

## Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education

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### Abstract

This issue explores how higher education (HE) uses transformation to develop diverse and inclusive institutions, including policies utilising multiple actors’ agency. Existing HE literature has examined transformation through several lenses, such as how managerial reforms on diversity and inclusion work, and the potential of disruptive events for HE access and teaching quality, but also concerns that reforms may reinforce longstanding inequalities. Less attention has been given to how diversity, intersectionality, and the agency of institutional actors contribute to organizational transformation. Addressing this gap, we highlight the role of HE policies, practices, and agency of internal and external stakeholders in reshaping organizational practices, academic norms, and institutional routines. Drawing on perspectives that view transformation as emerging from complex interactions among stakeholders, the issue considers both planned reforms and emergent change processes. The contributions focus on: policies promoting equity and inclusion in HE, policy tools and organizational practices that support institutional change, and the agency of diverse stakeholders in transformative processes. Overall, the issue emphasises participatory governance and collaboration across institutional roles to foster more inclusive and adaptive HE systems. While these interactions can foster collaboration and coalition-building across institutions, they may also reproduce exclusionary dynamics.

### Keywords

agency; diversity; ECRs; higher education; inclusion; policy; students; transformative change; university

## 1. Introduction

Studies suggest that higher education (HE) has experienced massive global transformations for almost three decades, with technologies, markets, and government policies producing significant changes in universities' daily work (Dee et al., 2023; Deem et al., 2007; Geiger, 2004; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Change agents, aligned with leadership, have become a part of HE systems, just like in other public sectors (Wallace et al., 2023). By contrast, other analyses note that HE's institutional systems may nevertheless have a slow pace of change supporting the status quo, and forestalling new initiatives (Krücken, 2003; Leišytė et al., 2017). Currently, we are witnessing collective actions by staff and students (Klemenčič, 2024) and a polarization of beliefs and values on campuses in many countries. However, HE institutions are also seen as “catalysts” creating a sustainable future, which encourages HEIs to change both syllabi and cultures (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021), including issues like diversity and inclusion, amongst other changes.

## 2. Focus of the Thematic Issue

While transformation in the HE sector has been addressed through several angles from different literature streams, warnings have expressed concern about the effects of managerial transformation on diversity and inclusion in HE (Leišytė et al., 2021). Praise has been given for the handling of disruptive innovations and events such as Covid-19 (Treve, 2021) in improving the quality of and access to HE teaching, but there are also concerns that HE transformation has exacerbated long-established stratification and inequalities (Dee et al., 2023; Leišytė et al., 2021). Many studies, though, overlook both the agency and roles that diversity and intersectionality play in the organizational transformation of HE. This thematic issue aims to shed light on the role of academic and administrative staff, and students, in fostering changes in organizational practices, academic norms, and routines in HE towards diverse and inclusive organizations.

To understand the role of diverse actors in transformation, we draw on Wheatley (2006), who postulates that transformational change occurs through processes encompassing complex and constant interactions among stakeholders in HE institutions. The web of intertwined interests and interactions offers possibilities for fostering collaboration between stakeholders at multiple levels who seek to transform HE. However, these intertwined interests may simply reflect elite priorities. Transformations under those conditions may only deepen stratification, hierarchical power relations, and inequalities found in HE (Dee et al., 2023).

Transformation towards an inclusive university ranges from narrow notions of inclusivity focusing just on students with disabilities to much wider audiences (Mora et al., 2021). Intersectional approaches in teaching and learning may bring transformational change in teaching practices and organizational routines (Mense & Sera, 2019). New dimensions of diversity have been developed that are closely linked to inclusion practices and initiatives for both staff and students in university programs (Leišytė et al., 2021). Diversity is also increasingly associated with the decolonization of curricula—following violent student protests in countries like South Africa (Jansen, 2023)—and the questioning of “potential for change” promoted in special programs for newly appointed black academics (Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019). At the same time, transformation is continually challenged by managerialism (Grummell & Lynch, 2016), neo-liberalism (Mintz, 2021), and cultures of precarity (Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015). The role of disruptive innovations, such as AI, can mediate processes of transformation but also bring forward various biases about diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality (Ulciane, 2024; Williamson & Komljenovic, 2023).

### 3. Overview of the Thematic Issue

This thematic issue focuses on three themes: policies and policy-driven change towards equity and inclusion in HE, policy actions and tools in fostering change in HE towards diverse and inclusive organizations, and agency of stakeholders in transformative change towards diverse and inclusive HE.

#### 3.1. HE Policies and Policy-Driven Change Towards Inclusion in HE

S. Djerasimovic and J. Barke analyse the effects of the UK research impact agenda on early career researchers (ECRs) and their academic trajectories. Findings suggest that while impact evaluation may broaden the recognition of collaborative knowledge production and diverse research competencies, it largely operates alongside established metrics like publication output and funding acquisition, thereby risking the reproduction of existing inequalities within academic reward structures.

A. Björnö investigates the role of institutional language policy in shaping the inclusion of international researchers in Finnish universities. Ambiguous language expectations, insufficient institutional support, and limited professional value attributed to national language proficiency can constrain meaningful integration, pointing to the need for more comprehensive institutional strategies that support linguistic diversity.

Drawing on autoethnography, F. Alpagu examines how HE diversity initiatives can inadvertently reproduce exclusionary dynamics. The analysis highlights how practices like symbolic inclusion, exceptionalisation, and performative allyship contribute to the reproduction of racialised hierarchies and institutional whiteness, often positioning scholars of colour as representatives rather than equal participants in academic communities.

G. García-Romeral, M. Garcia-Castillo, and L. González-Ruiz explore how recent equality legislation in Spain interacts with student agency to shape institutional approaches to inclusion. Their case study of a Catalan university reveals tensions between formal regulatory commitments and everyday institutional practices, while also identifying emerging forms of collective student engagement that contribute to the institutionalisation of intersectional inclusion approaches.

Ö. Karakaş analyses the implications of e-Science platforms for knowledge production and academic labour within digitally mediated research environments. The study finds that the expansion of interdisciplinary, distributed, and project-based forms of work can intensify labour and exacerbate precarity, generating gendered effects that constrain the inclusive potential of digital science infrastructures.

The above contributions illustrate that although universities increasingly articulate commitments to inclusion through policy reforms and diversity initiatives, structural inequalities remain embedded in institutional practices. Collectively, the articles underscore the importance of critically examining HE policies and policy-driven change, which, rather than dismantling inequality, may instead enable its persistence in new and more complex ways.

### ***3.2. Towards Diverse and Inclusive HE Organizations: Policy Actions and Tools in Fostering Change in Organizational Practices, Academic Norms, and Routines***

J. Mergner, S. Pekşen, and L. Leišytė analyse the potential of intersectional pedagogy to foster transformative change through case studies in German universities. The authors demonstrate how targeted training initiatives can empower lecturers and students through critical reflection on power relations and knowledge. Their findings suggest that institutionalising intersectional approaches in teaching requires sustained educational interventions that support teaching staff in integrating inclusive pedagogical practices across disciplines.

E. Robert Aguirre-Villalobos, D. Paz Godoy-Donoso, L. González-Otárola, and M. de los Ángeles Ferrer-Mavárez explore how faculty training can contribute to institutional transformation by the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum in Chilean public HE. The study shows that training in neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy can shift teaching practices to inclusivity. However, the authors also highlight addressing structural barriers such as managerial cultures and precarious working conditions that limit the long-term institutionalisation of inclusive practices.

L. Zurné, J. Seijbel, and B. Fiçi examine efforts to promote inclusivity within undergraduate history education at a Dutch university. Findings reveal persistent eurocentric and androcentric patterns in course content and reading lists, despite widespread recognition among staff of the importance of inclusive teaching. The authors argue that achieving meaningful change requires coordinated institutional leadership, pedagogical support, and shared disciplinary commitments.

A. Lipinsky, B. Cristina Jaquette Pereira, and V. Pilinkaitė Sotirovič investigate the institutional dynamics that silence racially minoritised women experiencing gender-based violence in academia. The study reveals how structural barriers, discriminatory attitudes, and institutional norms simultaneously produce hypervisibility and invisibility for marginalised scholars. The authors show that transformative policy change requires creating institutional mechanisms capable of amplifying marginalised voices, addressing intersectional discrimination, and dismantling organisational practices that perpetuate exclusion.

### ***3.3. Agency of Academic and Administrative Staff, Students, and Other Stakeholders in Transformative Change***

V. Holubek, D. Ruez, M. Bujčić, M. Honkanen, and Z. Millei investigate how international academics can act as agents of institutional transformation within processes of university internationalization. Drawing on a case study in Finland, the authors demonstrate that international staff navigate complex challenges related to language, precarious career prospects, and limited participation in decision-making, while simultaneously contributing to institutional change through their diverse experiences and perspectives.

S. Smeets explores how teachers' diversity beliefs influence the prospects for transformative change in HEIs. An ethnographic study at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences analysed how teachers' perspectives on diversity can be understood through conservative, liberal, and critical frameworks. The findings show that although liberal diversity perspectives dominate, teachers' views are dynamic and contested, suggesting that educators can act as important agents of change by negotiating and challenging prevailing norms.

B. O. Ntsele and H. Ghorashi examine the role of academics as change agents through community-engaged scholarship and partnerships with marginalised communities. Using a university–community partnership in South Africa, the authors highlight how co-creative collaboration enables the integration of indigenous and academic knowledge systems. Their analysis underscores the transformative potential of knowledge exchange and emphasises the need for power-sensitive approaches that recognise communities as equal partners in processes of social and institutional transformation.

C. Whitchurch focuses on university staff occupying “third space” roles that blur the boundaries between academic and professional domains. The study highlights how individuals in areas such as teaching development, research support, and educational innovation often make significant contributions to institutional change despite lacking formal recognition within traditional academic career structures. The article argues that acknowledging and institutionalising such hybrid roles can help reduce hierarchical divides within universities and strengthen the capacity for innovation.

L. Leišytė and colleagues investigate the role of ECRs in university governance across several European and East Mediterranean countries. Based on seven case studies and extensive interviews with ECRs and university managers, the research shows that formal representation of ECRs in decision-making bodies remains limited. Nevertheless, the findings reveal that ECRs exercise influence through informal channels, demonstrating the importance of recognising their voices in shaping institutional strategies and governance practices.

H. Segarra, C. Antón Rubio, I. Juknytė-Petrekienė, and L. Tackie analyse how students, academic staff, and administrative professionals perceive their agency in promoting diversity and institutional change. The study demonstrates that perceptions of diversity and agency are shaped primarily by professional roles rather than institutional contexts. While students emphasize grassroots activism, academic staff highlight pedagogical responsibilities, and administrative staff focus on procedural influence, the authors argue that meaningful change can emerge through collaboration and mutual recognition among institutional actors.

E. Karaduman-Oskay and colleagues examine the experiences of women doctoral students and dropouts in Türkiye to understand how structural inequalities affect academic careers. The study identifies key challenges, including traditional gender roles, financial constraints, and problematic relationships with supervisors. The findings highlight the importance of supportive academic networks and institutional mechanisms that enable women scholars to remain in doctoral education and contribute as agents of change.

The above studies indicate that recognising and supporting the agency of multiple stakeholders, especially those who have traditionally not been given a voice and a place at the table in HE decision-making, while fostering collaboration across institutional roles, constitutes a critical pathway toward more inclusive and adaptive HE systems.

## 4. Conclusion

This thematic issue offers several contributions to the literature on HE, intersectionality, and policy change. An emerging central theme is the persistent tension between formal policies and structural reality. While contemporary policies aim to broaden participation, the findings suggest they often fail because of old, rigid power structures. This reinforces concerns that transformation can sometimes exacerbate the stratification

and inequalities that have long characterized the sector. Furthermore, the articles presented here emphasise the importance of policy interventions moving beyond symbolic managerial policies. Whether addressing “institutional whiteness,” ambiguous language policies, or the silencing of marginalized voices, findings argue for a shift that transforms everyday academic practices and institutional cultures. Ultimately, this issue illustrates that meaningful transformation depends on recognizing and supporting the agency of diverse stakeholders, such as international staff, ECRs, academics, and students. Achieving an inclusive university requires moving past symbolic inclusion toward participatory governance and intersectional pedagogies that ensure inclusion is treated not as a peripheral goal, but as a fundamental organizational routine.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used to edit the language for a better flow. The authors are responsible for all the content.

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