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ARTICLE 1 PREAMBLE

EPOKA University is an internationally oriented, non-public institution of higher education established pursuant to the Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 281, dated 12.03.2008. Operating under the Statute approved by the Academic Senate on 14 December 2016 and guided by the Code of Ethics adopted on 19 December 2018, the University has consistently affirmed its commitment to respecting and upholding the universality of human rights, tolerance toward different religions, languages, genders, nationalities, and diversity of opinion.

This Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy (hereinafter "the Policy" or “EDI”) gives institutional form and regulatory substance to these foundational commitments.

ARTICLE 2 LEGAL AND REGULATORY BASIS

This Policy is based on Law 9970/2008 “On Gender Equality”; Law No. 10221, dated 04.02.2010, 'On Protection from Discrimination' (as amended), Law No. 80/2015, “On Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Institutions of Higher Education in the Republic of Albania' (as amended); Law No. 124/2024, dated 19.12.2024, 'On Personal Data Protection”; Statute, Code of Ethics and Basic Regulation of EPOKA University.

ARTICLE 3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

EPOKA University adopts this Policy with the overarching purpose of building and maintaining a university community in which every person is treated with dignity and respect, has equal access to opportunities, and can participate fully in academic, research, and administrative life regardless of any protected characteristic.

In pursuit of this purpose, the Policy has the following specific objectives:

1. To eliminate unlawful discrimination in all its forms, direct, indirect, associative, and by instruction, in every area of university activity, including admission, recruitment, employment, promotion, remuneration, disciplinary proceedings, access to facilities and services, and academic programme design.
2. To advance equality of opportunity by identifying and removing structural barriers faced by persons who share a protected characteristic, and by implementing positive action measures where a demonstrable equality deficit has been established.
3. To foster good relations between people of different backgrounds, promoting respect for diversity as an academic and institutional asset, and countering stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory attitudes through education, dialogue, and institutional culture.
4. To create and maintain an inclusive environment in which all students, academic staff, administrative staff, and external partners feel safe, valued, and able to contribute their full potential, free from harassment, victimization, and unwanted conduct.
5. To ensure full compliance with applicable Albanian law, with European Union standards and directives relevant to higher education, and with international human rights instruments ratified by Albania.

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6. To embed EDI considerations systematically into institutional governance, strategic planning, budgetary processes, quality assurance, and external reporting, so that EDI is understood and practiced as a core dimension of institutional quality and not merely as a compliance exercise.

ARTICLE 4 SCOPE OF APPLICATION

This Policy applies, without exception and without limitation, to all aspects of EPOKA University's activities and to all persons who interact with the University in any capacity. Specifically, it covers:

- all students enrolled in any study programme (Bachelor, Master, PhD, and continuing education);
- all academic staff, in any contractual arrangement;
- all assisting academic, administrative, and support staff, irrespective of their contractual status or level within the institutional hierarchy;
- candidates applying for admission to a programme of study or for employment.
- external partners, contractors, consultants, and visitors acting on University premises or on behalf of the University.

The Policy applies to all University activities, including student admission and assessment; staff recruitment, promotion, and remuneration; academic programme design and delivery; research activities; governance and decision-making; access to university facilities and services; and all forms of digital communication conducted through university platforms.

ARTICLE 5 PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS

5.1 EPOKA University guarantees the protection of all members of its community against any form of discrimination, harassment, or victimization, based on protected personal characteristics, in accordance with Law No. 10221/2010 “On Protection from Discrimination” and the applicable acquis of the European Union.

5. For the purposes of this Policy, protected characteristics include, but are not limited to, gender, race, color, ethnic origin, language, religion or belief, political opinion, economic or social status, pregnancy, parental responsibility, age, marital or family status, disability, nationality, and any other personal attribute recognized under applicable law.

5.3 The protected characteristics and their practical application within EPOKA University are defined as follows. This list is non-exhaustive and shall be interpreted in a manner that ensures the broadest possible protection of individuals, in line with the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

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EPOKA UNIVERSITY POLICY ON “EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION”

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Gender: The University shall ensure equal treatment and equal opportunities for women and men across all institutional activities, including but not limited to admission, employment, promotion, and participation in governance and decision-making structures.

Pregnancy and maternity: The University shall guarantee protection from any form of unfavorable treatment related to pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and the exercise of rights associated with maternity or paternity leave.

Age: The University shall ensure non-discrimination based on age, guaranteeing equal treatment of individuals of all age groups in academic, administrative, and employment-related decisions.

Disability and special needs: The University shall ensure that persons with physical, sensory, mental, or intellectual impairments have equal access to all University activities through the provision of appropriate support measures and reasonable accommodation.

Race, color, and ethnic origin: The University shall guarantee equal treatment irrespective of a person’s race, color, ethnic origin, or descent.

Religion or belief: The University shall ensure equal treatment regardless of a person’s religion, philosophical beliefs, or absence of religious belief.

Nationality: The University shall ensure equal treatment of all students and staff, irrespective of their nationality, citizenship, or national origin.

Language: The University shall respect linguistic diversity and ensure that no individual is placed at a disadvantage on the basis of their native or working language.

Socio-economic status: The University shall guarantee equal access to academic and professional opportunities irrespective of an individual’s economic situation or social background.

Marital and family status: The University shall ensure non-discrimination on the basis of marital status or family responsibilities, including obligations related to the care of dependent children or other family members.

Political opinion: The University shall ensure that no individual is subjected to adverse treatment on the basis of lawfully held political opinions or affiliation.

ARTICLE 6 PROHIBITED CONDUCT

The following forms of conduct are strictly prohibited in all University activities and contexts, including digital communications and social media:

Direct Discrimination:

Treating a person less favorably than another in a comparable situation because of a protected characteristic. Examples include refusing to select a qualified candidate for employment because of their ethnic origin; failing a student's work for reasons unconnected to academic merit; denying a staff member a promotion because she is pregnant.

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Indirect Discrimination:

Applying a rule, criterion, or practice that is neutral in appearance but places persons with a protected characteristic at a particular disadvantage, when that rule cannot be justified by a legitimate aim. Example: requiring full-time physical presence for a role that could functionally be performed flexibly, without valid operational justification, may disadvantage persons with caregiving responsibilities.

Harassment:

Any unwanted conduct related to a protected characteristic, whether verbal, written, physical, or digital that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. Even a single incident may constitute harassment if it is sufficiently serious. Sexual harassment any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature is a specific and particularly serious form of harassment, prohibited without exception between any persons within the University community, regardless of their position in the institutional hierarchy.

Victimization:

Subjecting a person to adverse treatment because they have in good faith made a complaint, participated in an investigation, or supported another person's complaint under this Policy. Victimization is an independent prohibited act, irrespective of the outcome of the underlying complaint.

Discrimination by Association:

Treating a person less favorably because of their association with another person who has a protected characteristic

Unequal Pay:

Paying a staff member less than a comparable colleague for work of equal value, based on gender or any other protected characteristic.

Discriminatory Publications and Communications:

Publishing, displaying, or disseminating any notice, advertisement, or communication whether physical or digital that contains or implies a discriminatory preference, restriction, or exclusion based on any protected characteristic.

ARTICLE 7 INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS

Beyond the prohibition of discrimination, EPOKA University undertakes the following positive commitments to build a genuinely equitable and inclusive community:

7.1 Gender Equality

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EPOKA University is committed to promoting substantive equality between women and men across all institutional functions. To this end, the University aims to:

- strive toward achieving balanced gender representation, with a target of at least 30% participation of each gender in governance and management bodies, in line with the principles of Law No. 9970/2008 “On Gender Equality”;
- promote the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, regardless of gender;
- support pregnant employees, new parents, and employees returning from maternity or paternity leave, including by fostering a work environment that prevents unfavorable treatment and, where operationally feasible, encourages flexible work arrangements;
- take gender balance into consideration in the composition of recruitment committees, selection panels, and research teams;
- encourage the use of academic curricula and teaching materials that are free from gender stereotypes, in accordance with the principles of Law No. 9970/2008 “On Gender Equality”.

7.2 Disability and Accessibility

Inspired by the approach of leading European universities, EPOKA University places special emphasis on the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The University shall:

- progressively ensure that all physical facilities, teaching rooms, libraries, laboratories, offices, and common areas are accessible to persons with mobility impairments, and shall publish an annual accessibility improvement plan;
- provide adaptive learning technologies, accessible digital materials, and alternative content formats upon request;
- offer flexible examination arrangements including extended time, alternative formats, and quiet venues to students with verified disabilities or specific learning differences;
- make individual reasonable accommodation arrangements for staff members with disabilities;
- process all disability-related personal data in strict compliance with Law No. 124/2024 on Personal Data Protection, using data collected solely based on voluntary self-declaration and for the exclusive purpose of providing support.

7.3 Cultural, Linguistic, and Religious Diversity

EPOKA University serves a diverse community of students and staff drawn from multiple countries and cultural backgrounds. The University shall:

- ensure that institutional communications, events, and activities are welcoming and respectful of the cultural, linguistic, and national diversity of all community members;
- facilitate, within the constraints of the academic calendar, reasonable observance of religious practices by students and staff, consistent with the secular character of the University established in its Statute;
- ensure that academic programmes and teaching materials do not promote cultural stereotypes or present any nationality, culture, or religion as inherently superior or inferior;
- offer appropriate orientation and support services to international students to facilitate their academic and social integration.

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7.4 Age Inclusivity

EPOKA University does not tolerate age-based discrimination in any direction. Students, early-career staff, and senior staff shall receive equal access to academic and professional opportunities. The University shall design its programmes and services to accommodate the learning styles and professional needs of persons at different stages of life.

7.5 Positive Action

Where statistical data or institutional analysis reveals a measurable inequality affecting persons sharing a protected characteristic, the University may adopt temporary positive action measures such as targeted scholarships, reserved participation in training programmes, or preferential shortlisting in recruitment to accelerate the achievement of de facto equality. Such measures shall be time-limited, periodically reviewed, and shall cease when the objective of equality has been achieved, in conformity with Article 11 of Law No. 10221/2010 “On protection from Discrimination” and Law 9970/2008 “On Gender Equality”.

ARTICLE 8 COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE

EPOKA University provides a fair, confidential, and accessible internal mechanism for the resolution of EDI-related complaints. The mechanism operates in parallel with and does not replace external remedies available under Albanian law.

8.1 The subjects that have the right to complain:

Any student, staff member, candidate, or other person covered by this Policy who believes they have been subjected to a violation may submit a complaint. An organization with a legitimate interest may act on behalf of a person affected, with that person's written consent, in accordance with Article 33 of Law No. 10221/2010 “On protection from Discrimination”.

8.2 Submission

Complaints are submitted in writing to the Board of Ethics or the Rector of Epoka University.

- A. The complaint shall contain, at a minimum:
 - i. the name of the complainant.
 - ii. information enabling the complainant to be contacted.
 - iii. the identification of the subject alleged to have committed discrimination, or an explanation where such identification is not possible.
 - iv. a description of the alleged discriminatory conduct.
 - v. the date and signature of the complainant or of their authorized representative.

- B. The complaint shall not be admissible where:
 - i. it is anonymous.

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- ii. it constitutes an abuse of the right to file a complaint or is incompatible with the provisions of Law No. 10221/2010“On Protection from Discrimination”;
- iii. the same matter is under examination within another complaint procedure or has already been decided, and no new facts or evidence have been presented;
- iv. it is manifestly unfounded or does not contain sufficient information to enable an investigation;
- v. it is submitted later than 6 (six) months from the occurrence of the alleged discrimination or later than 3 (three) months from the date on which the injured party became aware of it.

8.3 Procedural guarantees

All complaint proceedings shall be governed by the following safeguards:

- i. Confidentiality: all information is treated as strictly confidential and shared only with persons with a legitimate need to know, in compliance with Law No. 124/2024 on Personal Data Protection.
- ii. Non-retaliation: no person shall suffer any disadvantage for having submitted a complaint in good faith, participated in an investigation, or supported a complainant. Retaliation is itself a serious disciplinary offence.
- iii. Impartiality: investigations shall be conducted by persons with no conflict of interest in relation to the parties.
- iv. Continuation of studies or employment: both complainant and respondent retain their full status during the investigation, subject only to interim protective measures strictly necessary to prevent further harm.

8.4 Timeline

Upon receipt of a complaint, the Board of Ethics: acknowledge receipt within 10 (ten) working days; notify the respondent within 10 (ten) working days; complete the investigation within 15 (fifteen) working days (extendable with notification); communicate findings and recommended measures to the Rector within 10 (ten) working days of the investigation's conclusion; and inform both parties of the outcome within 5 (five) working days of the Rector's decision.

8.5 Internal appeal

Either party may appeal the outcome to the Rector within 15 (fifteen) working days of receiving the written decision. The Rector, or a designated commission not involved in the original investigation, shall issue a reasoned decision within 15 (fifteen) working days.

ARTICLE 9 SANCTIONS

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A violation by a staff member constitutes a disciplinary offence subject to proceedings under the University's internal regulations and respective legislation. Sanctions range from a formal written warning to dismissal, depending on the gravity of the offence and any aggravating or mitigating circumstances. A violation by a student is subject to academic disciplinary proceedings and may result in sanctions ranging from a formal warning to permanent exclusion.

ARTICLE 10 POLICY REVIEW MONITORING AND REPORTING

EPOKA University commits to evidence-based monitoring of its EDI performance, following the approach of leading European universities that publish regular, transparent EDI data.

This Policy shall be formally reviewed every three (3) years. An early review shall be triggered by: material changes in Albanian national legislation; the transposition into Albanian law of new EU directives relevant to equality; significant recommendations from quality assurance assessments; or material deficiencies identified through monitoring data.

ARTICLE 11 EDUCATION AND TRAINING

EPOKA University recognizes that legal compliance, though necessary, is not sufficient to achieve genuine cultural change. Sustained education is essential. The University shall:

- require all newly appointed staff to complete an EDI awareness induction module within three (3) months of appointment, covering the content of this Policy, staff rights and obligations under Albanian anti-discrimination law, and the complaint procedure;
- offer specialized inclusive leadership training to all persons in management or governance roles, addressing bias in decision-making, complaint management, and gender-balanced leadership;
- incorporate EDI principles in the mandatory student orientation programme at the start of each academic year;
- support research in gender equality, anti-discrimination, and social inclusion through the University's research centres.

ARTICLE 12 FINAL PROVISIONS

12.1 Relationship with other instruments

This Policy is complementary to and shall be read together with the Statute, the Code of Ethics, the Basic Regulation, and all other applicable institutional regulations of EPOKA University. In the event of any conflict, the provision affording the greater protection to the individual shall prevail.

12.2 Non-waiver

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The rights conferred by this Policy are non-waivable. No person may be required, as a condition of admission, employment, or any other benefit, to waive any right protected under this Policy or under applicable law.

12.3 Language

This Policy is issued in English and Albanian. Both versions are equally authentic. In the event of any inconsistency concerning compliance with Albanian national law, the Albanian-language version shall prevail.

12.4 Entry into force

This Policy enters into force on the date of its approval by the Academic Senate of EPOKA University.

12.5 Enforcement

The Rector shall have overall responsibility for the oversight of the implementation and enforcement of this Policy, without prejudice to the responsibilities assigned to other University bodies under this Policy

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