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Dissecting Discourses in Policy: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Problematizations in Academia

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Abstract

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) related injustices have long drenched higher education institutions (HEIs), prompting ongoing efforts to address them. In Norway, such efforts include Gender Equality Plans (GEPs)/DEI action plans in all HEIs, stipulating how DEI should be incorporated and supported. This article examines the GEP/DEI Plans at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Applying Carol Bacchi's "what's the problem represented to be" (WPR) approach to the UiT Equality Plans, we genealogically contextualize and dissect the policy discourse to explore its problem representations, underlying assumptions, and policy evolution. Recognizing that policy proposals are not mere governance tools but inhabit meaning beyond the explicitly stated, we regard policy as inseparable from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it operates. We find that the policy primarily targets women, despite the change of name from GEP to DEI Plan, and frames the overall DEI problem as the underrepresentation of women in professorship/leadership roles. While the fairness approach to equality is prevalent, women in the academy are reinstated as units of resources that must be tapped, whose productivity must be audited and enhanced through affirmative action to utilize all resources. Aligning our findings with the three DEI policy operational frameworks outlined in the research literature, i.e., individual, structural, and cultural, we identify a deficiency in this literature: a lack of emphasis and clarity on the importance of academic content to support DEI. Consequently, we propose a new analytical dimension related to research, teaching, and study content.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues have long plagued academia. Scholars like Mirza (2006), Ahmed (2012), and Tzanakou (2019) have highlighted the gendered and racialized tendencies in Western universities despite ongoing efforts to address these issues. Over the past three decades, universities have developed and implemented various measures to address these problems (Drange et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2017; Silander et al., 2021; Timmers et al., 2010). However, many of these measures have been criticized for overlooking the issue's complexities, creating new forms of inequalities, and being a box-ticking exercise (Tzanakou, 2019). Despite these criticisms, policy efforts in academia have had a positive impact by fostering environments where solidarity is prioritized and teaching is recognized as a fundamental aspect of academic practice (Suboticki & Sørensen, 2023, p. 440). This article categorizes all these initiatives under the umbrella term "DEI policy" and nuances what such policy entails as we engage in a contextualized policy analysis.

Despite being termed the "DEI action plan," the discourse in European DEI initiatives predominantly focuses on gender inequalities, particularly those concerning women, whilst other critical dimensions of the diversity component, such as ethnicity and belonging, receive insufficient attention. The emphasis on women is evident in the European Commission's She Figures 2024, which highlight how women's representation in top-level positions remains low: only 26% among heads of HEIs, 38% as board members, and 39% as board leaders at the EU level (European Commission, 2025, p. 222). The figures also point to women as underrepresented in grade A positions, equivalent to full professorships, across all academic fields: 38% in humanities, 35% in the social sciences, and 33% in medical and health sciences. Women's representation in STEM fields is even lower, with just 24% in natural sciences and 19% in engineering and technology (p. 222). The primary equality problem is thus represented as the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions. Consequently, most policy measures both at the state and institutional levels focus on addressing the gender imbalance (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Sigurdardottir et al., 2022; Silander et al., 2021). This indicates that the shift from the Gender Equality Plan (GEP), with a focus on women's underrepresentation relative to men, to the wider and more complex DEI policy concept, with an emphasis on the diversity component that comprises much more than gender, is merely rhetorical, as "diversity" still tends to be understood as "women." We bring this observation to our analysis.

In the EU, gender equality is a priority across all areas, particularly in research and innovation. This focus is evident in the EU's framework program for research and innovation (2021–2027; Council of the European Union, 2019) and the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020). A key objective of the Gender Equality Strategy is to advance towards a gender-equal Europe, where men and women in all their diversities can freely choose their life path, have equal opportunities to succeed, and participate equally in leadership roles. The She Figures 2024 report indicates that, among 36 countries analyzed, research organizations in 13 countries actively implemented action measures at a 50% level (European Commission, 2025, p. 12). Despite these efforts, inequalities in academia persist. This article aims to address academic inequalities by exploring "problem representations" in DEI policy in higher education.

Scholarly work on DEI policy analysis (e.g., Drange et al., 2023; Kalev et al., 2006; Nielsen, 2014, 2017; Timmers et al., 2010) has primarily focused on the measures to address the problem, the implementation strategies, and the efficacy of the measures. However, these analyses often overlook the political dynamics of the policy-making process. They tend to present broad discourses and general policy goals and neglect deconstructing the usually inconsistent elements that frame policies (Suboticki & Sørensen, 2023, p. 430).

Considering that policy proposals are not mere tools of governance but also carry meaning beyond what is explicitly stated, policy should be scrutinized as inseparable from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it operates. Hence, "context" should be seen as an active participant in the policy-making process and must be included in policy analysis.

In HEIs, context is crucial due to significant changes in the sector over the last 30 to 40 years. HEIs have shifted from independent science and educational institutions, inspired by the Humboldtian ideals of Bildung (Connell, 2019), to a market-driven neoliberal sector (Bleiklie, 2018) often described as "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). While the neo-liberalization of the HEIs is often criticized for its dehumanizing effects (Burton & Bowman, 2022), the adoption of sophisticated DEI initiatives coincided with these neoliberal transformations. This shift frames DEI as a political and organizational matter that requires attention and solutions (Ferree, 2008, p. 240). Consequently, DEI discourse has increasingly influenced institutional public relations, reshaping the images of universities (Thompson & Zablotsky, 2016, p. 78). Today, internal evaluations and external rankings of institutions are progressively based on DEI standards, compelling universities to perform, gain a competitive edge, and deliver tangible outcomes (Duarte et al., 2023). Some scholars argue that DEI is becoming a strategy for universities to achieve neoliberal objectives by enhancing their competitive advantage (Connell, 2019; Thompson & Zablotsky, 2016). Although these transformations do not encompass all academic aspects, they represent a new governing regime affecting power structures and academic life. While the coincidence of DEI initiatives and neoliberal changes does not imply causality, it underscores the need for contextualized analyses of DEI policies in academia. This article contributes to the field of DEI studies by providing a contextualized policy analysis.

Departing from the historical transformations of the HEI sector, this article employs Carol Bacchi's "what's the problem represented to be" (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 1999) to analyze the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan for 2020–2024 (hereafter referred to "as the Plan") adopted by UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT, 2020a). We challenge conventional views of policy, such as those by Dudley and Vidovich (1995) and Fischer and Miller (2017), who see policy as a response to pre-existing problems, i.e., as proposals to address problems "out there," and policy analysis as contributions to defining the best solutions. Drawing on Bacchi (2012) and Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), we instead argue that "policy problems" do not objectively exist "out there" but are represented in certain ways in policy, thereby rendering the problem definition inseparable from the problem solution. Thus, it is the problem representations that require scrutiny. We hence interrogate the Plan to uncover how the problem of inequality in academia is represented and analyze the assumptions underlying this representation. Our exploration is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the "problem of DEI" represented to be in the Plan?
2. What presumptions underlie the problem representations?
3. How did DEI policy develop, and how has it evolved at the university?

In what follows, we outline our application of the WPR approach to the analysis and explore potential frames and levels of operations in DEI policy discourses in European and Norwegian contexts. We then delve into the genealogy of the Plan and analyze the measures of the Plan relative to the frames and levels of operation to extract the problem representations. Finally, we discuss our findings, relating them to existing research literature, and conclude thereafter.

2. WPR and Its Applicability to DEI Policy

The title "dissecting discourses" highlights the centrality of "discourse" in our analysis. The WPR approach is particularly relevant here, as the signature of this critical policy analysis approach is a dissection of taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions of policy discourses. Unlike critical discourse analysis, which focuses on language usage (Fairclough, 2013), our understanding of "discourse" in this analysis is Foucauldian, emphasizing the knowledge/power dynamics that define problems and constrain normative debate (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1972). An important distinction between the two is that "discourse analysis" (Fairclough, 2013) examines language and its usage in text, while "analysis of discourses" (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1972) in WPR analysis critically reflects on how problems are constructed and represented in policies as discourses/knowledge. Hence, discourses are "forms of social knowledge that make it difficult to speak outside the terms of reference they establish for thinking about people and social relations" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35). What we opt for with a WPR analysis is, therefore, to analyze and understand the thinking that underpins problem representations in policy documents and the consequences the problem representations might have. Understanding discourse in this way consequently means that other representations of the problem are possible, that other representations can produce other effects in practice, and that competing discourses might operate concurrently. When doing a comprehensive WPR analysis, the researcher's job is, therefore, to analyze and understand the dominating discourses/knowledge, how they produce problems, and the effects of these problem representations. To make our policy analysis doable within a limited journal article space, we use selected elements of the WPR approach, namely: problem representations; underlying presumptions; and the emergence and evolution of the DEI policy (genealogy), whereas we only slightly touch upon the effects of the representations.

Following the WPR framework, the way we perceive and think about phenomena determines what we think should be done with them, and policy proposals are made accordingly. Thus, proposed solutions contain an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the problem or representation of the problem, and indicate what needs to be changed and, consequently, how the problem is perceived (Bacchi, 2009). Therefore, the proposed solutions become the starting point for the analysis, with the suggested solutions as clues for the analysis of problem representations.

Using WPR as both theory and methodology, we analyze the UiT GEP to construe the main problem representations of the DEI problem over time, examining the underlying assumptions. We trace the historical development of knowledge dynamics that have established certain discourses as dominant in institutional policy. But before we come to the Norwegian case, we review suggested frameworks and levels of operation in DEI policy discourses as they are described in the literature and then situate DEI policy within a European context.

3. Frames and Levels of Operation in DEI Policy Discourses

Various frames of operation guide the problematization of policy issues and the corresponding measures. "Frames" here refer to the process of stating what the problem is, what and whose needs are addressed, and which solutions are deemed appropriate. Each frame is attached to a theoretical perspective on DEI, adopting a corresponding approach to address the identified problem. These frames do not usually stand

alone but rather complement each other. In academia, the DEI discourse is largely construed in three common frames (see Huisman et al., 2002; Nielsen, 2017; Pitts, 2007; Probert, 2005; Timmers et al., 2010):

1. Fixing the individuals;
2. Creating equal opportunities;
3. Revising the existing organizational culture.

In the "fixing the individuals" framework, the problem is attributed to individuals' attributes such as ambition, motivation, experience, and merit (Nielsen, 2017, p. 299). Solutions are usually affirmative action measures, skills development, mentorship, and training. In the "creating equal opportunities" framework, measures entail challenging the unequal and biased structural settings that hinder people from excelling. The measures include more balanced DEI evaluation committees and appointing women to certain positions to address the structural barriers to women's advancement and correct the discriminatory nature of existing hiring processes (Nielsen, 2017, p. 303). The "revising organizational culture" framework tackles restructuring organizational practices, systems, norms, values, and factors that perpetuate inequalities and aims to address the historically male-dominated arrangements within organizations (Nielsen, 2017, p. 300).

Corresponding with the frames of operation, Timmers et al. (2010, pp. 720–722) established three levels of operation:

1. The individual;
2. The structural;
3. The cultural.

At the individual level, the measures focus on integrating women into the university by addressing individual factors and barriers that affect career choices and work orientation. Traditionally, women are stereotypically perceived to lack desirable attributes to execute leadership duties. Consequently, interventions like mentorship and training courses are implemented to address these assumed deficiencies. At the structural level, the barriers concerning the nature of organizational structures are tackled to create an equal structure of opportunities for both men and women. Culturally, the focus is on historical and ideological factors within HEIs, such as values and practices that govern how people should behave in society. Corresponding measures aim at revising organizational culture to address these issues.

In analyzing the UiT's DEI policy, we utilize the aforementioned framing model to categorize the policy proposals. We begin by exploring DEI policy in a European context, followed by a focus on the Norwegian context, ultimately justifying our selection of the Plan as our empirical material. Through the WPR analysis of the Plan, we identify a set of problem representations, which we then discuss against the general literature on DEI policy in academia.

4. DEI Policy in a European Context

Gender equality is one of the six European research area priorities, resulting in numerous EU-funded research projects with a gender equality approach. To qualify for research grants, HEIs are obliged to have GEPs, and all research funding applications must demonstrate how the ambition of gender equality is

projected in their respective projects. The plans should contain recruitment criteria, career progress, work–life balance, leadership and decision-making, organizational culture, gender in research and educational practice, and gender-related harassment (Rosa & Clavero, 2022, p. 2). This points to what Ahmed (2007) asserts: That the GEPs might become instrumental in gaining research funding rather than serving as strategies for achieving gender equality in practice, thereby nuancing the connection between DEI policy and the neoliberal transformations occurring in academia.

According to the European Commission (2014), GEPs tend to rely on broad forms of categorization that do not capture the complexity and details of what gender equality and diversity might entail. Some research literature supports this critique, for example, Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) argue that institutional actors have been preoccupied with liberal practices, such as mentoring, and training programs geared towards women, with a focus on how effective the gender equality interventions could be in transforming and adjusting organizations to new managerial demands. However, the arrangement of the interventions has mainly been about "fixing women" and has not challenged the structural and cultural barriers (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Moreover, some of the well-written policy documents have been labeled as mere marketing appeals, enabling universities to promote themselves as spaces where differences are celebrated (Ahmed, 2007). "As tools, they look wonderful, yet they obscure and conceal inequalities" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 606). Studies on organizational diversity documents in the UK also show that the documents are often "empty shells" with no definite actions and initiatives (Hoque & Noon, 2004). Unfortunately, the gender equality interventions that have adjusted to the critique from the European Commission and included more complex understandings of gender equality face operationalization and implementation challenges due to the complexity of the interventions (Evans, 2014).

The DEI discourse in contemporary scholarly work (e.g., Rosa & Clavero, 2022; Silander et al., 2021; Suboticki & Sørensen, 2023; Timmers et al., 2010) examines and establishes discrepancies in the general impact and efficiency of DEI policies in attaining gender balance and equality. One example is the efficacy study of DEI policies by Timmers et al. (2010) that established that policy proposals are characterized by inconsistent coordination and inadequate support from lower-level units of the university, plus skepticism and lack of evaluations (p. 731). However, the study also established that there is a positive relationship between policy measures and a reduction of the glass ceiling, and there is an increase in the proportion of women professors attributed to DEI measures (Timmers et al., 2010, p. 719). Hence, the research community is seemingly critical of how DEI measures are implemented, rather than towards the DEI initiatives. DEI policies are steadily discussed, but the critiques doubt the effects of the measures. In Norway, however, the case appears differently.

5. The Case of Norway

Due to the long tradition of pursuing gender equality in Norway in general, but also in the HEI sector, we chose to use Norway as the case for this article. Norway is ranked as the third most gender-equal country in the world (World Economic Forum, 2021, p. 10) and as a Nordic welfare state that has employed the most comprehensive policy approach to address gender inequalities in academia (Husu, 2001). This means that we have situated the study in a "gender-friendly" context and purposely chosen an extreme case for this study. We not only operate within a gender friendly context but also one that has a long history of GEP initiatives and experiences to draw on. In this respect, we note with interest that there are far more male than female

professors in Norway and that men hold a clear majority of management and other key positions in academia (Research Council of Norway, 2019, p. 7). This observation speaks to a scientific curiosity about what the DEI problem might be in this gender friendly society, which the GEP/DEI policies try to solve.

The policy measures are suggested solutions to this hard, explainable problem. To effectuate the efforts, the Norwegian Government established the Committee for Integration Measures—Women in Research in 2004, which changed its name to Committee for Gender Balance in Research in 2010, and in 2014 to its current name Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (KIF, 2022). This change of name indicates a shift in governmental policy from "women" via "gender balance" to "diversity," signifying a shift in what the problem of equality in academia is represented to be in Norway. In the introduction to this article, we argued that this shift within the European context was mere rhetoric, as "diversity" tended to still be understood as "women." In what follows, we dive further into this issue with the Norwegian case, where all HEIs, including the Research Council of Norway, are obliged to have an active knowledge-based policy for DEI and are recommended to seek advice from the KIF committee.

5.1. UiT The Arctic University of Norway Excelling in the DEI Class

In addition to the history of gender equality work at UiT that stretches back to the 1990s, beginning long before it became a requirement from the Norwegian Government, we chose UiT because the policy has been successful based on some core parameters. For example, the proportion of female professors rose from nearly zero percent in the early 1990s to almost 40% in 2019 (Duarte et al., 2020). This represented a leap from last place to the top of the HEI class regarding female professors. However, we do not claim that UiT is the best in class, but that this success is a good place to start our analysis because a success story has more to say about the complexity of the successes and failures.

5.2. The History of UiT Equality Policy

Shortly after its establishment in 1972, UiT earned the nickname "the Red University" due to its attraction of radical students and staff who influenced its teaching and governing. Many staff members were politically left-wing, prioritizing academic freedom institutionally and individually, fostering a participative culture and university democracy. However, this ideal had a clear gendered flip side: women were significantly underrepresented among the professors, despite a rise in female associate professors and societal support for gender equality. The problem was partly systemic, as professorships were limited to government-appointed positions, requiring retirement before new appointments, a system perceived as inflexible and unfair. In the late 1980s, the Labor Party Government initiated reforms, and by 1993, new regulations allowed associate professors to apply for professorships based on merit. This structural reform significantly improved women's opportunities for obtaining professorships. Although not primarily aimed at women, the reform was influenced by the contemporary gender equality policy, highlighting the previous system's disadvantage to female academics and the need to increase the number of female professors. The presumption was that the new model would enhance gender balance, as noted by Kyvik et al. (2003, p. 13):

> The committee pointed out that women with families are usually less mobile than men in a similar situation and that there were probably many women who had refused to apply for top positions for

such reasons. Promotion based on competence would provide a better opportunity for the individual to take charge of and plan their own career, which the committee believed would be an important equality measure. (authors' translation from Norwegian)

At the time, the equality problem was seen as an amalgamation of structural and individual factors. The proposed solution focused on structural change, allowing professorships to be earned by merit, with the expectation that this would enhance gender equality. However, no measures were suggested to address women's domestic situations or their impact on workplace dynamics. Instead, the approach was to "fix the (university) structure" to create an environment where women would succeed.

When the new promotion model was adopted, many female associate professors were eager to apply for promotion. However, from 1994 to 2004, the increase in female professors fell short of expectations for achieving gender balance. To accelerate progress, the university administration implemented a mentoring program for female associate professors (Kilden, 2004) designed to support women in attaining professorships. This individualized effort proved successful, leading to nearly 40% of female professors by 2019 (Duarte et al., 2020). As of the time of writing this article, the program, known as *Opprykksprosjektet* (the promotion project), continues, even though the percentage of female professors exceeded the 40% goal by 2023 (Prestige Project, 2023). The problem representation remained the same as the previous one, identifying a mix of structural issues and women's disadvantaged positions. However, the solution (mentoring program) marked a shift towards individualized solutions, as structural change alone had not achieved the desired gender equality. Mentoring in this context was framed as an individualized "fixing women" solution, despite the recognition that gender inequality was a structural issue. Thus, an individualized measure was presumed to address a structural problem, suggesting that the institution, rather than the women, was responsible for gender inequality.

Another individualized initiative was an adjunct professor program, designed to improve gender balance at UiT and increase the positions for women. The underlying assumption was that a greater presence of women would enhance research quality by leveraging the capabilities of both genders. At this juncture, gender equality was framed as a matter of human resources, specifically, tapping into "the good brains." This represents a shift in the discourse towards "utility," embracing the "resource argument," where gender equality is seen as a strategy for the University's success. This contrasts with earlier views where gender equality policy addressed "unfairness for women" and "women's disadvantages." Consequently, the new discourse produced women academics as tools for the University's success.

5.3. The Emergence of GEPs at UiT

With the shift from focusing on "women's disadvantage" to "gender equality," which included increased attention to men both in academia and Norwegian society, the University Board adopted its first GEP for 2010–2015 in 2009. This was followed by the 2015-2020 and the 2020-2024 action plan, upon which our analysis is based. However, as we were finalizing the analysis of this article, a new plan for 2024–2026 (UiT, 2024) was adopted, but this plan is not included in our analysis due to timing constraints.

The 2010–2015 GEP aimed to enhance gender equality across levels, from students and employees to administration and leadership. The 2015–2020 GEP focused on creating an "equal and inclusive working

environment," providing "good arrangements for competence and career development," and fostering a "culture of excellent management and teamwork" (UiT, 2015). During this period, assumptions about a positive relationship between mixed-gender environments and improved working conditions became prominent. For example:

> At the institutional level, each gender should be allocated at least 40 percent of the entry-level positions. (UiT, 2015, p. 2, authors' translation from Norwegian)

> UiT shall strive to provide good role models of both genders for employees and students. (UiT, 2015, p. 3, authors' translation from Norwegian)

In the 1990s and 2000s, the fairness discourse dominated DEI policy initiatives, framing the equality problem as the unfairness of women's underrepresentation in scientific and leadership positions, making women the primary focus of the policies. However, the gradual shift towards the utility discourse in the 2010s, evident both at UiT and in broader society, led to a "conflict" between the two discourses. These discourses offered differing problem representations and approaches to discussing the "problem."

The utility discourse produced gender equality as a tool for achieving objectives other than gender equality as a goal on its own terms. This shift coincides with the growing demands on the HEI sector since the 2000s, to enhance efficiency, increase output, and reduce costs. Like other public sectors in Norway, the HEI sector is expected to adopt New Public Management principles, adhering to neoliberal ideals of optimization, rationalization, and commercialization (Ball, 2012; Poutanen, 2023).

6. Problem Representations in the Plan

The University Board adopted the Plan on February 5, 2020 (UiT, 2020a). Although the KIF committee's mandate shifted towards gender balance and diversity in 2014, UiT's DEI policy did not reflect this change until the adoption of the Plan. According to the case presentation to the University Board, the extension of the target group beyond gender was driven by new governmental requirements for all universities and other public institutions to address discrimination across all grounds outlined in the new Equality and Anti-discrimination Act (UiT, 2020b). The Plan was grounded in the university's commitment to academic freedom and its vision of being a "safe space" where everyone can learn, teach, develop, and express themselves without fearing discrimination, as the Plan states:

> No one shall experience discrimination, including based on their ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and life stance, functional ability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. (UiT, 2020a, p. 2)

The goals were:

> To prevent sexual harassment, increase the proportion of female professors to forty percent, improve gender balance in study programmes with uneven representation, render visible gender and diversity perspectives in research and teaching, make use of role models to strengthen diversity, and employ disabled people. (UiT, 2020a, p. 2)

The Plan also addresses new requirements from Horizon Europe and the Research Council of Norway, mandating research institutions to maintain an active GEP. While the Plan is essential for external funding, it also emphasizes the goal of fair treatment for all students and employees, suggesting that fairness policies survived the general nonlinearization trends in society. The introduction (p. 2) reveals that both the utility and fairness discourses coexist within the Plan. It is a comprehensive document featuring nine main measures and over sixty sub-measures.

To better understand the suggested policy solutions—and to analyze how these solutions shaped the identification of "policy problems"—we meticulously reviewed the document, identifying and highlighting all proposed solutions. Since a WPR analysis starts with pinpointing solutions to comprehend problem representation, our initial task was to identify all solutions within the document. We then categorized the solutions by topic, resulting in five meaningful categories: recruitment; career development; governance and management; working environment; and research and teaching. In the subsequent analysis phase, we aligned the five categories with the three previously outlined operational levels (see Timmers et al., 2010, pp. 720–722), ultimately consolidating them into four final categories:

1. Individual level: Recruitment and career development;
2. Structural level: Governance and management;
3. Cultural level: Working environment.

At this point, we realized that all policy measures in the above categories pertained to the terms and conditions of work and study for employees and students at the university, rather than the content of their work or studies. We then deduced that the measures related to research and teaching needed a distinct operational category, which we termed "epistemological" as a fourth level:

4. Epistemological level: Research and teaching content.

Unlike the above three levels, the fourth level is not prominently featured in existing research literature. It emerged from our analysis of the measures outlined in the Plan and is, therefore, a main contribution to this field of research.

With these categories of policy measures established, we proceeded to explore how the problem is represented within the Plan and to analyze the underlying assumptions of the representation.

6.1. Individual Level: Recruitment and Career Development

At this level, we focused on identifying measures related to individual capabilities, abilities, competencies, and opportunities for personal growth. The solutions exhibiting these characteristics were linked to the thematic areas of recruitment and career development for employees at the university:

> The university shall offer women in academic environments with a low proportion of women and women who have the potential to achieve personal promotion to professor...the opportunity to participate in a promotion project. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

> Offer competence enhancement measures to women to use in technical and administrative positions who qualify for management positions. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

These solutions manifested as initiatives such as promotion routines, mentorship, network building, media training, and writing workshops, all designed to enhance women's competencies for management/leadership roles. The underlying presumption of these policy measures is that women lack certain attributes necessary for those positions, necessitating training to acquire the missing skills. If women possessed these attributes, such measures would be unnecessary. Consequently, the problem is represented as inadequate leadership or professorship capabilities among women. Thus, to promote fairness between men and women, these inadequacies need to be "fixed." In alignment with the fairness approach, the plan further states:

> UiT shall have a life-phase policy that facilitates a good balance between careers and family commitments. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

> During the recruitment of women to faculties/units with a particularly low proportion of women, start packages consisting of grants, post-docs, and/or extra working capital might be used, (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

These quotes suggest that structural solutions are still being used to fix individual challenges, reflecting a fairness approach like that of the 1980s, as discussed in Section 5.2. We see, though, that the Plan acknowledges the need for "balance between career and family commitment," for both male and female employees, indicating that family responsibilities are shared among genders and are not solely a barrier to women's careers. Because the Plan emphasizes work–life balance and targeted recruitment measures for women, we deduce the problem to be a difficulty of balancing career and family, insufficient effort to recruit women to male-dominated units, and job postings that fail to attract underrepresented genders.

6.2. Structural Level: Governance and Management

Here, we explored measures addressing structural phenomena, including organizational aspects, leadership structures, responsibility distribution, funding, evaluation procedures, and human resource policies. These elements are linked to administrative and management tools and practices:

> The work involving equality and diversity shall be included as a theme in governance dialogue with faculties and units. (UiT, 2020a, p. 2)

> Develop an overview of indicators that describe the state of work involving diversity and inclusion. (UiT, 2020a, p. 4)

The measures in this category focus on institutional management, implementation, visibility, and DEI evaluation initiatives. The key measures include funding DEI work, engaging faculty and trade unions in DEI work, integrating DEI efforts in the university's annual reports, concretizing activity plans, and reporting activities to the Ministry of Education and Research. Additionally, it involves conducting DEI training workshops for human resources and management and establishing an "equality and diversity committee" with a "broad representation that reflects the committee's areas of work" (UiT, 2020a, p. 2).

At this level, the problem representation is produced as an inadequate organization of DEI work, necessitating the establishment of a new unit for DEI work and a clear distribution of responsibilities among trade unions, management, and leadership at all levels. There is also a lack of knowledge and competencies in DEI issues, highlighting the need for training responsible actors, as well as insufficient funding and the invisibility of DEI work. In essence, the problem is represented as inadequate organizational preparedness to address DEI issues. However, the University Board's adoption of the Plan signals a commitment to resolving the problem through targeted measures. By raising awareness and knowledge of DEI among management and key stakeholders and ensuring that faculty and trade unions are actively involved with sufficient funding, it is presumed that DEI can be realized at the university.

6.3. Cultural Level: Working Environment

At this level, we searched for measures/solutions related to working conditions and study culture for both students and employees:

> Make a template for an introductory meeting with new employees that includes information about risk situations, zero tolerance of harassment, and notification procedures. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

> Create a working environment for students and employees that is safe and inclusive, regardless of gender identity and gender expression. (UiT, 2020a, p. 4)

The quotes highlight situations and risks that students and staff need to be made aware of, emphasizing the university's responsibility in these areas. Concrete measures include offering Norwegian language courses for non-Norwegians, reception programs for international students and employees, and celebrating significant events like International Women's Day, Sami National Day, and the PRIDE parade. These initiatives aim to leverage diversity among students and staff and showcase UiT as an international university. The measures are primarily collective, aiming at transforming the university into a "safe space" for all.

At the cultural level, the problem is represented as an unsafe environment, particularly for the target group of the DEI policy, which requires attention. The problem stems from a lack of awareness and information about risk situations and reporting mechanisms among new employees and students, difficulties in understanding the Norwegian language, and insufficient information on sexual diversity. The underlying assumption is that increasing awareness among new employees and students curbs harassment and encourages victims to report incidents. Additionally, understanding the Norwegian language fosters inclusion, and celebrating important events embraces diversity, including sexual diversity. Collectively, these efforts aim to cultivate a "safe" university culture.

6.4. Epistemological Level: Research and Teaching Content

The residual categories of our analysis, those measures not fitting into the three analytical levels we found in the research literature, were far too important for DEI to be ignored. What and how teachers teach, what and how students learn, is about epistemic diversity and justice. The content of research, teaching, and learning needs more attention in DEI work. We found some measures in the Plan:

Work to strengthen and render visible gender and diversity perspectives in research and teaching. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

Focus on the syllabus and reading lists to assess whether various gender perspectives and/or female role models are included in the subjects' academic development. (UiT, 2020a, p. 3)

In these quotes, the Plan highlights solutions such as "strengthening, rendering visible, focusing, assessing, and including" DEI perspectives in teaching and research. These policy solutions suggest a lack of clarity regarding the extent to which DEI perspectives are integrated into the syllabi and reading material, highlighting the need for assessment. Additionally, DEI perspectives are perceived as insufficiently visible in research and teaching, necessitating their increased visibility. An underlying assumption is that their satisfactory inclusion and visibility can lead to equality. However, the Plan does not specify how these included and visible perspectives will translate into equality, nor does it address the consequences of whether DEI perspectives are found lacking in the teaching content. Furthermore, the Plan does not substantiate what "inclusion" encompasses in this context. Thus, the epistemological level appears as a less developed part of the Plan, with unsubstantiated measures.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed at exploring what the problem of DEI is represented to be in the GEP/DEI policy of UiT, the presumptions underlying the problem representation, and the policy development and evolution. The discourse in previous studies generally highlights the DEI problem as the underrepresentation of women in professorship/leadership positions and gender imbalances in academic programs due to gender-skewed choices (Nielsen, 2017; Silander et al., 2021; Timmers et al., 2010). The research literature also highlights affirmative action measures such as mentorship, training programs, and role modeling as solutions to attain gender equality. Our findings corroborate previous research, indicating persistent underrepresentation of women at the professorship and leadership levels, with affirmative action as a key remedy. However, our analysis reveals more nuanced problem representations, including inadequate leadership skills among women, career and family balance difficulties, insufficient funding for DEI work, lack of institutional management orientation on DEI work, unattractive recruitment announcements, a language barrier that hinders inclusion of non-Norwegians, insufficient sexual diversity information, DEI invisibility in university annual reports, and no proper overview of the inclusion of DEI perspectives in research and teaching content.

However, there are reasons to question some of the presumptions underlying the problem representations. For example, the strong emphasis on mentoring and leadership training for women indicates an understanding of women in academia as less capable than men, and therefore, necessitating training and nurturing to acquire the missing skills. Consequently, women are portrayed as the problem in the Plan, with solutions being individualized. This, furthermore, creates "capability" as a leadership and professorship attribute that the underrepresented groups (in this case, women) are presumed to lack. By framing the problem this way, leadership success is portrayed as dependent on specific capabilities. Hence, the problem representation produces discursive effects, that is, how we think and talk about phenomena; subjectification effects, that is, who we might be; and real-life effects, that is, how we might live (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, pp. 49, 65, 69).

Comparatively, the Plan does not propose similar measures for men to enhance their "capabilities," suggesting that men are presumed to possess these skills inherently. This indicates that women's capabilities are assessed based on their ability to conform to a male-dominated society rather than their individual academic and leadership prowess, thereby reinforcing traditional gender biases. Lipton (2021) notes that "academic women are not simply judged on other meritocratic performance as scholars but rather subjective standards of how well they fit into the masculine culture of the contemporary university" (p. 768). While equipping women with leadership skills is ideally not a bad idea, it becomes problematic if men are not explicitly part of those efforts. Assuming men already possess the necessary leadership skills, we may ask whether there is space, effort, and will to unlearn historical tendencies and integrate the "trained newcomers" (women) into leadership roles. Are men a governable group who will naturally and easily relinquish their "privileges"? This cannot be taken for granted but must be questioned (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 50). Thus, the process of reconciling power dynamics, shifting positions, and altering social relations to achieve gender equality remains inadequately addressed in the policy problem representation. Initiatives aimed at gender equality in academia, focusing on individual women, and grounded in feminist principles and broader understandings of gender inequality, represent substantial effort (De Vries & Van Den Brink, 2016; Magnussen et al., 2022). However, these efforts should be complemented by practices that challenge the subtle reproduction of gendered and other differences.

Our analysis reveals several taken-for-granted issues in how the Plan represents the problem of DEI. Firstly, the Plan construes "gender" as a fixed category, assigning value to either male or female, which overlooks the dynamic nature of gender as involving "relations of power and conflict" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 65) and ignores its evolution beyond binary definitions. Secondly, the categories "men" and "women" are portrayed as homogenous groups. This approach, described by Bacchi (1999, p. 48) as the "pluralist model," can obscure injustices within sub-groups, leaving critical questions unaddressed (Bacchi, 1999, p. 94). For instance, a woman of color facing oppression in university spaces may experience sexual or racial discrimination, or both (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149), necessitating an intersectional analysis to fully comprehend her situation. Similarly, representing men as a single group conceals the reality that, despite being perceived as more privileged than women, men do not always enjoy privilege in all social contexts, and such representations can obscure the costs associated with perceived privilege (Magnussen, 2019, p. 133). Therefore, discrimination and inequalities in academia are complex and multifaceted, reflecting the diverse nature of individuals, which cannot be understood in a unidirectional manner (Losleben & Musubika, 2023).

In examining approaches to equality within the Plan's genealogical history, both fairness and utility approaches have been evident. However, the utility approach has gained prominence in neoliberal times as public universities increasingly adopt market logic to accommodate new priorities (Bleiklie, 2018; Connell, 2019). These priorities include accountability for public resources, return on investment, performance-driven systems, excellence, competitiveness (Poutanen, 2023, pp. 625–626), political visibility, and the growing importance of research for economic prosperity (Bleiklie, 2018, p. 1). We see that the simultaneous presence of DEI initiatives and neoliberal changes suggests mutual influence. For instance, to align with neoliberal trends, universities spectacularly showcase performativity and productivity to secure more research grants and attract students. Additionally, local and international university rankings increasingly incorporate DEI standards, pressuring universities to double their DEI efforts, gain a competitive edge, and deliver tangible outcomes (Duarte et al., 2023). But for universities to secure more research grants, they must explicitly demonstrate how DEI perspectives are integrated into both the content of research

projects and the representation of human resources within research teams (Duarte et al., 2023, p. 2). However, this performativity logic tends to drive policy efforts, values, and purposes towards policy proposals that facilitate such ambition, potentially hindering the fundamental goal of advancing DEI (Ahmed, 2007; Tzanakou, 2019). Connell (2019) and Thompson and Zablotsky (2016) suggest that some universities may manipulate DEI strategies to fulfill neoliberal objectives, focusing less on practical DEI implementation. While we do not assert this occurs at UiT, our analysis indicates that the Plan's emphasis on utilizing all talents and maximizing "good brains" reflects neoliberal tendencies. Briefly, this focus also protrudes through the new DEI plan for UiT (2024), underscoring the "maximization effect" of resources and talent in contemporary times.

While previous research identifies three levels of operation in DEI policy—individual, structural, and cultural (Nielsen, 2017; Timmers et al., 2010)—our analysis introduces a fourth level, the epistemological level, which focuses on the content of research and teaching. While the existing levels address DEI perspectives in terms and conditions of the operation of work and study, our dimension addresses DEI in study and research material. The methods and content of teaching and learning influence educational outcomes; thus, addressing both epistemic and human diversity in DEI policy and university practices is crucial for enacting and achieving equality. Unfortunately, the problem representation in the Plan lacks a comprehensive overview of the extent to which DEI perspectives are included in the syllabi and reading materials, despite highlighting the need to assess the extent of their inclusion in study content. With this finding, we contribute to DEI policy research with a proposed extension of the policy operational framework to include academic content, teachers, and students' everyday practices in learning. To transform universities into inclusive spaces, policy operational frameworks must be holistic, addressing individual, structural, cultural, and epistemic aspects, given the university's role in learning and knowledge production. Therefore, the epistemic dimension must be addressed with concrete measures beyond mere assessment of the absence or presence of DEI perspectives. It must specify what should be included in the study content, how it will be done, and how this will foster equality.

To conclude, despite the clear shift towards the utility argumentation in the previous plans, we see a more nuanced argumentation of the coexistence of both utility and fairness in the 2020–2024 DEI action plan, but also a more complex understanding of the organizational aspects of the equality problems. These nuances became apparent in the variety of solutions at all the identified levels. However, the UiT Plan predominantly deals with gender equality, with limited focus on diversity, despite its change of name from the Gender Equality Plan (2015–2020) to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan 2020–2024. Many diversity measures lack clarity and detailed directives, such as the vague guideline "have information about how to support people who are in a process of changing gender identity" (UiT, 2020a, p. 4), which does not specify how this information should be obtained, utilized, and to what end. Further research is hence needed to explore how policy problem representations incorporate the changing fluidity in gender and other differentiating categories. Additionally, there is a need to examine how DEI policies can navigate the growing neoliberalization of academia, which may obscure the fundamental goal of promoting DEI. Overall, more critical and intersectional policy research is required.

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