were encouraged to wander around and see for ourselves what inclusive education means for teachers and students. In all this, our La Pampa hosts made great efforts to help us understand their experience and demonstrated amazing hospitality: the Minister herself (Sra. Marcela Feuerschvenger) spent more than six hours with us from her doubtless very busy schedule.

Clearly this whole multi-level network of people in La Pampa has a lot of confidence in what they are doing. As visitors, we would say that this confidence is justified: we have seen inclusive education in La Pampa and it works! At the same time, our hosts would be the first to say that transforming the whole education system remains 'work in progress'. There is always more to do, for example better to meet the UNESCO principle 'Every learner matters and matters equally'.

We three agreed to write up this commentary on what we learnt from La Pampa. We come from three different countries (Uruguay, Perú and the United Kingdom). We have different roles: policy advisor, psychologist, international consultant, mother and sibling, etc.)

In what follows, we first describe La Pampa and trace briefly some key milestones in the province's journey to an inclusive system of education. Then we try to describe both current pedagogical practice in the schools and the support available to foster this. In this descriptive part, we have checked our facts at with people in the Ministry. Our commentary is then focused on two questions: *How* has transformational (and we think, sustainable) change been achieved in La Pampa? *What* are the *key lessons* from this experience for achieving transformational change in other education systems?

We hope these reflections will be a useful resource to other educational leaders, both within the education system and representing civil society, plotting journeys to inclusive education elsewhere.

1. La Pampa: Introduction and recent history



Argentina is a large country at the southern end of South America. The province of La Pampa is located in the middle, west of the capital and major population centre, Buenos Aires. It is a large rural (and therefore mainly farming) area with a land size of 143,440 sq. km. spread around a number of small towns, including the capital, Santa Rosa, which houses the main seats of provincial government. The total population is 366,022 inhabitants (Census 2022).

Radical change in education is usually multi-determined: that is, a range of opportunities and pressures, both external to the province and from within, together with local leadership, promote processes of change which may proceed rapidly but also plateau and regress as new circumstances arise.

In La Pampa, our hosts traced this story back 20 years. In that period, the elected political leadership has had a strong commitment to social justice and a belief in social change through popular participation (values still important to the current Education Minister). Argentina has close connections with countries in southern Europe and some members of this leadership were familiar with the educational transformations in Italy and Portugal. It was this political leadership that provided impetus for reforming education with equity and inclusion central to the agenda.

This positive agenda was complemented by pressures arising from a number of concerns about the quality of education then on offer, especially for students with disabilities. For example, many of the students attending special schools were perceived as not reaching their full potential and their transition from primary to mandatory secondary education was often problematic.

Some people we met spoke highly of progress in these early years of the Century but our study visit focused more on the recent past, going back about a decade. Around 2017, there was renewed political commitment to advancing inclusion and this was reflected in both legislative and structural change designed to promote the conditions required for more rapid progress across the whole La Pampa system, each step accompanied by publication of detailed policy and practice guidance - as far as possible in accessible form - designed to ensure that the transformation process was well understood.

Fundamental to all these activities was leadership from the Ministry level that set out to develop and share a coherent new vision of education to inform and guide the change efforts. In his famous book, *Leading Change*, the North American management expert, John Kotter, makes establishing and constantly communicating a vision of a better future central to achieving radical change. Leadership within the

Education Ministry understood this message. Moreover, going beyond Kotter, they also understood that communication has to be in both directions: they needed to listen carefully to the views of teachers, students and families in the process of building widespread support for transformation - including, of course, people who were not, and may still not be convinced about the direction of travel.

The Ministry's new perspective had several elements. It recognised that education serves a diverse population in La Pampa: students with different interests, talents and socio-economic status etc. The overarching goal was to recognise this diversity and make education better for everyone. The purpose of education was understood as being to help every student understand better the world around them, discover their own talents and develop relationships with their peers so that they could become valued and successful citizens as they progress to adulthood. This is best achieved where students are educated together and all schools develop the capacity to include all students. Where students faced learning difficulties, these were to be understood as resulting from barriers created by the system, not deficits within the student. Schools need to adapt to their students, not the other way round.

In turn, pursuing this purpose required a new pedagogy in which classroom diversity is welcome, the curriculum is flexible and adapts to student interests, teaching is informed by Universal Design for Learning principles, the school addresses access requirements, provides assistive devices and makes reasonable adjustments to accommodate students - and is able to offer additional support when this is needed.

All of this was understood to require significant investment in both the support available to teachers and their continuing professional development. We discuss the wide range of support available to both teachers and students in the regular schools in what follows. In relation to teacher training, La Pampa is an 'open system'. Primary teacher education is a federal responsibility. La Pampa University trains secondary level teachers. The province has worked hard to ensure through local training providers that teachers have good opportunities to learn relevant new skills, 3000 people are registered in an on-line learning network and schools make time available within the school day for teachers to reflect on their classroom practice with others. Most importantly, teachers learn 'on the job' with other pedagogical experts, notably the support teachers for inclusion, how best to lead inclusive classrooms.

'Juan' - Developing valued talents

Juan is a teenager living in an economically deprived area of Santa Rosa. His school knows his family and they have been having a tough time. Perhaps as a consequence, Juan has been missing more and more school - spending a lot of time with other lads on the street. Recently he came to the attention of the criminal justice system.

Government in La Pampa practices co-responsibility. His school took the lead in trying to find a better path. The school principal met with Juan and his family and they managed to cut a deal. Juan is passionate about street music but his family lacked the finance to get him recording and other equipment. The school offered to help if Juan returned regularly and he has kept his side of the bargain. Working in a music project, he has emerged as a competent 'rap' artist. We listened to some of his recordings: he channels his anger into social commentary about Argentine inequality.

Clearly there were many discrete activities required by this change programme but the Ministry leadership identify *five key pillars* to their strategy:

- Start from the experience and aspirations of each family to identify what would be needed for their sons and daughters to flourish through their school and post-school career. The bold offer was that the inclusive education system would strive to meet every student's needs.
- Build the commitment and capacity of all schools to welcome all students, thus making a reality of choice for families.
- Invest in school transport to ensure students with mobility challenges could access their chosen schools.
- Work with community networks so that inclusive schools were understood as local neighbourhood resources and vice versa.
- Greatly strengthen the expert support available to schools, teachers and students in delivering the inclusion mandate.

Some of the most important policy and legislative milestones in acting on these intentions include:

2017 - A change in regulations for the certification of students with disabilities on graduation from schools so that their individual achievements are formally recognised and they have access to the next level in the education system (for example, so as to be able to move from primary to secondary schooling).

2018 - Closure of the province's 21 special schools in their original form and their redefinition as 'Schools of support to inclusion'. (Escuelas de Apoyo a la Inclusión)

2018 - Complementing this re-purposing, redefinition of the roles of special educators as 'teachers of support to inclusion' now working directly to support teaching in the ordinary schools. (Docentes de Apoyo a la Inclusión y Equipos de Apoyo a la Inclusión)

2020 - Establishing a new General Directorate working across the Education Ministry with all relevant delivery directorates (pre-school, primary, secondary etc.) to support both their development of inclusive cultures, policies and practices and continuity for students as they advance through these sub-systems. (Dirección General de Transversalidad de la Educación Inclusiva)

Of course, this brief summary is no more than an outline of the road-map to radical change in La Pampa. In [Section 3](#), we explore in more detail *how* radical change, that won the hearts and minds of local people, was achieved and try to identify the 'theory of change' that informed the La Pampa transformation strategy.

2. The La Pampa education system in 2024: What did we see?

As David says in his Preface, during our visit we were able to visit six schools for students at different ages, two former special schools that were now support centres for inclusion open to all learners, and talk with a large number of teachers, students and family members.

Most impressive in 2024 are the basic statistics. There are around 98,000 students of all ages in La Pampa. Just a few years after the closure of the 21 special schools, nearly 100% of all students, including those identified as having disabilities, are in regular education. Moreover all these students are expected to progress through pre-school, primary and secondary education and indeed given priority in school admission as they transition through the system, as well as having opportunities for post secondary education, training or employment options. Currently, among this 98,000 around 7000 are receiving additional support, 2400 of whom have high support requirements, some but not all of whom have 'accredited' disabilities.

An independent evaluation of progress in La Pampa undertaken in 2022 (that is, in the shadow of the global pandemic) by the EUROsocial agency together with the Grupo Social ONCE, reports positive evidence that students with disabilities are for the most part successfully participating in school life and achieving real and recognised progress against their learning goals, although clearly there remains more to be done to generalise these successes.

Starting with our visits to pre-school (ages 3 - 5 years old) and primary schools (6 - 11 years old), we were able to see inclusion in practice. All the schools we visited advertised the values that inform the culture of the school community prominently (typically on the wall of the reception area).

Classrooms we visited typically had between 15 and 25 students. Seating was arranged either in an open square (in which all students could see each other and the teacher) or in small groups around tables. These arrangements allowed students to help each other and conveyed the principle that all students are equally valued.



'Lionel' - We all need mates

We were talking with teachers in the primary school corridor when break was signalled. A small group emerged from one classroom. Lionel is a boy with some physical challenges and uses a wheelchair for mobility. He was being pushed by an adult, his personal (non-teaching) assistant. There were six other children either pushing or hanging onto the wheelchair. They all proceeded to the playground where the children took it in turns to push the wheelchair so that Lionel could play in their game. The playground had adult supervision.

In the classrooms we observed, the class teacher typically provided leadership, first in setting the framework for the lesson and then in moving around to engage with different small groups or individual students to further prompt them as the work proceeded.

Support teachers for inclusion were available to help teachers in lesson planning and identifying how all students could be active participants. Working with the teacher and the student's family, these support teachers were also likely to be involved in establishing 'individual pedagogical plans' for the minority of students with more complex disabilities. They might also participate for a while in the lesson but usually served a number of classrooms so moved around.

Schools could also get assistance from other professionals that are part of the Support Teams for Inclusion (for example, psychologists, psychopedagogists, speech therapists and social workers) that provide different kinds of student support. And about one in seven of the students with disabilities had (non-pedagogical) personal assistants. However, we never saw more than two adults in the classroom at the same time.

As we have noted, an important part of the educational project in La Pampa is the idea that all students should have a school career that embraces pre-school, primary and secondary opportunities. Indeed, most of the schools we visited were in clusters so that, for example, the transition from primary to secondary only involved crossing the street. Moreover, as part of preparation for transition, five year olds spent some time in their final year participating in the primary school, and eleven year olds did the same in their proposed secondary schools. These neighbouring schools worked with each other, the various support teams and student families to plan for a smooth transition.

Accordingly, the secondary schools we visited were welcoming students, some of whom might previously have participated in the special schools. In other countries, full inclusion at the secondary level can be challenging: first because secondary students tend to move through lots more classrooms, with lessons organised on a subject basis (Spanish, Mathematics, History etc.); and second because teachers who are subject specialists tend to be more resistant to curriculum differentiation than their primary school counterparts. We expect that these are challenges in La Pampa too.

An important response to these challenges in La Pampa is a flexible curriculum that allows students with disabilities and with high support needs to work in multi-disciplinary projects that are relevant to their lives and require team-working and problem-solving abilities.

We saw this approach in other schools but it was most emphasised in so called 'i-schools' in an economically deprived area of Santa Rosa, which is the focus of a Federal/Provincial initiative aiming to reconnect the population to the local society

and economy (a 'social inclusion' initiative in its wider sense). The picture (below) shows how the intent of this initiative is represented at the school level. It is this school where 'Juan' got the opportunity to develop his 'rapping' skills.

Juan's school had as one curricular focus, the visual arts. But we also saw project work addressed to reducing violence in the community, protecting the natural environment and identifying what it would take to achieve equal citizenship.



'Maria' - Strengthening inclusive communication

Maria is a pre-teen student who lip reads and needs sign language interpretation to aid communication. We met her with two of her class mates. They told us that they were keen to relate better to their friend and had asked her sign language interpreter to teach them this language too. This had been arranged and indeed sign language was now part of the curriculum for the whole class, with fortnightly lessons from the specialist. Their efforts had greatly strengthened Maria's opportunities to participate like her friends in all aspects of school life.

Our study visit also included two of the schools designated to support inclusion. The buildings of the former special schools are spacious and fairly modern. They also had useful physical resources: an accessible swimming pool in one; a basket ball court in another. When transforming the special schools into Support Schools for Inclusion, the Education Ministry had elected to repurpose both their physical and human resources (in the latter case being able to reassure staff that change did not require redundancies).

We have already mentioned the staff who became teachers supporting inclusion and indeed their numbers have been significantly expanded as an expert resource to the regular schools. Some of their time was also devoted to offering a range of extra-

curricular activities in the support centres to groups of students who wanted this. This included courses in practical skills like carpentry, cooking and gardening; professional development opportunities, for example in technology, communication and health; as well as one base for work experience opportunities for students approaching the school leaving age.

Such work experience was an intrinsic part of preparation for adulthood at the secondary level and we were able to learn about an employment programme specifically designed to ensure that students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, were included in these opportunities.

We ended the study visit in a large meeting with students and family members. The experience of some of the students is captured in the text boxes above. A common view among them was that 'inclusion works': we are better learning together.

Parents at this meeting tended to emphasise a related point: the commitment to quality and inclusive schooling, with parents as partners in their children's education, brings stability to the family and greatly reduces the stress often involved in advocating for your child when schools are not responsive to their individual needs.

'Gloria' - Constructive cooperation in the family/school partnership

At the final meeting, Gloria shared her experiences. Her daughter 'Vicky' is a bright and lively girl with cerebral palsy. (We have seen her Facebook postings.) After Vicky's birth they had to go often to Buenos Aires where there is a wide range of specialist provision, but didn't find good ways of meeting Vicky's needs. A few years ago it wasn't 'plain sailing' in La Pampa either and the mother invested in studying relevant pedagogical approaches so that she could help the school Vicky was attending.

Then La Pampa delivered major investment in making regular schools inclusive. Gloria decided to move Vicky from her private school to the public system. (Most schools are public in La Pampa.) For Gloria, this investment was transformational. Years of family stress gave way to a sense that Vicky was now being welcomed to her regular school and teachers understood what it takes for her daughter to feel comfortable in the classroom, participate and learn. For example, Vicky - a little clumsily we may guess - now started participating in the sports class. It turns out that Vicky loves physical activity. Gloria was now a partner with Vicky's school, not just a critic.

3. Achieving transformational change: Seven key lessons

In Sections 1 & 2 we have described the recent history of educational change in La Pampa and how the system is currently working. Clearly the radical shift towards a fully inclusive system cannot be achieved just as an 'add on' to what went before: rather it requires 'whole system' transformation. In our judgement, certainly compared with elsewhere in Latin America, La Pampa has made impressive progress towards this end. Like New Brunswick however, where this journey started more than 20 years earlier, leaders in La Pampa recognise that there is always more to do to meet the goal that *every* student is included in regular schooling, participating in school life and achieving in relation to their own aspirations and possibilities.

Indeed, while we were in La Pampa, the Ministry leadership was giving fresh attention to how better to rationalise the varieties of support available to schools, probably through the creation of zonal support teams serving geographical clusters of schools. As we have noted, the journey to inclusion is always 'work in progress'.

Some of the details we have described may be unique to the situation in La Pampa. Just copying what they have done may not in itself work well elsewhere. However, within this detail we think it possible to identify the inter-related elements of a transformational *strategy* which has much wider relevance.

We think this strategy has *seven main elements*:

1. **Leadership** - A guiding coalition of people with the authority and vision to guide a process of long-term change.

Transformational change is complex: it needs a leadership group able to set direction (we come to this next), identify a road map for change and provide the conditions for decentralised action, small and large, to advance on the chosen path.

In La Pampa, the core of this leadership were the members of the 'transversal' directorate, with Ministerial and local government support. Over time, however the leadership coalition has widened to include others with local leadership roles, for example, the school principals. What struck us from meeting these people was not only the shared sense of direction ('singing from the same song-sheet') but also their shared confidence in both the urgency and possibility of positive change. In a classic Spanish phrase, they believe '¡Es Posible!' (We can do it!). Accordingly they are invested individually and together in a continuous 'Plan - Act - Learn' cycle. Their civil servant leader for seven years until recently, Sr. Ladio Scheer Becher, says that rather than waiting for everything to be in place before acting, it is important to generate momentum in the change process...and then learn from experience.

2. **Vision** - A clear sense of direction to inform all the discrete activities involved in transformation.

Sailors of old needed both a compass and sightings of the pole star to help their navigation. Sr. Scheer Becher similarly emphasises the importance of having a 'norte' (north) to guide social change. Where are we trying to get to?

Simply, La Pampa's leadership aims to develop a regular system of education that welcomes the diversity in local communities and enables every student to flourish. In [Section 1](#), we summarise both the philosophy of education and the pedagogical approach that underpin this goal. In all this, La Pampa is addressing the indicators for success set out in an important UNESCO publication, [Reaching Out To All Learners](#). In all schools, and in transition between them, these indicators require that everyone is made to feel welcome, teaching is planned with all students in mind, students help each other and assessment contributes to the success of all students.

3. Partnership and co-responsibility - Engaging with the full range of stakeholders in education and related services to build consensus about transformation, promote local action and learn from experience.

Education Ministries make laws, establish policies and allocate resources. But education is delivered by teachers, students and families in thousands of classrooms and many more thousands of families. Students also draw on services provided by other agencies, for example in the health system. The Ministry leadership in La Pampa understands this and works hard both to communicate their vision and discuss its implications, listening to both successes and problems.

In population terms, La Pampa is not a big province. People in the Ministry tried to establish a culture in which their 'door is always open'. Indeed we met people who had the telephone numbers of Ministry officials. Civil servant leaders were happy to visit individual schools and talk with families so that change was generated through dialogue and informed by feedback from those directly affected. One especially strategic dialogue was with the teaching trade unions to establish confidence that proposed changes would not disadvantage their members.

In this sense, the Ministry sought to work with civil society representatives as partners in change, although our impression is that beyond neighbourhood groups, La Pampa has less organised advocacy groups (for example, speaking for people with disabilities or families with children with Down Syndrome) than we have encountered elsewhere.

4. Pedagogical Innovation - Enabling the regular schools to successfully welcome diversity.

In this strategy for transformation, the critical investment is in ensuring the regular schools are well equipped - that is, develop the cultures, policies and practices - to ensure that every student is able to thrive. As we have seen, this is a profound change from traditional practice. It especially requires investment in the continuing

professional development of regular teachers and direct support to them in their classrooms.

As we have seen in [Section 2](#), good teachers understand the purpose of education broadly and take responsibility for the education of all their students. They work in partnership with families to promote high expectations for all learners. They consider carefully how to manage lessons and the way they use any additional teaching assistance. They set and assess achievable goals and use pedagogical strategies like universal design for learning, differentiated instruction and cooperative learning groups. They pay constant attention to the well-being of all their students and whether they are fully engaged in the lessons.

In turn, good schools support their teachers in these activities and ensure that they have time and opportunities to learn new methods and reflect with others on their classroom experience.

5. Repurposing specialist resources - Focusing all available human resources on improving practice in the regular schools.

There are two reasons for closing the previous special schools. The first is practical: a large number of skilled staff (teachers and others) were thus 'liberated' to redirect their efforts to supporting both teachers and students in the regular schools. Hence their re-designation as teachers supporting inclusion. Indeed, the Ministry recruited additional support staff as the regular schools increasingly accepted all local students. Second, the philosophy behind 'special education' typically casts a long shadow. Usually it means labelling some students as different from the norm, indeed having 'deficits'. In an inclusive system, every student is 'special' in the sense of needing their education to be tailored to their interests and needs.

6. Creative problem-solving - Mobilising all available expertise around the student, especially the student encountering difficulties.

None of this is easy. Making the education system work well for everyone is a collective responsibility, involving government, schools, teachers, students and families. It requires the capacity within schools to coordinate efforts to find good solutions to emerging challenges.

In the four stories we have included, Juan's school clearly 'went the extra mile' to ensure that he rediscovered a good reason for attending and wasn't lost to the system. Similarly, some success for Vicky depended on her mother's willingness to engage in a long struggle to establish her place in regular schooling - and indeed Vicky's own resilience. In the example of Maria, her school had to demonstrate flexibility in making her sign language interpreter available to other students so they could become bi-lingual. Lionel's small friends probably worked out for themselves how to involve him in their games but this still needed some adult supervision to avoid too much exuberance!

Everyday life in schools, especially inclusive schools, requires this kind of commitment to everyday problem-solving.

7. Making education itself a learning system - Creating processes that ensure the whole system learns from the experience of transformation.

Addressing the complexity of transformational change requires not only that education enables all students to learn and develop but also that the education system itself is able to learn and develop: that it becomes a learning system. 'Vertically' this means creating processes that enable leaders in different parts of the system to be able to see something of the 'whole', so that they can relate their contributions to system-wide objectives. 'Laterally', just as students learn from other students and teachers learn from other teachers, successful transformation requires processes that enable schools to learn from other schools and local clusters of schools to learn from other local clusters. In turn this requires that the wider culture of education supports safe and inclusive spaces within which people with different perspectives can reflect honestly on successes and disappointments.

Both in La Pampa and elsewhere, we think that success in weaving together these seven strands of strategy is fundamental to achieving transformational and sustainable change.

Authors:

Karen Van Rompaey is the Inclusive Education Advisor at the Disability Directorate of the Uruguayan *Ministry of Social Development*

Rosa Pingo is a psychologist member of the Peruvian development agency *Aliados por la inclusión*

David Towell is Director of the London-based *Centre for Inclusive Futures*