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From Legislative Mandates to Student Demands: Institutionalising Intersectionality in Spanish Universities

Gloria García-Romeral [1] , Marina Garcia-Castillo [2] and Lorena González-Ruiz [2]

[1] Department of Pedagogy, Universitat de Vic–Universitat Central de Catalunya (UVic-UCC), Spain
[2] Department of Social Sciences and Law, Universitat de Vic–Universitat Central de Catalunya (UVic-UCC), Spain

Correspondence: Marina Garcia-Castillo (marina.garcia.castillo@uvic.cat)

Abstract

Spain has undergone a significant normative shift; new laws on equality, coexistence, and university governance have expanded institutional responsibilities for promoting inclusion and preventing discrimination. This development reflects broader changes in the composition of the Spanish higher education student population and highlights the need for a more comprehensive, intersectional approach to inclusion, moving beyond the traditional focus on disability. This article examines how institutional frameworks and student agency interact to drive organisational change in higher education. Drawing on a qualitative case study at a Catalan university, the research combines (a) policy analysis, (b) eight participatory workshops on inequality and inclusion with over 150 students, and (c) an analysis of the first year of operation of the university's Equality and Diversity Unit, which includes a review of the types of requests and cases managed and semi-structured interviews with staff responsible for implementing student support plans and coordinating inclusion efforts. The study examines the interaction between top-down policy frameworks and bottom-up initiatives in shaping institutional understandings and practices of inclusion. Findings point to persistent tensions between regulatory commitments and everyday university life, revealing how inclusion policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted across different organisational levels. This article advances current debates on the institutionalisation of intersectionality and identifies emergent forms of collective agency within increasingly complex university ecosystems.

Keywords

diversity governance; higher education; inclusion policies; inequalities; intersectionality; Spanish universities

1. Introduction

The Social Dimension of Higher Education (SDHE) within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aims to ensure that universities reflect the social composition of wider society, eliminating barriers to access and participation based on socio-economic status, origin, or gender (Ariño & Llopis, 2011; Herrera Cuesta, 2019). Yet, despite the significant expansion of the Spanish higher education system, persistent disparities remain. Access and academic success continue to be strongly shaped by students' family socio-economic and educational backgrounds, which largely determine who enters university, the programmes they pursue, and their future employment prospects (Herrera Cuesta, 2021; Jiménez-García & Fachelli, 2025).

These structural inequalities are further compounded by the fact that students' experiences are rarely defined by a single axis of disadvantage. A recent study on discrimination in Spanish universities revealed that 43% of students who reported being discriminated against identified more than one cause (Gallego-Noche et al., 2021). The most common intersections involved migratory and ethnic identities, as well as gender or age, combined with other structural factors. This evidence underscores that inequalities in higher education emerge from the interplay of multiple social positions, pointing to the need for intersectional analyses that capture this complexity.

In response to these challenges, the Spanish policy landscape has undergone a notable normative shift. Recent legislation on university governance, coexistence, and equality has expanded institutional responsibilities in promoting inclusion and preventing discrimination across multiple grounds. These reforms call for the creation of structures and strategies that address not only gender and disability, but also inequalities linked to social class, migration, ethnicity, religion, and other intersecting factors. Similar developments at the regional level further consolidate these commitments. Together, they signal a move towards a broader understanding of diversity, while inviting critical reflection on whether institutional responses truly adopt intersectional approaches or remain confined to single-issue strategies.

This article examines how legislative mandates and student demands act as interconnected drivers of change within Spanish universities. It analyses whether these dynamics reproduce inclusion "continuity" or "expert-based" models or, instead, foster transformative inclusion strategies (García-Cano Torrico et al., 2024). Central to this inquiry is assessing the extent to which these processes contribute to advancing intersectional understandings of inequality or whether they reproduce unitary or single-ground approaches. Similar tensions between intersectional discourse and predominantly expert-led, voluntary implementation have been identified in other European higher education systems (Beeckmans et al., 2025), including recent work on intersectionality in German universities (Mergner et al., 2026).

To do so, we draw on a qualitative case study conducted at a Catalan university that combines three strategies. Firstly, we mapped and analysed the current policy framework. Secondly, we facilitated eight participatory workshops on inequality and inclusion with over 150 students from diverse social and academic backgrounds. Thirdly, we examined the first year of operation of the university's Diversity Unit, integrated within the previous Equality Unit, and now Equality and Diversity Unit (UID), including a review of the types of requests and cases managed, as well as semi-structured interviews with staff responsible for implementing student support plans and coordinating inclusion policies. This study situates the interplay between policy mandates and bottom-up student agency. While the former refers to policies and directives

issued by the regional government on how inclusion is to be enacted, the latter emerges from students' own experience.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, it analyses the main policy frameworks and persistent inequalities that shape inclusion and diversity in Spanish higher education, followed by a discussion of the theoretical approach guiding the study. The results are then presented in three parts, moving from the analysis of legislative instruments and institutional policies to students' lived experiences of inequality and the university's responses to these demands. The discussion interprets these findings through the three inclusion models proposed by García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024)—continuity, expert-based, and transformative—highlighting how these logics coexist and overlap within the institution. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of these dynamics through an intersectional lens and on the structural and cultural transformations required to move towards a genuinely inclusive university.

2. Policy Frameworks and Inequalities in Spanish Higher Education

To understand the dynamics of inclusion in Spanish universities, it is necessary to consider them in the context of both the broader European policy framework and the characteristics of Spain's higher education system. Although European agendas reaffirm the "social dimension" of higher education, national and regional frameworks translate these into institutional mandates. At the same time, long-standing inequalities continue to shape access to and progression within higher education. This section outlines the main contextual factors shaping the development of inclusion policies and practices.

At the European level, inclusion has become a central component of higher education policy. The 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué established the "social dimension" as a priority, calling for systems to reflect the diversity of society by widening participation among "vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented" groups (EHEA, 2020). Complementary initiatives, such as directing Erasmus+ resources towards diversity strategies and recognising the qualifications of refugees, highlight the growing expectation that universities address multiple axes of inequality through structural measures (European Commission, 2017). However, as Jaquetto Pereira (2025) points out, the European policy discourse still tends to frame inclusion under the broad umbrella of "diversity," which can obscure the structural and intersectional dimensions of inequality. This remains an ongoing challenge for national systems when it comes to translating these commitments into practice.

Spain has aligned its higher education agenda with these European commitments through several recent reforms, notably the Organic Law 2/2023 on the University System (Ley Orgánica 2/2023, de 22 de marzo, del Sistema Universitario, 2023; hereafter: LOSU 2023) and the Law 3/2022 on University Coexistence (Ley 3/2022, de 24 de febrero, de convivencia universitaria, 2022), which together establish a rights-based framework for equality, non-discrimination, and democratic participation in universities. LOSU 2023 requires the creation of Diversity Units in all institutions, frequently incorporated into existing Equality Units, while the "Coexistence Law" promotes mediation and restorative practices to prevent discrimination and foster inclusive campus environments.

Within Spain's decentralised higher education system, implementation varies across regions. In Catalonia, the Law 19/2020 on Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination (Ley 19/2020, de 30 de diciembre, de igualdad

de trato y no discriminación, 2021) provides a broader legal foundation that recognises multiple forms of discrimination and incorporates an intersectional perspective. Building on this law and the equality mandate in LOSU 2023, the 2024 Plan for Inclusion and Diversity in Catalan Universities (hereafter: PIDUC 2024; see Generalitat de Catalunya, 2024) translates these principles into a coordinated regional strategy to foster accessibility, participation, and diversity governance. Together, these frameworks signal a move beyond a disability-centred understanding of inclusion.

Despite the overall expansion of access to higher education in Spain, social inequalities continue to shape the system (Ortiz & Rodriguez-Menés, 2016). Vertical stratification shows how strongly family background still influences educational trajectories. OECD data indicate that while 77% of adults whose parents hold tertiary qualifications also complete a university degree, the proportion falls to just 31% among those whose parents did not finish upper-secondary education (OECD, 2024). This pattern reveals the persistence of intergenerational inequalities, which are even more pronounced in the case of historically excluded groups such as the Roma population, where participation remains strikingly low (García-Andreu et al., 2020; García-Cano Torrico et al., 2021). Inequalities are also evident in the way students are distributed across programmes, where gender, social origin, and migratory background intersect to shape academic trajectories (Jiménez-García & Fachelli, 2025). Although women now outnumber men in the student population, they remain concentrated in humanities, social sciences, law, and health, while men continue to dominate technical and engineering degrees. Such patterns reproduce long-standing forms of occupational segregation and contribute to limiting women's opportunities in the labour market (Navarro Guzmán & Casero Martínez, 2012). Class background reinforces these divisions, as students from working-class families are more likely to enrol in shorter or less prestigious programmes, while those from more privileged origins predominate in longer and higher-status degrees (Langa Rosado & Río Ruiz, 2013).

Migratory origin adds another layer of differentiation: Although the second generation of immigrant students often shows higher aspirations through processes of selective acculturation, access rates remain lower for young people of Latin American and African descent, who also tend to report more modest employment expectations (Ariño et al., 2014; Herrera Cuesta, 2021). At the same time, universities can function as spaces of empowerment, particularly for migrant women, who often view higher education as a pathway to greater autonomy and social recognition (Pérez Serrano & Sarrate Capdevila, 2013). Taken together, these vertical and horizontal stratification dynamics demonstrate that, despite the overall expansion of higher education, structural inequalities continue to influence who enters Spanish universities, the subjects they study, and their prospects.

3. Theoretical Approach

Despite decades of policies and interventions aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion, higher education continues to face significant challenges in addressing the inequalities experienced by underrepresented groups. As Fernández et al. (2023) observe, two features are particularly characteristic of these policies. First, they tend to focus on isolated identities, such as gender, social class, or ethnicity, rather than adopting more comprehensive and intersectional approaches that recognise the interplay of multiple axes of inequality. Second, initiatives are frequently designed and implemented through top-down mechanisms, with little input from those directly affected. This not only limits their effectiveness but also risks reproducing a deficit perspective in which students and staff are positioned as passive recipients of

interventions rather than active co-creators of institutional change. In the Spanish context, these limitations are compounded by a marked lack of conceptual clarity regarding the meaning of "diversity" in universities (García-Cano Torrico et al., 2021). As García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024) argue, current policies tend to be driven primarily by legislative imperatives, rather than by internal strategies grounded in institutional commitment to equity and social justice.

From a theoretical perspective, these limitations call for analytical frameworks that move beyond single-axis understandings of inequality. Following Hancock's (2007) typology of "unitary," "multiple," and "intersectional" approaches, most equality policies still operate within a "unitary" or "single ground" logic (Kantola & Nousiainen, 2009), where each axis of inequality is treated separately and managed by different departments. While this approach helps to highlight specific forms of discrimination and to mainstream certain equality perspectives, it tends to conceptualise social positions as independent and static, neglecting how multiple dimensions of inequality interact in people's lives (Coll-Planas et al., 2023).

In contrast, the intersectionality approach, first articulated by Crenshaw (1989) and further developed by Black feminist scholars (Collins, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1977; hooks, 1994), provides a powerful conceptual lens for analysing these interconnections. It examines how systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism, intersect to generate distinct configurations of privilege and disadvantage. Intersectionality recognises inequality as multidimensional and context-dependent, with social categories understood as interdependent and mutually constitutive (Hancock, 2007; Hankivsky et al., 2014) and rejects hierarchical relations between axes of difference. This perspective offers a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding how universities frame and address inequality, and for identifying the conceptual orientations that underlie institutional approaches to inclusion.

Building on broader debates about social justice in education, other scholars have focused on the types of institutional responses that can be mobilised to address these inequalities. McArthur (2021) draws on Fraser's work to distinguish between "affirmative" and "transformative" approaches to inclusion in higher education. "Affirmative" approaches are primarily concerned with measurable end targets and seek to rectify inequalities without altering the underlying structures that produce them. Typical examples include providing additional resources, mentoring, or tuition to help disadvantaged or non-traditional students "bridge the gap" with their peers. While such measures can improve individual outcomes, they leave systemic conditions untouched (McArthur, 2021). By contrast, "transformative" approaches focus on the root causes of injustice and work upwards from there. They entail a process of deconstruction that destabilises existing status hierarchies and challenges entrenched assumptions about what constitutes the "mainstream." From this perspective, an inclusive university cannot simply rely on policies designed to bring specific groups, such as Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students in the UK context, into the existing institutional framework, since doing so leaves intact the supremacy of dominant norms and categories (McArthur, 2021). Instead, transformative change requires the university itself to interrogate and reshape its assumptions about normality and difference, to address the structural forms of misrecognition, and to alter not only the opportunities available to marginalised groups but also the material conditions and self-understandings of all members of the academic community (McArthur, 2021).

The distinction between "affirmative" and "transformative" approaches (McArthur, 2021) resonates strongly with the three inclusion models identified by García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024) in their analysis of Spanish

university leaders' discourse. The first of these models, the continuity model, has an "affirmative" orientation in that it focuses on maintaining existing measures, such as financial aid schemes and the provision of legally mandated specialised services, particularly for students with disabilities. This standpoint is largely reactive, addressing inequalities through compliance with regulations rather than through proactive institutional change, and is primarily institutionalised in the areas of access and specific services (García-Cano Torrico et al., 2024). The "expert model," which places emphasis on training, awareness-raising, and curriculum adjustments, sits somewhat between affirmative and transformative logics. While it introduces more dynamic elements by addressing teaching and learning practices, García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024) note that progress in this area is often attributed to broader social change rather than to deliberate institutional leadership, signalling a limited capacity to drive structural transformation. Finally, the "transformative model" directly aligns with McArthur's vision of structural change. It advocates for a rethinking of institutional philosophy, leadership, and culture, with a focus on design thinking for diversity, participatory governance involving marginalised groups, and a commitment to social justice that extends beyond the university itself. This approach is institutionalised in dimensions such as leadership and policy, as well as participation, culture, and community projection (García-Cano Torrico et al., 2024).

These three models, articulated across five analytical categories—access and continuity at university; specialised services; training, awareness, and curriculum; leadership, philosophy, and policy; and participation, culture, and social projection—constitute the framework that guides our analysis. They allow us to explore the extent to which institutional responses and student demands, in dialogue with legislative frameworks, promote an intersectional understanding of inequality, or if they continue confined to single-axis, group-specific approaches. Rather than representing sequential or mutually exclusive stages, these models are understood as analytical ideal types that may coexist within the same context.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory design based on a single institutional case study of a Catalan university. The institution is a medium-sized regional university offering a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees across the social sciences, health, education, communication, and experimental sciences. Its mixed urban-rural profile and mission to be a driver of knowledge and innovation in its territory, while maintaining an international outlook, provide a particular context for examining how inclusion and diversity policies are implemented and experienced in practice. Although the study is embedded in a broader international collaborative project, the empirical data analysed here were generated exclusively within this institution, which was selected through purposive sampling as the setting where the workshops were implemented. The research analyses how institutional policies and student agency interact in shaping inclusive transformation in higher education. Consistent with single-case studies, it combines three complementary strands: (a) documentary and policy review, (b) participatory workshops with students, and (c) interviews with staff responsible for inclusion and student support. The approach is guided by intersectionality as both a theoretical and methodological lens, allowing attention to how multiple axes of inequality interrelate within institutional processes and everyday university life.

The first stage consisted of a review of European, national, and regional policy frameworks addressing inclusion and diversity in higher education. Particular attention was given to the Law 3/2022 on University Coexistence, LOSU 2023, and PIDUC 2024, as these currently guide institutional strategies for equity and

non-discrimination. The analysis focused on how these frameworks conceptualise intersectionality and translate legislative mandates into university-level responsibilities.

The second stage generated empirical data through eight participatory workshops held during the 2024–2025 academic year, involving over 150 undergraduate and master's students from diverse disciplines and academic years. Workshops were integrated into regular teaching sessions within the social education, early childhood education, biology, audiovisual communication, and journalism degrees, as well as in two master's programmes, translation and gender studies, the latter two being conducted online. These degrees and programmes were selected to ensure representation across disciplinary areas and study levels and to capture diverse student experiences regarding inclusion and inequality in their educational trajectories and current environments.

Each in-person workshop lasted approximately four hours and followed a common structure:

1. Introduction and framing of objectives
2. Brief training segment on intersectionality
3. Contextual presentation on inequalities in Spain, Catalonia, and higher education
4. Exploration of four analytical dimensions: learning environments, curriculum, teaching methodologies, and assessment
5. Small-group discussions
6. Collective plenary synthesis of key barriers and proposals for change.

Adaptations were made for online sessions, where participation occurred asynchronously, and for students enrolled in the communication and journalism degree, who, as first-semester, first-year students, had limited prior knowledge of university dynamics. These sessions included more practical activities such as "Steps" (García-Romeral et al., 2025).

The participatory workshops were designed as reflexive spaces for collective discussion, privileging students' situated knowledge and the ways it is shaped by social, historical, and embodied positions (Haraway, 1988). The workshops were facilitated by a team member and followed a systematic reporting process: Researchers took detailed field notes and produced a post-session report combining descriptive and interpretive elements. To ensure anonymity and encourage open participation, sessions were not audio-recorded.

The third methodological strand focused on the first year of operation of the university's UID. Data collection included a review of the cases managed by the unit and semi-structured interviews with two staff members from the UID and the Student Support Service, conducted as key informant interviews to contextualise the implementation of inclusion and student support measures rather than to achieve representativeness.

All qualitative materials, policy documents, workshop reports, and interview transcripts were coded using ATLAS.ti and Excel through a thematic analysis approach (Guest et al., 2012). The first coding cycle was structured around four analytical dimensions (learning environments, curriculum, teaching methodologies, and assessment). A subsequent inductive phase identified recurring patterns, intersecting axes of inequality, barriers encountered, and students' demands for change. In a final interpretive step, these themes were related to institutional responses and mapped onto the three inclusion models proposed by García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024)—continuity, expert-based, and transformative—to compare student narratives with organisational approaches to inclusion.

All procedures received ethical approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee and complied with data protection standards. Students were informed about the study's objectives and anonymity protocols; participation was voluntary, and withdrawal was possible at any time. No personal identifiers were collected. Workshop notes and interview transcripts were anonymised, and all institutional identifiers were removed to ensure confidentiality.

5. Results

This section explores how inclusion and diversity are addressed from legislation to institutional practice. It first examines how current legal frameworks conceptualise inequality and refer to intersectionality, then presents students' intersecting experiences of exclusion and the institutional responses developed through equality and diversity governance structures.

5.1. From Policy to Practice: Legislative Instruments for Inclusion and Diversity

Recent legislative reforms in Spain have established a renewed framework for inclusion and diversity in higher education. Two key milestones are the Law 3/2022 on University Coexistence and LOSU 2023. Together, they articulate a rights-based vision of the university as a democratic and inclusive community.

The Law 3/2022 on University Coexistence replaced the outdated 1954 disciplinary regulation with a democratic framework grounded in participation, mediation, and the protection of rights. It requires universities to adopt "norms of coexistence" that explicitly promote equality, inclusion, and respect for diversity, while establishing preventive and restorative mechanisms against discrimination, harassment, and violence on any personal or social grounds. The law thus reframes coexistence as a matter of rights and shared responsibility, situating it at the heart of university culture rather than within a punitive or disciplinary paradigm.

Building on this foundation, LOSU 2023 introduced a comprehensive reform of the Spanish university system, positioning universities as agents of social transformation. It mandates the creation of Diversity Units in all institutions, tasked with ensuring equal treatment and non-discrimination on grounds such as gender, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic origin, religion, disability, or other personal conditions. Although LOSU 2023 broadens the traditional scope of inclusion, previously centred mainly on disability, towards a more holistic understanding of diversity, it does not explicitly frame this shift in intersectional terms.

In the Catalan context, these national reforms connect with the Law 19/2020 on Equal Treatment and Non-Discrimination, which provides a general framework for equality policies across all public institutions. The law introduces the concepts of multiple discrimination and an intersectional perspective as analytical tools to address the cumulative nature of inequalities. Together, these regulations constitute the normative foundation of the PIDUC 2024. Approved by the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia and coordinated by the General Directorate for Knowledge Transfer and Society, the PIDUC 2024 represents the first comprehensive strategy to mainstream inclusion and diversity across the Catalan university system. Developed through a participatory process involving universities, students, and public bodies, the plan seeks to promote equality, non-discrimination, and accessibility from an intersectional perspective. It articulates diverse axes of action, ranging from "transition to university life" and "inclusive governance" to "universal

design," "labour-market access" and "inter-university coordination," translated into 15 strategic and 39 specific objectives. While intersectionality appears as one of the guiding references, its operationalisation within the Plan remains mostly additive and fragmented, addressing diversity categories separately rather than relationally (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2024, pp. 38, 39, 40).

5.2. Students' Identified Needs: From Participatory Workshops to Institutional Demands

This section presents findings from the eight participatory workshops with students, complemented by cases formally managed by the university's UID. Together, they reveal how students' experiences of inequality reflect intersecting structures of class, gender, migration, religion, disability, and neurodivergence that shape everyday university life. To unpack these dynamics, the findings are organised thematically around specific intersections that illustrate how multiple axes of exclusion operate.

5.2.1. Neurodivergence, Accessibility, and Learning Design

Neurodivergent students consistently linked concentration and participation to the organisation of time and space. Long teaching blocks without meaningful breaks, back-to-back sessions, and a heavy reliance on reading and writing were perceived as particularly exclusionary (social education, gender studies, biology). Noise in classrooms, the lack of quiet study areas, and unpredictable schedules further undermined attention. Some students with ADHD explained that group work, beneficial for most peers, can be counterproductive for them due to difficulties focusing in noisy or unstructured settings (social education).

Students also pointed to physical and sensory barriers: lighting that cannot be adjusted, materials unsuited to dyslexic readers, or slides without visual contrast (social education, biology). They requested diversified assessment formats (oral, practical, and written) and that reading materials be uploaded in advance to allow accessible preparation.

5.2.2. Gender Dynamics in Classroom Participation

Gender appeared as a subtle but pervasive axis of inequality. In mixed classrooms, male students were more often addressed by lecturers, appointed as group spokespeople, or praised publicly, while women's contributions tended to receive less recognition (social education). In audiovisual communication, gendered seating patterns emerged spontaneously and persisted throughout sessions, with some men dominating class debates in ways others experienced as silencing (audiovisual communication, journalism).

5.2.3. Religion, Migration, and Visibility

Religion intersected with gender and migration most clearly among Muslim women, who reported the absence of appropriate prayer spaces and the trivialisation of their requests by equating prayer rooms with leisure areas (social education). The UID confirmed that these demands had been formally submitted. Short breaks and distant facilities made daily prayer unfeasible, reflecting not only the invisibility but also the lack of institutional recognition of non-Catholic religious calendars and practices in the organisation of university life. Similar concerns were raised through formal petitions for spaces to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, which received university support but also triggered public backlash from far-right groups seeking to instrumentalise religious diversity for political purposes.

5.2.4. Socioeconomic Status and Geography

These variables shaped access in material ways. Commuters from rural areas cited inflexible timetables, late field trips, and long gaps between lectures that left them stranded on campus (biology). The absence of nearby cafeterias or study rooms and unreliable Wi-Fi compounded the time and cost burden. Some students reported calculating petrol costs to decide which classes to skip with the least academic loss (social education). Working students highlighted rigid attendance policies, "surprise" assessments, and last-minute schedule changes that penalised those balancing employment and study (social education, biology, early childhood education). Continuous assessment and group work, particularly in gender studies, were said to advantage students able to dedicate full-time attention and those more comfortable with public speaking, disadvantaging workers, carers, introverts, and newcomers to the language of instruction. Staff interviews corroborated that students often request adaptations related to maternity, but rarely for paid work or caring responsibilities, perhaps because these are not recognised as legitimate grounds for accommodation or as markers of socio-economic vulnerability.

5.2.5. Representation and Eurocentrism

Across programmes, students criticised the Eurocentric and masculine bias of curricula. Social education and early childhood education students noted reading lists dominated by white, male European authors and teaching cases that omit structural racism, sexism, and classism. Biology students observed gender imbalance in cited authors and inconsistencies between the lecture and reading languages that hinder comprehension. Gender studies programmes included more Latin American and some African voices, yet students remarked that these were still often framed through European theoretical canons. In journalism and audiovisual communication, discussions about language, accent, and perceived authority revealed how credibility is mediated by linguistic confidence and social labelling rather than by content alone. These issues extended to institutional imagery: A complaint to the UID about a promotional video criticised its overwhelmingly white, cis-heteronormative, middle-class representation, reflecting a broader perception that while gender balance is now increasingly mainstreamed, other dimensions of diversity remain marginal in institutional communication.

5.2.6. Digital Divides and Online Participation

In the online master's in translation, students valued flexibility but emphasised persistent digital inequalities, including unstable internet access, inadequate devices, and software limitations. They reported compressed deadlines, minimal formative feedback, and requested occasional synchronous or recorded sessions to clarify expectations and reduce isolation.

5.2.7. Learning Environments and Infrastructures

s Students across workshops described numerous small but cumulative barriers: broken lifts, inaccessible ramps, poorly ventilated or dark rooms, fixed furniture impeding wheelchair passage, lack of clocks in exam rooms, and insufficient power outlets (biology, early childhood education, social education). These material conditions intersect with class, disability, and gender. Concerns also included safety in fieldwork and scheduling field trips to avoid late-night returns. Students asked for better coordination of classroom

allocations, so activity-based courses could access flexible layouts, and for clearer, earlier timetables aligning classes, labs, and placements with paid work. Some cases brought to the UID blurred the line between discrimination and coexistence issues, such as conflicts in group work or peer bullying. Although these often fell beyond the unit's formal remit, they revealed the growing need for institutional mechanisms to address everyday relational conflicts that reproduce power hierarchies within the university.

5.2.8. Assessment Practices

Assessment crystallised many of the concerns raised. Students questioned minimum-pass thresholds on single exams, surprise evaluations, and heavy reliance on multiple-choice tests that disadvantage dyslexic students or those who demonstrate knowledge better through other formats (biology). They called for transparent criteria, consistent feedback, and for group work to include ongoing instructor follow-up to ensure fair grading (biology, early childhood education).

Taken together, these findings show that students' demands for institutional change arise from layered and intersecting experiences of inequality, expressed through both the participatory workshops and the formal cases managed by the UID. Rather than isolated complaints, these accounts reveal how higher education continues to privilege certain normative subject positions, neurotypical, white, middle-class, secular, and male, while placing the burden of adaptation on those who depart from this norm.

5.3. Institutional Responses to Students' Demands and Governance of Inequality

Interviews with staff from the Student Support Service and the UID illustrate how the university is attempting to respond to students' requests elicited during the first year of the UID, and to cases emerging from its new diversity governance structures. Their accounts reveal a growing institutional awareness of inequality, but also expose the constraints imposed by limited resources, fragmented competences, and reliance on individualised solutions despite the intention to embed inclusion across all university domains.

5.3.1. Neurodivergence and Mental Health

Both interviewees reported a steady increase in support requests related to attention disorders, dyslexia, anxiety, and depression. The psychologist explained that most students approach the service already experiencing high levels of distress, often linked to workload, time pressure, or the challenge of combining study and employment. Institutional support, therefore, tends to be reactive and short-term: The service offers initial counselling sessions, assists students in obtaining documentation for academic adaptations, and mediates with teaching staff. However, sustained therapeutic follow-up lies beyond its current capacity, and institutional responses remain largely focused on punctual adjustments rather than on pedagogical redesign. Coordination with academic staff, although crucial, remains uneven and depends heavily on individual lecturers' awareness and willingness to apply accommodations.

5.3.2. Religious Diversity and Islamophobia

Regarding religious diversity, the UID described recent cases involving Muslim students' requests for a dedicated prayer space and the celebration of Eid al-Fitr. The unit facilitated dialogue between students

and the university, proposing the adaptation of a "silence room" within one of the main buildings as a multi-faith space for prayer and reflection, while respecting the institution's secular framework. It also engaged with reception and maintenance staff to ensure access and understanding of the space's purpose. In the case of Eid, the UID coordinated with other university actors to support the celebration, reaffirming the institution's commitment to inclusion despite attempts by far-right groups to instrumentalise the initiative for political purposes.

5.3.3. Socio-Economic Inequalities and Work–Study Balance

Economic precarity and the difficulty of reconciling study, work, and care responsibilities increasingly affect students' well-being. Requests for timetable flexibility or deadline extensions are relatively frequent but are usually resolved informally within faculties. Both interviewees noted that students rarely frame these situations as equality issues or as grounds for formal support, which limits their institutional visibility and prevents their inclusion within official equality frameworks.

5.3.4. Accessibility and Disability

In the area of accessibility, staff from the Student Support Service described a more consolidated protocol based on formal student support plans, which define specific classroom and examination adaptations. Collaboration with the UID is activated when such cases intersect with complaints of discrimination or harassment, enabling a coordinated institutional response.

5.3.5. Communication and Institutional Culture

Concerning institutional communication, following criticism of a promotional video for its narrow representation of diversity, the UID participated in consultations with the responsible area to promote more inclusive imagery and language in future campaigns. Beyond specific cases, UID staff emphasised the importance of integrating gender and diversity as cross-cutting dimensions of all university policies through the development of internal protocols, awareness-raising initiatives, and staff training. A substantial part of the unit's work involves mediation between different university services and stakeholders to align procedures and progressively mainstream inclusion, ensuring that it becomes embedded in institutional practice rather than confined to isolated interventions.

Overall, the interviews reflect the university's efforts to address inequalities through the emerging, albeit partial, coordination of its student support and equality and diversity services. While these initiatives signal an expanding awareness of diversity governance, their dependence on limited resources and informal cooperation continues to limit their capacity to achieve structural transformation.

6. Discussion

Drawing on policy analysis together with patterns emerging from workshops and interviews, we analyse the findings through García-Cano Torrico et al.'s (2024) "inclusion models" within an explicitly intersectional framework.

6.1. Continuity Model

Following García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024), the continuity model refers to the institutionalisation of inclusion through compliance with existing regulations and the maintenance of pre-existing measures, particularly those related to access and disability services. This pattern is clearly visible in the case study. Policy analysis and workshop data reveal a strong emphasis on compliance and individualised accommodation. Student support plans and one-off adjustments (such as deadline extensions or rescheduled assessments) constitute the main instruments for managing inequality. These measures fulfil legal obligations but remain reactive, individualised, and dependent on documentation rather than on the proactive redesign of teaching or assessment.

Similarly, socio-economic difficulties, such as work–study balance or commuting costs, repeatedly identified in the workshops, are addressed informally at the faculty level, outside equality frameworks. Inequality is thus managed through administrative compliance and case-by-case interventions, while institutional structures remain largely unaltered, as evidenced by both the policy analysis and the staff interviews. This keeps structural drivers such as timetabling logics, assessment design, room allocation, or study costs out of scope.

At the level of philosophy and policy, inclusion is primarily approached through the lens of gender, often articulated as a "gender approach incorporating an intersectional perspective," as established in Article 3a of the Law 3/2022 on University Coexistence. While this framing signals an awareness of multiple inequalities, in practice, it rarely extends beyond the gender axis. The persistent absence of measures addressing social class, beyond grants or individual adjustments, further illustrates this limited scope. Social class is neither formally recognised as an institutional category of inequality nor operationalised as a specific strand of action within the UID.

The continuity model is also evident in the way participation is conceived. There are no mechanisms that promote co-creation with students or other members of the university community, such as research, technical, or service staff. Inclusion policies are usually designed and implemented from the top down, based on the idea that institutional expertise alone is enough to identify needs and set priorities. Consequently, the perspectives of those most impacted by inequality are rarely incorporated into the design or evaluation of these measures. Inclusion is primarily understood in relation to the student body, while other groups are positioned as implementers rather than co-producers of inclusion.

6.2. Expert-Based Model

In García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024)'s typology, the expert-based model represents a shift from mere compliance toward the professionalised management of inclusion through specialised knowledge and training. At the case university, several initiatives documented through the interviews and workshops correspond to this logic. The UID's mediation in the Eid al-Fitr and prayer-space cases, the proposal and establishment of a multi-faith "silence room," the sensitisation of building reception staff, and consultations with communication units to diversify institutional imagery. Similarly, the Student Support Service standardised procedures for documentation and classroom or exam adaptations demonstrate an increasingly technical and professionalised approach to diversity. Such actions can effectively diffuse tensions and normalise inclusive practices incrementally.

The "expert model" is also reflected in the UID's training strategy, which promotes capacity building among teaching staff, technical and service personnel, and students on issues related to gender inequality and discrimination. Training sessions address how to identify and respond to gender-based violence and how to integrate a gender perspective into teaching and research. In parallel, the university's continuous professional development programme for teaching staff includes modules on inclusion and inclusive classroom methodologies. However, participation in these initiatives remains voluntary, which limits their potential for structural impact and contributes to uneven engagement across departments and roles.

The student support plans further illustrate the gradual transition between the continuity and expert-based models. While they retain elements of the continuity logic, focused on compliance and individual accommodation, they also signal an emerging expert orientation by systematising support through specialised services and shared protocols. Yet, this approach still stops short of structural or pedagogical redesign, as evidenced by the formal avoidance of modifying "competences" (i.e., the learning outcomes students are required to achieve). As García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024) observe, the sustainability of such measures depends on the initiative of specialised units and the voluntary cooperation of teaching staff. These expert-led interventions correspond to the concrete cases and service procedures reported, where inclusion thus advances through isolated projects and service expertise rather than through systemic redistribution of responsibility across the institution.

6.3. Transformative Model

According to García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024), the transformative model entails a qualitative leap towards structural and cultural change. At the case university, elements of this orientation are beginning to emerge but remain incipient. The creation of the UID itself represents an attempt to move beyond specialised services toward a more comprehensive governance structure that integrates gender and diversity across institutional policies. The ongoing work carried out by the Unit to develop internal protocols, design training programmes, and articulate new policies indicates an ambition to mainstream inclusion within the university's organisational culture. Likewise, the university's support for the celebration of Eid al-Fitr, despite external backlash, constitutes a symbolic gesture towards recognising diversity as an intrinsic part of the university community.

However, decision-making remains highly hierarchical, with limited opportunity for participation in institutional governance. The existing model of specialised services, which cover areas such as disability, gender equality, and psychological support, continues to operate through parallel structures. Although these services are now under the same UID umbrella, substantial reorganisation and coordination are needed for them to function cohesively. Collaboration between units largely depends on informal networks, and advancing inclusion continues to rely heavily on individual initiative. While the Unit benefits from stable institutional funding, resources remain limited, meaning some of its activities depend on acquiring additional funds through competitive research projects and public calls. Without enhanced interdepartmental cooperation and the systematic participation of students and staff in policy design, transformative change risks remaining aspirational rather than structural.

This orientation is reflected in the PIDUC 2024, which is ideologically aligned with the "transformative approach." It explicitly emphasises structural change, participatory culture, and the need to question

entrenched institutional practices that reproduce inequality. The plan also adopts an explicit intersectional perspective, positioning inclusion as a cross-cutting principle across governance, teaching, research, and campus life.

Nevertheless, in practice, the implementation of the PIDUC 2024 largely mirrors the expert-based model. Its focus on training, awareness-raising, and curriculum adjustments reflects a procedural rather than structural approach, addressing inclusion mainly through the development of competences and specialised services. Intersectional dimensions, such as gender, disability, or socio-economic vulnerability, are addressed primarily through expert-led initiatives, with limited participation of students or staff in policy design and decision-making. This top-down orientation confirms García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024)'s observation that inclusive rhetoric often fails to translate into policies that redistribute power or challenge institutional hierarchies, thereby falling short of embedding a genuinely inclusive university culture grounded in intersectionality at its core.

7. Conclusion

Analysis of the three models identified by García-Cano Torrico et al. (2024) shows that these orientations coexist and overlap, rather than following a linear, mutually exclusive progression. Therefore, it is not possible to classify the behaviour of a university exclusively under one model. This finding suggests that inclusion measures must be adapted to the context-specific philosophy and organisational environment of each institution. In the analysed case, for example, compliance-based mechanisms from the continuity model coexist with the professionalised, service-led practices that characterise the expert-based model. Meanwhile, transformative approaches remain incipient and unevenly embedded. These patterns resonate with wider debates in Western higher education, where inclusion often advances through compliance and specialised support structures while struggling to shift the underlying organisational and epistemic norms that reproduce inequality.

Following Crenshaw (1989), we treat the barriers reported here as intersectionally produced within everyday university practices, and we show how single-axis institutional responses can struggle to capture this complexity.

The dynamics described above reveal that institutional change in inclusion continues to be largely top-down, driven primarily by legislative reforms and policy mandates rather than by bottom-up participatory processes. As a result, implementation tends to prioritise procedural compliance and technical management over collective deliberation and shared responsibility. The interaction between institutional policies and student agency, which lies at the heart of this research, therefore becomes constrained: While students articulate intersectional experiences and demands for change, institutional responses tend to channel them through existing administrative or service frameworks that operate according to a unitary and additive single-ground logic.

This additive logic is evident in institutional practices. While the PIDUC 2024 promotes an intersectional approach, it provides no specific tools or indicators for implementation. Consequently, responses often remain individualised and reactive. student support plans, for example, tend to frame difficulties as personal circumstances rather than manifestations of structural inequality. Similarly, the plan's compartmentalised

structure, dividing governance, inclusive culture, reception, and support into separate domains, reproduces fragmentation, despite their interdependence. The experience of the UID further illustrates this dynamic: Although it plays a key role in promoting intersectional awareness, the support system still relies on specialised services organised around single axes such as gender or disability, with limited integration across areas. Many inclusion measures, such as training activities for staff, also depend on voluntary participation, which limits their reach and structural impact.

The prioritisation of certain inequalities reveals which axes are institutionally legitimised. Gender and disability remain central to policy design and resource allocation, while social class is largely invisible, rarely recognised as a structural factor of inequality or as a legitimate category for institutional intervention. This absence does not stem from a lack of impact but from the fact that class is not formally recognised as a policy category, which in turn generates few formal claims and keeps class-related inequalities outside equality infrastructures. In this sense, intersectionality, although officially endorsed, continues to operate within pre-existing hierarchies of recognition.

In this context, intersectionality emerges as both a guiding principle and a pedagogical and political commitment, which the authors of this article understand as central to the transformation of higher education institutions toward more equitable and inclusive models. Although intersectionality is becoming more prevalent in institutional discourse, there is a risk that it will become a symbolic marker rather than a driver of structural change. Intersectional practice needs to recognise that the university is not a neutral space; rather, it is a historically situated institution that perpetuates social hierarchies, epistemic exclusions, and power relations. From this perspective, intersectionality is about more than recognising multiple identities. This research did not seek to design or test transformative interventions but to analyse the institutional conditions that currently enable or constrain them. Future research should further explore how intersectionality can be operationalised in institutional practices within higher education and the tensions, limits, and resistances that emerge when intersectional approaches are implemented in specific educational contexts. This also entails a commitment to "epistemic justice" (Collins, 2000; Fricker, 2007): valuing diverse ways of knowing, questioning whose knowledge counts, and who is allowed to speak and be heard within academic spaces. Without addressing these epistemic and structural dimensions, inclusion risks remaining superficial, centred on access and representation rather than on the redistribution of power and legitimacy.

To move towards an inclusive and transformative university, intersectionality must evolve from a rhetorical commitment into a relational framework that redefines how inequalities are recognised, governed, and challenged. This involves not only specialised expertise and training but also a redistribution of responsibility, resources, and participation across the institution. Recognising how institutional policies and student agency interact, and how both can be reconfigured to challenge the university's own complicity in reproducing inequality, is the necessary first step for inclusion to move beyond compliance and professionalisation towards the cultural and structural transformation that current policy frameworks, at least in principle, already envision.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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About the Authors

Gloria García-Romeral holds a PhD in Sociology from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is a lecturer at the Department of Pedagogy at UVic-UCC and a member of the GETLIHC research group. Her research focuses on intersectionality, social inequalities, and inclusive higher education.

Marina Garcia-Castillo holds a BA in global studies, an MA in gender studies, is a PhD candidate at UVic–UCC and member of the GETLIHC research group. Her work focuses on research and knowledge transfer projects at Catalan and European levels, addressing intersectionality in public policy and specifically the intersections of gender and sexuality with religious and cultural diversity.

Lorena González-Ruiz holds a BA in humanities, an MA in culture management, and is a researcher at UVic's GETLIHC research group. Her work focuses on the representations of gender(s) in contemporary art and museums. She is involved in Erasmus+ projects on intersectionality and teaches gender and media in the Women's Studies MA at the Universitat de Barcelona.