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From Authoritative Voices to Dialogical Policy-Making: How Norwegian Universities Navigate Diversity Implementation

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Abstract

This article examines how Norwegian universities implement gender equality and diversity policies through a Bakhtinian dialogical lens. Using document analysis of action plans from four major universities and interviews with 19 department heads and research group leaders, we trace how authoritative voices from external policymakers are transformed as they move from institutional plans to local implementation. The study reveals a fundamental shift from top-down policy transmission to distributed dialogical sense-making. While university action plans echo external directives by adopting expansive diversity definitions, they paradoxically create "authoritative polyphony," messages too diffuse to enable meaningful local response. Our analysis identifies three patterns of local engagement: active resistance, where leaders contest institutional messages based on situated knowledge; interpretative paralysis, where unclear directives create obligation without actionable understanding; and creative transformations, where leaders reframe diversity through personal experiences and academic identities. When institutional guidance proves insufficient, local leaders draw upon two primary interpretative resources: embodied knowledge of inclusion and exclusion from personal experiences, and scholarly frameworks that reframe diversity through academic lenses. This process creates what we term "dialogical delegation," a tacit transfer of interpretative authority from institutions to individuals without corresponding support. The findings demonstrate how "doing diversity" becomes an active dialogical process where authentic diversity strategies emerge through countless individual interpretative acts rather than centralised planning. This reveals both the limitations of broad institutional diversity policies and the emergence of alternative governance forms where meaning-making authority becomes distributed across organisational hierarchies, with significant implications for policy implementation theory and diversity governance.

Keywords

Bakhtin; dialogical analysis; diversity policy; higher education; policy implementation

1. Introduction

Gender equality and diversity have become central concerns in higher education, with a growing emphasis on creating inclusive environments that reflect the diversity of society. Institutions face the challenge of implementing diversity initiatives that comply with legal requirements and effectively promote inclusion and belonging. However, research suggests a significant gap between institutional diversity policies and their local implementation (Ahmed, 2012; Lagesen, 2021; Lagesen & Suboticki, 2024; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). This article examines how Norwegian universities navigate this implementation challenge, revealing a fundamental transformation from top-down policy transmission to distributed dialogical meaning-making.

Instead of viewing policy implementation as a simple transmission, we utilise Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "voices" (Bakhtin, 1986, 2010; see also Maybin, 2001) to comprehend how diversity policies are dialogically constructed through continuous interactions among external mandates, institutional plans, and local interpretations. Authoritative political views refer to the substantive policy positions of governmental and institutional actors. However, we focus on how local leaders communicate, interpret, and enact these views. Bakhtin's concept highlights the dialogical nature of policies, allowing us to both trace how authoritative messages are transformed through local interpretation and demonstrate how local actors actively respond to, modify, and occasionally resist external directives.

This study examines Norwegian universities through two analytical steps. First, we analyse centrally created equality and diversity plans to understand how they echo and transform external authoritative voices. Second, we investigate how department heads and research group leaders interpret and respond to these institutional messages while "doing diversity" in their daily leadership practices. Thus, this study provides insights into how local leaders engage with diversity in their daily work, highlighting the impact of central policies and how personal experiences and academic identities serve as interpretative resources.

The concept of "diversity" is multifaceted and has been explored through various lenses, including race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, and disability (Sim & Bierema, 2025). Research highlights the benefits of diverse teams for creativity and innovation, as well as the persistent challenges of achieving inclusive universities (Leišytė et al., 2021; Moreu et al., 2021). This multifaceted nature makes diversity particularly suitable for dialogical analysis, as its contested meanings require constant interpretative work by local actors navigating competing definitions and expectations.

Norway offers a compelling context for such investigation. It consistently ranks high in international gender equality indices (World Economic Forum, 2023) and has implemented more extensive gender equality policies in higher education than the other Nordic countries (Drange et al., 2023; Husu, 2015). However, this policy-rich environment creates complex dialogical challenges, as universities must respond to multiple authoritative voices while maintaining academic freedom.

This article explores how national goals and policies influence how universities define and address gender and diversity. It is inspired by ethnomethodological theories of "doing difference" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995) and Bakhtin's concept of voices (Maybin, 2001). Our analysis reveals that contemporary diversity governance operates through what we term "dialogical delegation"—a tacit transfer of interpretative authority from institutions to individuals without corresponding support. This has implications for

understanding how organisations navigate the tension between institutional authority and distributed interpretative work.

2. Theory: Dialogism and Doing Diversity

Our analysis draws inspiration from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of voices within his broader theory of "dialogism" (Bakhtin, 2010; see also Jones, 2017). Dialogism is a concept introduced by Bakhtin that describes how meaning arises through the interaction and dialogue between different voices, perspectives, and discourses rather than from a single authoritative source. At its core, dialogism suggests that all language and meaning are inherently relational and social. Bakhtin argued that every utterance exists in dialogue with other utterances; it responds to previous statements, anticipates future responses, and is shaped by its social and ideological contexts. No word or statement exists in isolation; instead, meaning is generated through this ongoing conversation between various voices. Furthermore, Bakhtin distinguishes between authoritative and marginalised voices, aiding in the identification of dominant discourses (Maybin, 2001).

This concept offers a nuanced lens for analysing how department heads understand and engage with authoritative voices in gender and diversity policies. In Bakhtinian terms, voices carry the social, institutional, and ideological positions from which they speak (Jones, 2017). When department heads encounter diversity policies, they engage with broader constellations of embedded voices—from EU directives to national legislation to institutional priorities. This framework is especially valuable for analysing diversity concepts because these terms are inherently contested and multifaceted, requiring local actors to navigate competing definitions and expectations.

In our study, we identify three levels of dialogical interaction: external authoritative voices of policymakers; institutional voices of university action plans that attempt to translate external demands into local strategies; and responding voices of department heads who must interpret often ambiguous directives.

We combine Bakhtin's dialogism with West and Fenstermaker's (1995) concept of "doing difference," which extends their earlier work on "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This framework conceptualises social categories as ongoing accomplishments achieved through everyday interactions. "Doing difference" recognises that gender, race, and class are interconnected and mutually constitutive, intersecting in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1989). This combination allows us to analyse diversity work as an ongoing interactive process. While "doing difference" shows how social categories are performed in daily interactions, Bakhtin's concept of voices reveals how these performances are shaped by an ongoing dialogue between institutional directives and individual interpretation.

In our analysis, we trace the dialogical interaction of voices, highlighting how department heads respond to institutional messages not as passive recipients but as active interpreters who infuse their own experiences, identities, and local contexts into policy interpretation. Accordingly, we investigate "doing diversity" as an active interpretative process shaped by multiple intersecting voices. We ask:

1. How do Norwegian universities' gender equality and diversity action plans echo and transform the authoritative voices of national and European policy directives?

2. How do department heads and research group leaders interpret and respond to the authoritative voices embedded in their institution's diversity policies when "doing diversity" in their daily leadership practices?

These questions allow us to trace the dialogical process from external policy formation through institutional translation to local implementation, revealing how authoritative messages are transformed and the resources local leaders rely on when institutional guidance proves insufficient.

3. Background: The Making of Authoritative Voices in Norway

Gender balance and equality in academia have gained significant attention in Norway since the 1970s. Several national policy instruments have been established to promote gender equality and diversity in research and higher education. This includes legislation and directives from the Ministry of Education and Research. Since 2004, the ministry has maintained a dedicated Committee for Gender Balance and Diversity in Research (the so-called KiF Committee), which provides support and recommendations to enhance gender equality and diversity in higher education and research institutions. Moreover, the Research Council of Norway has required Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) for funding applications since 2022. This initiative is inspired by the European Commission, which, under Horizon Europe, mandates that research and higher education organisations have GEPs to be eligible for funding. Furthermore, integrating gender considerations into research content is mandatory, and gender balance is emphasised in evaluation panels and advisory bodies in EU and Norway. These GEP requirements stipulate that plans must be adopted by top-level management, be publicly accessible on the institution's website, and refer to allocated resources for gender equality initiatives.

Numerous studies have examined how universities have implemented GEPs. For example, Clavero and Galligan (2021) analysed seven plans from European universities. They found that the lack of genuine commitment from senior management, combined with the persistence of gendered power dynamics, hindered success. Although the initiatives were well-received and had positive impacts, the study underscored their failure to address the deeper structural issues perpetuating gender inequality. According to Palmén and Schmidt (2019), numerous measures are required to facilitate better implementation of GEPs. In the Norwegian context, Tica (2021) investigated 48 research institutes, universities, and colleges and found that while they organised their gender equality and diversity efforts in various ways, action plans enhanced universities' ability to implement and sustain gender equality and diversity initiatives. Similarly, Egeland and Drange (2022) examined key stakeholders, including equality and diversity advisers, managers, and academic staff from five institutions (two universities, one university college, and two research institutes), and found that having dedicated equality and diversity advisers, action plans, and robust systems in place can significantly improve gender balance and diversity efforts.

However, Silander et al. (2024) argue that the primary strategies of the policies of Nordic countries aim at organisational transformation through so-called gender mainstreaming, which often depends on weak policy instruments, leaving implementation to institutions where action plans serve as a key instrument. While action plans may be performative, Ahmed (2012) contends that institutional speech acts, such as action plans, tend to be ineffective. Her critique highlights the disparity between what institutions say and what they do. This disparity can be revealed through an analysis of policy documents and the experiences of those within the institution.

Much scholarly work suggests that it is important to be aware of the potential gaps between the GEPs established by universities at the top level and the practices at the department level (Lagesen & Suboticki, 2022; Ní Laoire et al., 2021). We pursue this in our study using the aforementioned two-step approach.

3.1. A Discursive Shift in Norwegian Higher Education

Diversity issues within Norwegian higher education have historically centred predominantly on gender (Husu, 2015; Suboticki & Sørensen, 2022). However, over the past two decades, the discourse has expanded to include ethnic diversity and internationalisation, reflecting the emergence of new authoritative voices that have transformed the landscape of diversity. We understand this discursive shift as a response to factors that have created new demands for institutional attention.

The increasing presence of international researchers has warranted a greater focus on diversity. Currently, immigrants make up 34% of the academic workforce (Gunnes & Steine, 2020). Most come from Europe, the United States, and Australia, rather than Norwegian-born descendants of immigrants. This demographic shift has led to new authoritative voices demanding an institutional response.

First, government policy has clearly promoted this shift through authoritative directives emphasising diversity and gender equality. The government's long-term research and higher education plan from 2018 expresses that "the quality of higher education must be further enhanced. There must be greater recruitment of the best talents" and a concern that it is "still a long way to go in fully utilising the potential of the population as a whole, both in terms of diversity and in terms of gender balance in senior academic position" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, p. 20). This requires deliberate efforts to promote equality and inclusion, establishing institutional obligations that universities must address through action plans.

Second, the growth of authoritative voices is evident in legislative changes. In 2017, the Equality Act became the Equality and Discrimination Act, prohibiting all forms of discrimination "on the basis of gender, pregnancy, leave in connection with childbirth or adoption, care responsibilities, ethnicity, religion, belief, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age or other significant characteristics of a person" (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2017, §1, p. 1). This expansion introduced new authoritative demands on universities, including intensified activity and reporting requirements.

Third, the mandate of the KiF Committee illustrates the institutional broadening of the focus on "diversity." Initially centred on gender, ethnic diversity was incorporated into its mandate in 2014, followed by "social background" in 2022. The committee now analyses how gender, ethnic diversity, and social background "affect critical transitions in a research career" while functioning as "a driving force in the international work on gender balance and diversity" (Kifinfo, n.d.). This institutional evolution shows how authoritative voices multiply and interact over time.

3.2. Governance and Scholarly Influences

The shift toward diversity also reflects broader changes in academic governance that create new forms of authoritative pressure. Bråten and Mikalsen (2022) argue that diversity emphasis reflects goal-oriented management focused on efficiency, competition, and excellence. Sørensen (2019) identifies 16 reform

initiatives designed to "discipline universities" for greater efficiency, including governance forms where priority-setting is "pushed down the system to individual units and employees" (Sørensen & Traweek, 2022). According to Bråten and Mikalsen (2022), diversity desires can be interpreted as part of this "utopian form of governance."

International scholarly developments have also contributed to authoritative voices that promote a focus on diversity. The feminist researchers' concept of intersectionality has influenced policy development by emphasising how social categories overlap and create complex forms of discrimination and privilege (Acker, 2012; Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014; Orupabo, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Research has also highlighted the complex challenges international researchers face in Norwegian academia, including language requirements and employment discrimination (Flikke, 2024).

This evolution from gender to diversity represents a multiplication of authoritative voices that universities are expected to incorporate into their action plans. The increased discursive attention to diversity extends, rather than replaces, the focus on gender equality, creating complex dialogical challenges as institutions attempt to respond to multiple, sometimes competing demands. We investigate how these competing authoritative voices are managed in university action plans and how local leaders interpret and respond to these expanded diversity demands when institutional guidance proves inadequate.

The above review reveals that diversity is not merely a policy area but a site of competing authoritative voices. It sets the stage for examining how universities navigate these complex dialogical demands through their action plans and local implementation practices.

4. Method

The first step of our study involves analysing the action plans for equality and diversity at Norway's four largest universities: Bergen, Oslo, Tromsø (the Arctic University of Norway), and Trondheim (NTNU Norwegian University of Science and Technology). The plans have been obtained from the universities' websites. We analysed these documents by reviewing and contextualising their purpose, target group, and authorship (Bowen, 2009). Next, we examined the content of the plans (Prior, 2020). Content analysis emphasizes the presence and frequency of relevant textual elements, thus helping to identify the prevalence of specific themes or topics. Our primary focus was on how the action plans have responded to the demands from institutions and national policymaking, concentrating on content related to these concerns. Consequently, we analysed the plans by identifying which dimensions of diversity are mentioned, how often, and in what ways.

To investigate the local implementation of these plans, we conducted in-depth interviews with 19 department heads and research group leaders at the same four universities. We interviewed department heads because they are responsible for executing the university's diversity policies. We also spoke with research group leaders, as they often occupy a middle management role between staff and department heads and can therefore address diversity issues. The selection of participants was strategic to ensure broad representation from various academic fields. The interviewees were drawn from the same disciplinary departments within each university's faculties of humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. Each faculty consists of five to nine departments. The interviews took place over a four-month period in 2023. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the interview data.

Table 1. Interviewees according to gender and position.

Position	No. men	No. women	Total
Department heads	6	2	8
Group leaders/deputy heads	5	6	11
Total	11	8	19

Table 2. Interviewees according to gender and discipline.

Discipline	No. men	No. women	Total
Humanities	2	5	7
STEM	5	1	6
Social sciences	4	2	6
Total	11	8	19

All interviews were conducted individually by two of the co-authors, while a third co-author participated in some of them. The interview guide included open-ended questions about the definition of diversity, challenges and opportunities related to diversity, and specific measures and strategies for promoting diversity in academic environments. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes and was conducted via Teams or Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data analysis. We employed thematic analysis, coding and categorising the transcriptions to identify key themes and patterns.

We have anonymized the interviewees (as promised) by assigning them fictitious names. The first letter designates whether they are from the humanities (H), the STEM fields (R), or the social sciences (S). The Norwegian Centre for Research Data, which oversees ethical issues in the social sciences, approved our empirical approach. All interviewees provided informed written consent to participate before each interview, with the option to withdraw later.

As social science researchers employed at one of the universities included in this study, we acknowledge our insider status within the Norwegian higher education system. This positioning likely influenced our interviews: Participants may have felt more comfortable discussing institutional challenges, but may also have provided socially desirable responses given our institutional proximity. We attempted to mitigate these effects through careful interview design, focusing on concrete experiences and ensuring participants understood our role as researchers rather than evaluators. However, the prevalence of critical perspectives, explicit resistance to institutional policies, and candid admissions of uncertainty in our data suggest that social desirability bias did not substantially constrain participants' responses.

5. Analysis

5.1. The Role of Authoritative Voices in the Universities' Action Plans

In Norway, gender equality and diversity plans are typically crafted by the central administration, often by gender equality and diversity advisors (Egeland & Drange, 2022). Three of the four universities we study

have such advisors coordinating these efforts; the fourth employs a committee. Draft plans are circulated for consultation and formally adopted by the university boards or equality committees.

Many resources support plan development, particularly the KiF website, which provides a repository of action plans from all Norwegian academic institutions, plus scholarly literature and policy guidance. The Research Council of Norway's website offers similar resources, linking to European Commission materials.

Despite expecting local adaptation under advisor leadership, the four university plans show remarkably similar designs and structures. All align explicitly with the universities' main strategy plans and now clearly assign implementation responsibility—a European Commission funding requirement. With few exceptions, central administration, particularly HR units, bears responsibility for most measures, indicating a centralised diversity management (Silander et al., 2024). Department heads handle specific measures like: "Everyone with managerial responsibilities must set clear boundaries and signal clear expectations of mutual respect and good collegial behaviour" (NTNU, 2022, p. 23).

The plans demonstrate clear compliance with national legislation and policies. The Universities of Oslo and Bergen systematically structure their plans to meet external requirements, while the University of Tromsø's plan provides detailed explanations of compliance alignment.

5.2. Dialogical Transformation of External Voices

Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism, we interpret this planning as echoing authoritative voices from national policymakers and the European Commission while extending beyond mere regulatory compliance. All plans include broad diversity definitions that encompass even more dimensions than external policy documents. The University of Tromsø's plan includes education level, life experiences, cultural background, work experience, competence, interests, family situation, minority experience, Indigenous status, national minority status, and underrepresented group membership. Gender remains significant, but alongside many other forms of diversity.

Some external authoritative voices prioritise gender equality, such as the Research Council of Norway and the European Commission. When universities' plans expand beyond this focus, it likely reflects broader perspectives from the Ministry of Education and the KiF Committee, which regularly meets with university leadership to discuss gender equality and diversity efforts while providing implementation advice.

However, the plans conceive diversity ambiguously. They clearly address discrimination, reflecting legislative requirements, while also responding to research showing that international staff often feel excluded and experience harassment. This ambivalence appears in frequent mentions of "inclusion" and "belonging." Aligning with external voices, diversity is presented as both a benefit and a resource—something to pursue while leveraging existing diversity to attract talent and maximize employee potential. Thus, diversity sometimes appears as a quantitative measure of having "little" or "much."

5.3. Strategic Communication and Institutional Branding

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the universities' action plans reveal complex dialogical processes where multiple authoritative voices interact and compete for influence. External voices—particularly from the European Commission, Research Council of Norway, and national legislation—are not simply adopted but actively engaged with and transformed. This dialogical engagement is evident in how universities expand beyond the gender focus of some external voices to embrace broader diversity definitions, suggesting an internal dialogue between compliance and institutional values.

The universities' expansive diversity definitions can be interpreted as dialogical responses to anticipated critical voices—preemptive engagement with potential exclusion claims from overlooked groups. This broad approach may also serve reputational functions, positioning universities as inclusive institutions in competitive higher education landscapes. The authoritative voice of diversity becomes intertwined with institutional branding, where demonstrating inclusion commitment serves external legitimacy as much as internal transformation. One university uses the slogan "Knowledge for a better world" to explicitly position itself as a social progress actor. Such messaging demonstrates how diversity policies function dialogically—responding to external authoritative voices while constructing institutional voices speaking to prospective students, faculty, funding bodies, and the public about social responsibility and inclusive excellence commitments.

The analysis reveals significant limitations in these authoritative voices' concrete implementation guidance. While the plans echo the authoritative message that "diversity is essential," they struggle with translating this into specific, actionable measures. Some measures remain vague and without explicit responsibility assignment. Many plans delegate the creation of more tailored local action plans—for example, NTNU's plan proposes that faculties and departments analyse their situations and implement their own gender balance measures.

5.4. Summary

The action plans define diversity very broadly, articulating nearly every possible diversity dimension while echoing national and European policymaking. They adopt inclusive stances resembling the slogan "No One Should Be Left Behind!" and acknowledge current underrepresentation while arguing that increased diversity enhances universities and research quality. However, the plans do not address any challenges, ambiguities, or dilemmas associated with these inclusive messages, rather presenting approaches as straightforward: "The more, the better, and just do it."

This creates a dialogical delegation where institutions maintain rhetorical authority over the diversity discourse while tacitly transferring interpretative responsibility to local leaders without corresponding support.

To explore this situation, we examine the dialogical relationship between the institutional voices of the action plans and local leadership practices in the next section, asking: How do department heads and research group leaders respond to the authoritative voices embedded in their institutions' action plans when "doing diversity" in their daily work? To what extent do they echo, resist, or transform these institutional messages? And when the authoritative voice of the action plans proves insufficient or ambiguous, what interpretative resources do local leaders draw upon to construct their understanding of diversity work?

6. University Departments' Leaderships Perceptions of and Engagement With Diversity

The above analysis showed how universities may transform external authoritative voices, shifting emphasis from gender equality toward expansive definitions of diversity. We now examine the next stage in this dialogical chain: How department heads and research group leaders interpret and respond to their institutions' diversity messages. We will show how the dialogue between institutional directives and local implementation generates new forms of interpretation that diverge significantly from both policy intentions and the institutional plans' authoritative voices. During the interviews, we frequently noted uncertainty about what diversity should mean. Several asked us at the beginning of the interview what we meant by diversity and wondered if their understanding was correct or aligned with what we were looking for. Thus, many doubted if their definition was "correct." They perceived the issue as complicated, in terms of which dimensions should be the focus. This uncertainty suggests a lack of clarity and consistency in the institutions' communication about diversity and the content of the action plans. The authoritative voice was insufficiently unambiguous. However, several had noted the discursive shift from a gender to a diversity focus. Simon, a department head, observed: "In Norway, diversity used to refer to first and foremost…gender diversity."

Moreover, diversity was not necessarily considered a blessing despite the positive arguments of the authoritative voices in policy documents and action plans. Some were critical and contested this message:

> The orders [from above] are very often imprecise. It wears us down a bit. Now we must increase diversity….Implicitly, it is assumed we have a problem with diversity. I refute that; it is not true at all. I have a problem with gender balance. We are desperately trying to do something there. (Runar, Head of Department)

Runar's response exemplifies active resistance to the authoritative voices, demonstrating how local leaders can contest institutional messages when they conflict with their situated knowledge and departmental realities. His statement reveals multiple layers of dialogical tension. First, he critiques the lack of precision. The vague directive to "increase diversity" lacks the specificity needed for meaningful action. This vagueness creates what we might understand as an incomplete dialogue, where the institutional voice fails to engage meaningfully with local contexts and challenges.

Second, Runar's explicit refutation—"I refute that, it is not true at all"—directly rejects the authoritative voice's underlying assumption. By asserting that his department has no diversity problem, he positions his experiential knowledge against institutional assessment. His department has been "internationally diverse for 30 years," giving him confidence to challenge the institutional narrative. This demonstrates how personal and departmental experience becomes a powerful interpretative resource to override external directives.

Most significantly, Runar's insistence on gender as "the real problem" reveals how local leaders may actively reshape diversity discourse through selective interpretation. Rather than accepting the broad diversity framework, he narrows the focus to what he perceives as the most pressing local challenge. His phrase "we are desperately trying to do something there" indicates genuine engagement with diversity work, but on his terms. This selective resistance illustrates how "doing diversity" becomes a negotiated process where local leaders filter authoritative messages through their understanding of departmental needs and capacity to effect change.

When authoritative voices prove insufficient, local leaders are caught between institutional expectations and practical uncertainty. As observed in the analysis of the action plans, institutional directives offered limited concrete guidance for translating broad diversity commitments into departmental practice. This created a peculiar dialogical situation where the authoritative voice was audible enough to state an obligation but too vague to enable a meaningful response. Some department heads found themselves in a state of interpretative limbo, aware of expectations but unable to construct coherent action frameworks.

> I know I should work with diversity, but I'm not sure what that means. I don't know what to do. We are so diverse, so I don't really know.

This department head's statement reveals the profound disorientation resulting from inadequate authoritative voices. Her repeated expressions of uncertainty—"I don't know," "I don't really know—underscore the failure of the institutional message to provide sufficient guidance. The phrase "I know that I should work with diversity" demonstrates the authoritative voice's directive force, while "but I don't know what that means" reveals its communicative failure. This creates a dialogical impasse—the institutional voice successfully conveyed an obligation but failed to provide an actionable understanding.

Her attempt to self-assess against unstated criteria is particularly telling: "We are so diverse, so I don't really know." She recognises diversity in her department ("we include the international ones") but lacks the interpretative framework to assess if the response adequately meets the institutional demands. Later in the interview, she speculates that "it is probably written somewhere," revealing awareness of authoritative texts while simultaneously acknowledging her disconnection from their practical meaning. This demonstrates how written policies can exist as distant, authoritative voices that create obligations without providing proper guidance.

Thus, the authoritative voice requiring diversity efforts was strong enough to be heard but not considered helpful, which leaves local leaders suspended between institutional expectations and practical paralysis. This situation illustrates how poorly constructed authoritative voices can generate anxiety and confusion rather than enabling the "doing diversity" work they promote. When institutional voices seemingly fail to bridge the gap between policy intention and practical implementation, local leaders are left to navigate diversity demands without adequate dialogical support, potentially undermining the very goals the policies seek to achieve.

This gap between authoritative voices and practical implementation created space for interpretation, where department heads and research group leaders drew upon their own experiences and observations to make sense of diversity demands:

> When I think of diversity, it's a list of four things I think….It's gender, ethnicity, age, and ability/disability. For me, personally, that's the definition I think of when I hear, "we have to include diverse perspectives; we have to be sensitive to diversity." (Stefan, research group leader)

In the above quote, Stefan illustrates how local leaders actively construct their own definitions when authoritative voices remain ambiguous. His systematic enumeration—"I think four things"—reveals an attempt to impose order and specificity on what he has received as a vague institutional message. Moreover, Stefan explicitly acknowledges hearing authoritative voices ("when I hear, 'we have to include diverse

perspectives'"), but he immediately personalizes the interpretation ("For me, personally, that's the definition"). This move from the institutional voice to a personal interpretation demonstrates the dialogical process, where Stefan actively translates "diversity" through his own conceptual framework.

This process of personal definition-making illustrates how "doing diversity" at the local level requires not just implementation of policies but active construction of meaning when authoritative guidance proves inadequate. The result is a proliferation of locally constructed diversity frameworks that may share common elements with institutional plans while diverging significantly in emphasis, scope, and practical application.

6.1. Personal Experiences and Academic Identities as Interpretative Resources in Doing Diversity

When institutional voices provided inadequate guidance, department heads relied on personal experiences to understand and prioritize their diversity efforts. The interviewees' perceptions of what was easy or challenging to engage with, as well as what they identified as the most significant diversity issue, varied greatly depending on their experiential frameworks. These personal experiences served as dialogical anchors, assisting local leaders in making sense of abstract institutional directives by linking them to concrete, embodied knowledge.

Personal encounters could transform previously overlooked diversity dimensions into urgent priorities. For example, Hanne, a department head, initially saw little relevance in disability issues:

> We have not had the opportunity to include disability so actively in my time. Should you work to get employees who are disabled or what, I don't know? Functional impairment—what to do with that? We have students we help, we have both blind and hearing-impaired people, so we do that, but it's mostly the administration.

Hanne's uncertainty reflects the gap between institutional diversity rhetoric and practical understanding.

However, others who had experienced disability-related challenges developed heightened awareness. Department head Steinar's dilemma during a research trip illustrates this transformation:

> I wanted to ensure a mix of men and women, and preferably diversity in ethnicity, class, and age. There is a very smart guy, a professor. Very relevant. He is in a wheelchair. And then I thought, what do I do now? He would have been a great resource to have…[he] is theoretically interested, and very good. But there were no resources.

This painful episode transformed his understanding, demonstrating how personal encounters can shift diversity from abstract policy requirement to embodied ethical concern.

Similarly, Hege, a deputy head, described a situation where she discovered that her office was inaccessible to a wheelchair-using student, which created a lasting impact: "It must have been an unpleasant experience for the student. I think it was very painful to witness." These encounters reveal how personal experiences can generate emotional engagement that institutional directives alone cannot achieve.

Conversely, positive personal experiences could also lead to the de-prioritisation of certain diversity dimensions. Sigurd, a department head, showed little focus on sexual orientation because of his positive assessment: "We simply haven't had any focus on it because it feels so natural that people have different sexualities today."

Sigurd's quote suggests that perceived progress can reduce attention to particular diversity issues.

Personal identity and lived experience are interpretative lenses for prioritizing diversity work. Hege's working-class background made her acutely aware of class issues:

> I have another matter close to my heart. It is not certain that this is how you define diversity, but I believe class is also a very important factor. I experienced this myself as a scholarship holder, student, and new employee, where it was expected that I would undergo a class journey and end up in the middle class.

Hege's personal navigation of class mobility became an interpretative resource for understanding institutional dynamics that she experienced, which formal diversity policies did not address.

Similarly, department head Randi's experience as a gender minority in STEM shaped her focus:

> I am a minority myself. I have been throughout my entire career. So, in a way, I think I find it easier to both see and pick up on situations where, based on my own experience, I would have felt that this was not okay.

For Randi, her lived experience as a minority became both an interpretative lens and a practical tool for recognising and addressing exclusionary dynamics.

These examples reveal how "doing diversity" becomes deeply personal when institutional guidance is scarce. Personal experiences function as interpretative filters that transform general diversity directives into specific, actionable priorities, creating locally situated versions of diversity work that may diverge significantly from institutional intentions but are grounded in embodied understanding of exclusion and inclusion.

The second important interpretative resource was academic identity and disciplinary perspective, particularly among research group leaders who lacked direct influence over staffing decisions. When confronted with institutional diversity directives that seemed disconnected from their academic roles, many local leaders drew upon their scholarly identities to reframe diversity in more relevant and actionable ways.

Stefan, a research group leader, exemplifies this academic reframing of diversity. While acknowledging the authoritative voices defining diversity as "gender, ethnicity, disability, etc.," he then repositioned the conversation around academic concerns:

> I would like to add that as a research group leader, for me, it's very important to have theoretical diversity, epistemological diversity, and methodological diversity. Those are diversities that, for me, as a research group leader, are more important....I don't staff our department.

His distinction between demographic and epistemic diversity shows how academic leaders could transform institutional messages through their professional identities, creating what we might call "scholarly doing of diversity."

This pattern of academic reinterpretation appeared across multiple interviews. Hans, a department head, emphasised the academic-specific nature of diversity: "I think diversity is both on the student side and on the employee side. In that sense, there are many categories in academia of different types of staff groups and students." Similarly, Raimond highlighted "the diversity of ideas and backgrounds that give us different ideas." These responses demonstrate how local leaders actively distinguished between the diversity dimensions voiced by action plans and what they perceive as uniquely academic forms of diversity, epistemic perspectives, and intellectual positions.

For some, research expertise itself became an interpretative resource for understanding institutional diversity demands. Research group leader Sarah's response illustrates this scholarly lens: "I have been most concerned with diversity in relation to the immigration debate and not so much with regard to gender...in my professional field, I have written extensively about diversity policy." Sarah's research background becomes both an interpretative framework and a source of authority for prioritising certain diversity dimensions over others.

This academic reframing demonstrates how "doing diversity" can be transformed from policy compliance into intellectual engagement. Rather than simply implementing institutional directives, these leaders filtered diversity messages through their scholarly identities, creating academically meaningful versions of diversity work. Particularly among social sciences and humanities interviewees, diversity became a policy challenge and a research perspective integral to their academic identity.

In the absence of clear guidance, we therefore saw three distinct patterns of dialogical engagement when the authoritative voices proved inadequate. The first we term "active resistance." This is exemplified by Runar's explicit refutation of institutional assumptions. Runar's resistance illustrates how "dialogical authority" can emerge from local expertise. His 30 years of experience with international diversity gave him the confidence to reject institutional assumptions while remaining committed to gender equality work. This reveals how effective dialogical engagement requires not just clear institutional messages but recognition of local expertise and context. The second is what we term "interpretative paralysis." This is demonstrated by leaders who "heard" institutional demands but could not translate them into action. Interpretative paralysis represents a sort of dialogical breakdown, where authoritative voices successfully convey obligation but fail to enable response. This pattern reveals the critical importance of institutional message quality in dialogical processes. When authoritative voices are too vague or disconnected from local realities, they create "dialogical impasses" that generate anxiety rather than action. It shows how institutional attempts to be maximally inclusive (addressing all diversity dimensions) can undermine practical implementation by creating interpretative overload. The third we have termed "creative transformations," shown by the reframing of diversity through academic lenses. This represents the most productive form of dialogical engagement, where institutional messages serve as starting points for locally meaningful interpretation rather than rigid directives. These leaders demonstrate the ability to transform vague institutional messages into actionable frameworks through creative engagement with their professional and personal resources.

This typology demonstrates that "doing diversity" locally transcends simple compliance or non-compliance, instead involving complex dialogical negotiations between institutional demands, local contexts, and individual interpretative capacities.

The latter category included two primary interpretative resources: personal experiences that provided embodied knowledge of inclusion and exclusion, and academic identities that reframed diversity through scholarly lenses. These resources enabled department heads and research group leaders to construct meaningful approaches to diversity work, though the resulting practices often diverged significantly from institutional intentions. This demonstrates how the dialogical process between authoritative voices and local interpretation generates new forms of "doing diversity" that are grounded in situated knowledge rather than policy compliance.

To sum up, our analysis reveals that local leaders don't simply comply with or reject institutional diversity policies. Instead, they engage in complex dialogical negotiations in a pattern of three distinct ways. The typology shows that leaders possess varying degrees of "dialogical competence," meaning the ability to productively engage with authoritative voices. This competence depended on experiential resources (personal encounters with diversity issues), professional identities (academic frameworks for interpretation, institutional position (authority to make changes), and departmental context (existing diversity challenges and strengths). Thus, this typology advances understanding of policy implementation by showing how the same authoritative voice can generate systematically different forms of local engagement depending on the interaction between institutional message quality, local context, and individual interpretative resources.

7. Conclusion: From Authoritative Voices to Dialogical Policy-Making

Employing a Bakhtinian perspective, we observed a fundamental transformation in how diversity policies operate—from top-down authoritative communication to distributed dialogical meaning-making. While universities responded to external authoritative voices by creating comprehensive action plans, these institutional attempts to echo and amplify policy directives paradoxically undermined their own effectiveness. By attempting to include every possible diversity dimension, the action plans created what Bakhtin might recognise as an "authoritative polyphony," that is, messages loud enough to demand attention but too diffuse to enable a meaningful dialogue or response.

A significant finding is an unacknowledged shift in diversity governance—what we term "dialogical delegation." While action plans assert institutional ownership of diversity goals, the practical implementation has been tacitly transferred to local leaders without accompanying resources, training, or support. This situation represents a profound transformation of Bakhtinian dialogue: Rather than institutions providing well-articulated authoritative voices that enable productive local responses, they have effectively outsourced the interpretative work to individuals.

Our analysis reveals three distinct forms of dialogical engagement with authoritative voices: active resistance, interpretative paralysis, and creative transformations. This typology demonstrates that local "doing diversity" is not simply a matter of compliance or non-compliance but involves complex negotiations between institutional demands and local capacities.

This outsourcing resulted in local leaders relying on two primary interpretative resources: personal experiences that provided embodied knowledge of inclusion and exclusion, and academic identities that reframed diversity through scholarly lenses. These resources enabled department heads and research group leaders to develop meaningful approaches to diversity work, although the ensuing practices often diverged significantly from institutional intentions. This pattern reveals a fundamental tension in contemporary diversity governance: Institutions seek to maintain authoritative control over the diversity discourse while depending on local leaders to perform the interpretative work that renders diversity efforts possible.

Thus, the dialogical process generates not only local variations but also a form of distributed policymaking in which genuine diversity strategies emerge from numerous individual interpretative acts rather than centralised institutional planning. This has significant implications for understanding policy implementation more broadly, demonstrating how apparent "policy failure" may actually signify the emergence of alternative governance forms where meaning-making and decision-making authority become dispersed across organisational hierarchies.

Paradoxically, the institutional strategy of broad and inclusive definitions of diversity may have undermined effective local action. By trying to include everything, the action plans offered minimal guidance, forcing local leaders to become unwitting policy entrepreneurs who essentially must rewrite diversity policies through their daily practices.

Thus, this pattern reveals a fundamental tension in contemporary diversity governance. While institutions claim authority over diversity policy, the work of "doing diversity" has been inadvertently delegated to individual leaders who must rely on their biographies and professional identities to understand institutional demands. The dialogical process thus generates not just local variation, but a form of distributed policymaking where authentic diversity strategies emerge through countless individual interpretative acts rather than centralised planning.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that our findings do not suggest that a "polyphony" of multiple voices and a considerable interpretative space are inherently problematic. While overly vague authoritative voices can create paralysis and inconsistency, overly prescriptive directives risk stifling the local knowledge and contextual adaptation that our study shows are crucial for meaningful diversity work. The challenge lies not in eliminating interpretative space but in achieving a more productive balance between institutional guidance and local agency that provides sufficient direction to enable action while preserving space for the creative transformations that makes diversity work locally relevant and effective. Our findings suggest that this delicate balancing act has not yet been achieved by Norwegian universities, creating opportunities for both policy innovation and further research into how institutions can better support rather than delegate the complex interpretative work that diversity implementation requires.

7.1. Contribution to the Research Field

This study makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions to research on gender equality and diversity action plans by introducing a dialogical framework for understanding policy implementation. While previous research has primarily focused on the content of action plans or their measurable outcomes (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Egeland & Drange, 2022), this study reveals the complex interpretative processes

that mediate between institutional policies and local practices. The concept of "dialogical delegation" advances understanding of contemporary diversity governance by showing how organisations inadvertently distribute meaning-making authority while maintaining rhetorical control—a phenomenon likely prevalent across many policy domains beyond diversity. The three-pattern typology (active resistance, interpretative paralysis, creative transformations) provides a sophisticated alternative to binary compliance models. By demonstrating how "doing diversity" emerges through ongoing dialogical negotiations rather than straightforward policy transmission, this research fundamentally reframes diversity implementation as an active, interpretative accomplishment that requires attention to local contexts, individual resources, and the quality of institutional message.

7.2. Study Limitations and Transferability

This study's focus on Norway—a country with exceptionally robust gender equality policies and strong egalitarian values—may limit its transferability to contexts with less developed diversity frameworks or different cultural orientations toward equality. The Norwegian setting provided rich dialogical complexity precisely because of multiple, well-developed authoritative voices creating interpretative challenges for local leaders. In countries with weaker institutional diversity commitments or less elaborate policy frameworks, local leaders might experience different types of dialogical challenges, perhaps more characterised by the absence of authoritative voices rather than their proliferation and ambiguity. Additionally, the study's focus on department heads and research group leaders in university settings may not capture how dialogical delegation operates in other organisational contexts or among different types of implementers. The sample, while strategically selected across disciplines and institutions, is relatively small and concentrated in large research universities, potentially missing perspectives from smaller institutions or different higher education contexts. Future research should examine whether the dialogical patterns identified here manifest similarly in countries with different diversity policy landscapes, alternative cultural approaches to equality, or varying organisational structures, and whether the concept of dialogical delegation applies to policy implementation beyond the diversity domain.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
The data generated and analysed during this study consist of qualitative materials (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes) that are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements and ethical considerations.

LLMs Disclosure

Portions of the text in this article were refined using a large language model (LLM) to enhance clarity, coherence, and academic tone. The model was employed strictly for linguistic and stylistic improvements, without altering the substantive content or introducing new ideas. All intellectual contributions and interpretations remain those of the authors.

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