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SOCIAL INCLUSION

# Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education

Edited by Liudvika Leišytė, Rosemary Deem,  
and Ivana Načinović Braje

Volume 14

2026

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2803



Social Inclusion, 2026, Volume 14  
Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education

Published by Cogitatio Press  
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,  
1070-129 Lisbon  
Portugal

Design by Typografia®  
<http://www.typografia.pt/en/>

Cover image: © Pixabay from Pexels

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Available online at: [www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion](http://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion)

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## Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education

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**Submitted:** 24 March 2026 **Published:** 14 April 2026

**Issue:** This editorial is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Načinović Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/i.480>

### Abstract

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

### Keywords

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

## 1. Introduction

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

## 2. Focus of the Thematic Issue

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

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

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

### 3. Overview of the Thematic Issue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 4. Conclusion

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

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

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### LLMs Disclosure

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

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# Achieving Inclusion: University Staff Working in Third Space Between Academic and Professional Spheres of Activity

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**Submitted:** 6 November 2024 **Accepted:** 27 January 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

The article reflects on the case of staff employed on academic and professional contracts in UK universities who work in areas of activity that are not aligned precisely to either domain, sometimes referred to as “third space.” Examples are given of academic staff on teaching-only contracts and people employed on professional contracts in educational and research development roles. Although such individuals are likely to be highly qualified, with a master’s or doctoral qualification, teach and, in some cases, undertake research, they occupy territory in the university that often lacks formal recognition. This is particularly so in relation to the legitimacy of their roles and parity with academic colleagues who undertake mainstream teaching and research and contribute to the UK Research Excellence Framework. Despite increasing commentary on the existence of these roles by practitioners themselves, institutions have been slow to accord them legitimacy in terms of, for example, dedicated space in institutional structures, appropriate professional development opportunities, career paths, or promotion and assessment criteria. Such individuals are therefore liable to feel excluded from the mainstream, even though they may be making a significant contribution to academic endeavours. Examples are offered of the extent to which individuals are able to achieve recognition at both a personal and collective level, and suggestions are made as to practical ways in which universities might accord this group of staff greater visibility, and thereby reduce the cultural, and implicitly hierarchical, divide between them and academic colleagues with an extended teaching and research profile.

## Keywords

academic careers; academic staff; educational development; higher education; professional staff; professional careers; research management; third space; UK; work in academia

## 1. Introduction

This article considers the sense of inclusion or otherwise of university staff employed on both academic and professional contracts who work in areas of activity that are not aligned precisely to either domain, in what has sometimes been referred to as “third space” (Whitchurch, 2013, 2018, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). It includes as exemplars academic staff employed on teaching-only contracts, who undertake activity outside the precise parameters of their roles; an early career academic who was unable to achieve a permanent academic post and therefore accepted a professional contract; and individuals employed on either academic or professional contracts who work in the fields of educational development and research enterprise. These two fields of activity have been chosen because they attract highly qualified staff, often to doctoral level, who work side by side with academic colleagues, but may be employed on professional rather than academic contracts. In turn, they have developed their own professional associations, international networks, journals, blogs, podcasts, and mail lists. The concept of third space has been picked up in recent years in the literature, for example, on learning development (Beckmann, 2018; Bossu & Brown, 2018; Grant, 2021; Joubert, 2024; L. Knight et al., 2022; LaCroix, 2021; Livingston & Ling, 2022; McIntosh & Nutt, 2022; Parkes et al., 2014; Puhr, 2024; Veles et al., 2023) and research enterprise (Birds, 2015; Botha et al., 2021; Dunleavy et al., 2019; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009; Holliman, 2017; Kerridge et al., 2024; C. Knight & Lightowler, 2010; Mackie & Holden, 2022; Santos et al., 2024; Veles, 2022; Veles et al., 2019). The article goes on to review ways in which the above groups of individuals feel themselves to be accorded recognition, legitimacy, and thereby a sense of value by their institutions, colleagues, and peer groups. Finally, the findings are theorised using Bourdieu (1988, 1993), demonstrating that the extent to which recognition occurs is likely to depend not only on structures and cultures at institutional and local levels, but also on individual contacts and social capital.

Despite increasing commentary on the existence of third space roles, the sense of legitimacy by those undertaking them is variable in terms of, for example, dedicated space in institutional structures, appropriate professional development opportunities, promotion criteria, and career paths. Such individuals can therefore feel excluded from the mainstream, even though they may be making a significant contribution to academic endeavours, thereby illustrating a lack of inclusivity at the heart of institutions. At a national level, the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2024), in its datasets, groups all staff who do not have academic contracts, including professional, clerical, technical, and manual staff, under the general category of “non-academic.” Moreover, since 2019–2020, it is no longer mandatory for higher education providers in England and Northern Ireland to return information about these “non-academic” staff, literally rendering them invisible. Although there are beginning to be signs that senior managers are asking questions about how to create more collaborative, third space environments, this has been slow to occur in practice, despite occasional workshops and seminars (see, for example, Baré et al., 2021; Bühlmann et al., 2020; Turpin & Gruba, 2021). Furthermore, despite discussions about career development for people in third space roles and the possibility of a dedicated track in which all feel included (see, for example, Baré et al., 2021; Grant, 2021; Grant & Kennie, 2024; Harrison, 2024; McIntosh & Nutt, 2024; Wolf & Jenkins, 2021), there is less evidence to date of this occurring in practice.

## 2. The Study and Examples Drawn

This article draws on a project conducted between 2017 and 2020 for the UK Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE), an international research centre based at the University of Oxford and University College

London, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, the UK Office for Students, and Research England (Whitchurch et al., 2021, 2023). The project considered trends in the development of the UK workforce. Interviews were conducted initially with 69 individuals employed on academic and professional contracts, including directors of human resources and members of senior management teams, in eight higher education institutions, selected on the following basis:

- Regional location, covering all four UK nations (five from England and one of each from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland);
- Institutional type: three pre-1992 Russell Group universities (leading research-intensive universities); two pre-1992 non-Russell Group universities (with a balanced teaching and research profile); two post-1992 universities (former polytechnics, teaching-focused); and one post-2004 university (former college, teaching-focused);
- Disciplinary and staff profiles, whereby a senior lecturer in a pre-1992 university would be equivalent to a principal lecturer in a post-1992 university.

Almost three-quarters (39) of the 53 respondents who did not have senior management roles were re-interviewed two years after the first interview, so that there was a longitudinal element to the study. It became evident from these narratives that almost 50% of this subset of respondents—25 out of 53—described significant elements of their role that were outwith the strict parameters of purely academic or professional work. This article focuses on these 25 respondents, 23 of whom agreed to be re-interviewed. These are described in Table 1. As can be seen, the contractual situation was by no means clear cut and, for

**Table 1.** Respondents from the CGHE study categorised as working in third space environments.

	First round of interviews (2017–2018)	Second round of interviews (2019–2020)	Male	Female
Academic staff employed on academic contracts (including three teaching-only)	15	17	5	12
Academic staff employed on professional contracts	2	0	0	[2]
Individuals employed on professional contracts undertaking educational development roles	3	2	1	2
Individuals employed on academic contracts undertaking educational development roles	2	1	0	2
Research development professionals (professional contracts)	3	3	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>19</b>

Notes: (a) The two academic staff employed on professional contracts at the first interview had been transferred to academic contracts by the time of the second interview; (b) six of the eight people employed on professional contracts had doctoral qualifications, including the two who had transferred to academic contracts at the time of the second interview; (c) the overall gender balance of all the study participants across the two sets of interviews was 65% female, 35% male; of those categorised as working in third space, 69% were female, 31% male; (d) 10 of those categorised as working in third space were employed in research-intensive universities, five in teaching and research universities, eight in teaching-focused universities, and two in the teaching-focused former college.

example, some individuals undertaking academic work had been placed on professional contracts. Others—for example, those with teaching-only contracts—might also undertake some kind of research and/or major project. Although the study was conducted in the UK, it adds to a developing literature in non-Anglophone countries on this drift of activity beyond strict academic/professional boundaries (Bühlmann et al., 2020; Kossek & Zwiauer, 2012; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2012; Zellweger Moser & Bachmann, 2010; Zinner, 2016).

### 3. Analysis

As a starting point, after the first round of interviews, a biographical profile of interviewees was drawn up. This included their current role and future aspirations. From this, descriptive codes were developed, for example, type of contract, key relationships, and career trajectory. Further analysis of the emergent data considered respondents according to their positioning in relation to institutional processes and structures. Interpretive codes were then developed for possible latent meanings, such as tension between individual aspirations and perceived career opportunities. As a second step in the analysis, an overview was taken of overarching themes, and from these pattern codes were developed to establish links or themes across respondents' accounts. These included, for example, approaches to roles and careers, understandings about the value placed on individual activities, and possible career moves, including where the narratives told different stories (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). The data gathered from both rounds of interviews was further analysed using Creswell's data analysis spiral (Creswell, 1998, p. 143), whereby data is revisited via processes of reading, describing, classifying, interpreting, and representing, with continuous links made between these activities. The data was then mapped against possible variables, such as different types of institution and the career stage of the individual. This enabled "semantic" (explicit, overt) and "latent" (underlying, implicit) themes to be identified (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In the sections that follow, individual exemplars are used to show how individuals on both academic and professional contracts can feel misaligned and even excluded if all or part of their work takes them into a third space environment. This is symptomatic of a move away from the traditional concept of an academic as someone who undertakes both teaching and research. In the last 15 years or so, there has been a significant increase of people employed on teaching-only contracts who do not have research formally included in their contracts. Thus, the proportion of academic staff who are expected to undertake both teaching and research has fallen from 52.3% of the total in 2010–2011 to 42.8% in 2022–2023 (HESA, 2024). The analysis is arranged so as to illustrate degrees of exclusion and inclusion, arising from dissonance between formal institutional structures and the lived experience of individuals. These are highlighted in a series of seven exemplars. Following Bourdieu (1988, 1993), they illustrate that a sense of inclusion is more likely to be experienced by those with a strong peer group network, and/or local mentors.

### 4. Degrees of Exclusion

The following exemplars illustrate the degrees of exclusion experienced by three people with academic backgrounds at different stages of their careers, two on teaching-only contracts and one on a professional contract.

#### 4.1. The Case of Academic Staff Having Teaching-Only Contracts

Although teaching-only academic roles have been introduced within UK higher education institutions, with associated promotion paths to professor, evidence shows that there is little belief or confidence in this route to a professorship (sometimes referred to as a chair), or the associated promotion criteria (Whitchurch et al., 2021, 2023). This has left a significant number of this group feeling excluded, particularly in relation to promotion opportunities. The first exemplar is someone in mid-career who had overseen the educational strategy of their school and, despite a research record, had transferred to a teaching-only appointment, but was unable subsequently to achieve promotion to professor on the teaching track. The second is someone who, in late career, achieved promotion to senior lecturer after several attempts, for an innovation relating to student welfare and support. This not only illustrates the variability in people's experiences, but also the ad hoc way in which they were inhibited by institutional conventions. Although institutions have theoretically developed career paths for people in teaching-only roles, individuals in this group of staff who do not succeed can feel doubly excluded, by not being seen as a fully-fledged academic, and by a sense of being low priority for promotion. This is illustrated in the two Exemplars below, of two people in the later stages of their careers.

##### 4.1.1. Exemplar 1: Senior Lecturer, Teaching-Only Academic Contract, Research Intensive University

This person (male, 50s, applied sciences) had been head of education for their school for nearly a decade, and during that time had relinquished research because of the pressures of administration. This had included not only admissions, examinations, student complaints, and appeals, but also, because of their technical know-how, responsibility for workspace design and the redevelopment of a teaching building. They described how they had applied for a professorship on the basis of this work and had not been successful:

If you're from an educational background...the career path to a chair [professorship] is extremely difficult...you've hit a glass ceiling..., there is a very small number of people who have progressed to the chair in education...it's also very difficult to obtain money for [education research].

However, after completing their management role, they had then become involved in a number of local construction projects, which might be seen as a form of community regeneration, and had brought in substantial contract income:

I'm on the education teaching contract, [but] I'm probably doing more research than a lot of the staff...I've probably got as many education publications as I have disciplinary publications, I've...a significant amount of money on both sides, so I don't necessarily reach the benchmark for either criteria...so in my mind, there's something obviously not right there.

Their achievements could be said to fall between management, project innovation, community engagement, and education development. Their assumption was that their research was not regarded as sufficiently pedagogically oriented and that the criteria for promotion were not flexible enough to accommodate the full range of their activity. They therefore perceived the promotion system as discounting them, recognising neither their contribution to teaching nor to research. As a result they had resigned themselves to their situation, focusing on utilitarian aspects—"It's well paid...we're on the national pay scale...you've a lot of

flexibility”—thereby to some extent suppressing their academic identity, and viewing their role more as a job than a vocation.

This individual, therefore, saw themselves as falling between two stools, achieving credit for neither their teaching nor their research. However, it may also be significant that they did not appear to have had advice about how to frame the application, or feedback on how it might be assessed. By contrast, the following person had, late in their career, achieved the desired promotion, attributed by them to the social capital that they had built, in particular to a colleague who was able to help.

#### 4.1.2. Exemplar 2: Lecturer, Part-Time Teaching-Only Academic Contract, Teaching and Research University

This person (female, 60s, biological sciences) had a 0.85 contract which had gradually increased over the years since they had had children. They had administrative responsibilities for student welfare, disability, and tutoring, and in particular guiding students with anxiety. As a result, they had been given a sum of money by a donor to support student welfare, which they had used to develop mindfulness sessions. These had been rolled out to schools in the university as well as to other institutions. They had also forged links with colleagues in careers, staff development, student services, and employability, and had spoken at national and international conferences. There was evidence that the sessions had not only helped retention but also student satisfaction. However, this person did not feel qualified to undertake the required pedagogical research required for promotion as their background and interests were scientific: “I’m not into educational pedagogy...apart from the mindfulness stuff and how it affects the brain and neurochemistry I don’t...do scholarship as such.”

Nevertheless, after feeling excluded for many years, they had achieved promotion to senior lecturer between the two interviews: “A big component was the mindfulness, because it’s...gone everywhere and we’ve taught more people to be trainers.” This had been interpreted by the promotions committee as having equivalence with pedagogical research and as having impact on the student experience. This person saw a critical element as being the help they received from a senior member of the school, as well as contacts who might be approached as anonymous referees: “I did have some good things from students who remember me teaching them and now are, like, head of a pharmaceutical company.” As a result of the promotion they said that their “life has totally changed” in that they felt valued and recognised for their achievements.

Although the case of the above exemplar demonstrates that with help in the interpretation of criteria, it can be possible to make progress, this tends to be an ad hoc process within inflexible structural promotion and career frameworks. In both exemplars, it is as if the individuals concerned were hidden in plain sight, invisible because they slipped between formal categorisations and criteria that did not accommodate activity outside the mainstream. Furthermore, although the literature points to a lack of time and opportunity for pedagogical research, particularly if individuals are part-time (see Arvaja, 2018; Loveday, 2018), these exemplars suggest that there are also other reasons. They both demonstrate the effects of an in-between status and the sense of exclusion engendered by promotion criteria that are geared primarily to linear academic careers involving both teaching and research. Achieving recognition and indeed legitimacy for novel activity, although not impossible, is likely to involve persistence, the recruitment of supporters, and the ability to demonstrate relevance and impact. From the examples, it would seem that national systems influencing recruitment and progression, giving weight to publications and research income, compounded by local structures that reflect this, constrain

the development of individual careers for those at different stages who have, in different ways, out of interest or necessity, blurred the edges of their academic roles. Recognition of situated, Mode 3 knowledge for local contexts, emphasising the involvement and feedback of users (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012, 2016), and thus extending the concepts of Mode 1 (pure disciplinary knowledge) and Mode 2 (applied disciplinary knowledge; see Gibbons et al., 1994), could be said to have helped the person in Exemplar 2. Indeed, such recognition could possibly be more fully incorporated into promotion and progression criteria more generally, particularly for people on teaching-only contracts (for further discussion of the development and use of Mode 3 knowledge, see Whitchurch, 2023).

## 4.2. The Case of Early Career Academics

At the other end of the academic career trajectory, the following exemplar illustrates the relatively narrow window of opportunity for an early career academic to achieve a substantive post and develop an academic career. Despite having a doctorate and a series of short-term academic jobs, this person was unable to secure a permanent appointment and therefore accepted a professional contract managing their institution's education strategy. As a result they felt an acute sense of exclusion early on, before accommodating to a more secure future on a professional pathway, using the experience that they had gained as an academic. Despite considerable regret about not being able to pursue an academic career, they had accommodated to a different type of career, as shown in Exemplar 3.

### 4.2.1. Exemplar 3: Education Strategy Manager, Professional Contract, Research-Intensive University

This person (female, 30s) had a PhD, had published a number of journal papers, and had had a series of short-term lectureships, but had been unable to obtain a permanent academic position. They had therefore taken a series of project-oriented roles culminating in responsibility for the university's education strategy and curriculum development. Although they were employed on a professional contract, it was "very much in the...academic sphere":

Writ[ing] up the papers for the policy changes and...governance, and in addition to that...engagement with faculties to find out...what elements of best practice are going on, so that we can...feed that into other parts of the university.

Therefore, for this individual, although "[achieving an academic post is] very much my preferred option...the reality of employment makes it my non-preferred option." In their current role, they lectured to graduate teaching assistants and indeed taught their own humanities subject part-time at another university, but felt that were not regarded as a bone fide academic: "The culture...is very much...if you do anything other than an academic role, it's almost [like] you've failed, rather than you've chosen to do something else." Furthermore, there was a sense of being excluded by what they saw as their peer group: "If I went to a...research seminar...I wouldn't necessarily feel welcome there....If someone attended who was...not employed in an academic role..., quite often there would be disparaging remarks said behind their back." As a result, they also felt that a senior academic management role would not be available to them as an endpoint in their career:

There's only so far you can go with [current role], because it's technically professional services, you're never going to get to be [a pro-vice-chancellor] because that is an academic role....I don't know how academic populations would feel if a...non-traditional academic ended up being in charge of them.

Ironically, having progressed to an education development role, they felt that they had by that stage evolved beyond an early career academic post: "I'm not qualified for a standard entry level academic job [any more], but....I've outgrown what that would be as well." They had, therefore, decided to make their career on the professional track. Furthermore, the perception of this person was that the split between academic and professional roles was not only a feature of the institution they worked in, but was built into the wider higher education system in the UK:

Institutions aren't willing to, or can't really employ people unless they know that they're going to get three-star or four-star publications and they're going to bring in good research income....Do you take a gamble on employing an early career researcher who may only have two publications or no publications...[or] do you go down the route of creating more teaching-only contracts, which actually do give people stable employment?

In their view, these difficulties were perpetuated by the lack of opportunities for people to diversify or build experience that would further their careers elsewhere: "I don't think universities...are displaying a duty of care [to] early career academics and later career academics...to be able to sell themselves to the outside world."

From the three narratives above, there would appear to be two elements of feeling included that are connected: firstly, being accorded recognition and legitimacy by the employing institution, and secondly a personal sense of being visible and valued. Perceptions of the first are likely to affect the second. In all three cases, the individuals were strongly influenced by the former. However, as will be seen from the examples of educational and research developers below, others also drew some gratification and a sense of identity from feeling that they had a key role in developing a relationship with and between academic and professional colleagues, as well as from strong professional networks, as suggested by Bourdieu (1988, 1993).

## 5. Degrees of Inclusion

### 5.1. *The Case of Educational Developers*

Educational development portfolios included managing the student experience, the Teaching Excellence Framework, widening participation, the virtual learning environment, equity and diversity, employability, and careers. People in these roles have a well-established collective identity via their own professional networks, such as the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE). Of the five people working in educational development in the study, including the person described above in Exemplar 3, two had academic and three had professional contracts. The two with academic contracts had been full-time academics and continued to undertake some teaching in their subject areas. Of the remaining two with professional contracts, one had a doctorate. This person, despite some sense of loss, was sanguine about not pursuing an academic career, as shown in the following Exemplar.

### 5.1.1. Exemplar 4: Head of Academic Practice, Professional Contract, Research Intensive University

This person (male, 40s, doctorate) had gone into school teaching after their doctorate and “abruptly turned my back...on the prospect of being an academic....Even after two years, I felt...my contacts and my knowledge base wasn’t sufficient to enable me to enter back.” They had a pragmatic approach to their career: “Doing this kind of job...kind of cuts away intellectual endeavour....I wouldn’t say I’m entirely satisfied...I mean, I’m happy, I’m fairly senior, I’m fairly well paid...from an entirely practical point of view.” Despite the element of pragmatism, this person was positive about having an academic background, which they saw as helping their credibility in an in-between, bridging role: “I see us as almost buffering academics from what the centre is imposing...my sympathy has always been to the academic community...the friendly face of the centre.” They therefore distinguished themselves from, for example, human resources, which they saw as being “about business...about customers...a vocabulary that I find alien,” allying themselves with academic colleagues. They also felt that they belonged to the wider educational development community: “I do lots of work for [them]...I’m an accreditor...I’m a consultant...I meet a lot of people through...that network...so we’re almost like a quasi-academic [association]...contributing towards the ethos in higher education.” There was therefore a sense of belonging to the academic enterprise as a whole, as well as to a wider professional network, and of bringing the two together, with a feeling that this was a valuable and valued role.

Such a holistic approach seemed to be a distinguishing feature of this group of staff, conferring an in-between role that they saw as constructive, as opposed to what the above person referred to as reinforcing “career trenches.” Such a bridging role was described further in Exemplar 5.

### 5.1.2. Exemplar 5: Head of Educational Development, Professional Contract, Research Intensive University

This person (female, 50s) had a master’s degree but not a doctorate, had come through an educational technology route, and “broadened out...into...student development [including widening participation, equality and diversity]. So, there is a connectiveness to it...opportunities arose that brought things together.” The idea of connectiveness was a theme throughout their narrative, being appreciative of the unique nature of academic work and the individual nature of academic identity: “There’s an element where [academics are] almost self-employed, and their identity is what sells things out there.” This person, therefore, saw a major part of their role as encouraging academic staff to undergo professional development, and they were also involved in supporting people’s careers:

One very strong thing that came out [of the latest staff survey]...was the frustration around progression, the lack of opportunities for development...[so] we’re saying things like...what are the kinds of things you’re interested in, how might we help to support that....[I’m] absolutely happy to meet and talk things through...look at application forms, offer support and...give...feedback [on interviews].

Like the individual in the previous exemplar, they were a member of a number of learning development networks: “There is a growing number of people like me...our community of practice helps to share in terms of developments that are happening...that I can think about and bring back.” There was also a sense of having options, of creating a portfolio of activity, and of being able to move on rather than any feeling of exclusion or loss:

I would say I am satisfied with [my career], I enjoy what I do....I have been able to move into areas bit by bit, that allows me to influence and shape change...but once it's up and running, I like to move on....I'll probably go somewhere [else]...it may well be out of higher education.

Nevertheless, this person ultimately moved into a senior management role at their university rather than leaving the system.

Because of the teaching function of academic developers, for example in relation to professional certification in teaching and learning, there can be blurring with academic roles. This can at times lead to some abrasion and a sense of exclusion in relation to progression and, for example, the inclusion of research and publishing in their workload. Nevertheless, as shown above, respondents invariably spoke of seeing it as part of their role to foster institutional inclusiveness, and to pursue arrangements that enabled this. Initiatives that enabled joint working, including the building of new physical space, were mentioned by more than one interviewee. One example was a centre focused on learning development, quality, and technology-enhanced learning, where research was undertaken into fields such as widening participation and learning analytics. This enabled connections to be made across a range of professional groupings, as suggested by one of the educational developers with an academic contract:

The whole area is quite large, and flows to different parts of the university....It...helps a dialogue across the services and support staff and the many other professional staff that fall across...those areas....They find it easier [to] begin to understand the pressures of academic staff...and the academic staff begin to understand some of the pressures on a group of people from careers or from the IT service or from the library....People then build further partnerships...to help that flow of conversation, to see into each other's worlds. (vice-dean, female, 40s, education, academic contract, teaching and research university)

Following Sennett (2018), this type of initiative exemplifies how appropriately designed physical space can translate into a place where interactions and innovations occur, in this case across academic and professionally oriented activities. It points to efforts among educational developers at the middle management level to deliver a greater sense of inclusivity by literally constructing a space that brings together people in different roles, on different types of contracts. As people in such roles progress and even become part of senior management teams, it may be that they can in turn influence the creation of more inclusive structures.

## **5.2. The Case of Research Development Professionals**

Research developers tended to have an extended worldview that included interaction with, for example, funding bodies, industrial partners, and international networks such as the European Association of Research Managers (EARMA). They were likely to see themselves as part of a broader collective beyond the university, with a dedicated Master's qualification and the possibility of employment elsewhere. It appeared to be an expanding field with career paths that were becoming established as research funding and impact agendas become more competitive. The three research professionals in the study were employed on professional contracts, and their portfolios included advising on applications for research grants, impact development, supporting spin-out activities, and liaising with funding bodies. At more senior levels they had a planning role in seeking and matching likely funders to the research profile of individuals. One had a doctorate, another was in the process of completing theirs, and the third had ambitions to undertake one.

There is evidence that research enterprise roles are seen as one possible career route for people with doctorates, and that increasing numbers of research professionals have one (Kerridge et al., 2024). In that sense, they might be said to be on the cusp of academia. As witnessed by one interviewee:

If you count the number of staff in R&E [research and enterprise] that have PhDs, or that are working towards one, or that have some kind of research experience, it's quite high compared to any other kind of support service within a university....I think you could deliver what the job says on paper without having experience of research, but I think having experience of research gives you an edge...so when I'm reading through somebody's application or when we're actually talking about their project and I'm saying..."that sample size is far too small"...it can sometimes help with...getting people on side. (research development manager, female, 30s, doctorate, teaching-focused university)

Furthermore, all three research developers in the study had experience outside higher education before taking up their roles, ranging from charities, libraries, and museums to research councils and public sector bodies. None of them necessarily saw their future within higher education, although by the time of the second interview, despite some frustrations, two had been promoted to higher grade roles at a different university. Exemplar 6 was the exception, this person feeling disadvantaged by the lack of a doctorate.

### 5.2.1. Exemplar 6: Research and Impact Officer, Teaching-Focused University

This person (female, 40s) had a background in psychology and had worked in marketing before taking up their post. They had initially managed an EU project, but then reverted to a focus on impact, "working one to one with the academics, in preparation for the next REF and sort of assisting them with impact in whatever they were doing their research in." This role included "a lot of help...a lot of redrafting...so you could say that we sort of co-author them." They had ambitions to undertake a doctorate, but were not eligible to be funded by the university, so felt excluded in that sense:

The focus now is on getting all members of academic staff to have PhDs, so if you're not classed as academic staff, and I'm services...they've got no reason to actually fund you...or support your development....Ironically, a lot of the academic staff being made to do PhDs really don't want to do them...and I would love to be in that position.

They were also conscious of a lack of a career framework for people in roles that were adjacent to the academic enterprise: "There's a lot of roles within higher education that need to be...clarified as a career....There doesn't seem to be a clear...way into them." There were therefore frustrations and they were thinking of a complete career change:

I've got to make a choice between staying with a career that wasn't ever what I intended, or dropping it completely and moving into something new....I have considered...the idea of going into consultancy...there's quite a gap in the market...it's quite a new and emerging field....I...feel like I'm not really using my skills.

They therefore had an open mind about moving on to employment outside higher education, including self-employment as a consultant.

There is a sense in which the above individual not only felt barred from developing their role, but also that there was no career structure in place that would allow them to progress. They therefore felt that they were essentially an outsider, particularly as they did not have a doctorate. Coming from business and industry they found it more difficult to understand, and were perhaps less tolerant of, the somewhat nuanced employment conventions within higher education. By contrast, the following individual had a doctorate, although they felt that any credit they gained from this was equivocal.

### 5.2.2. Exemplar 7: Impact and Engagement Officer, Teaching-Focused University

This person (female, 30s, doctorate) had experience as a research associate as well as public sector and project management: “When they hired me for this job, they did it specifically because....I’ve got kind of the office experience and the real world experience and the academic experience.” They continued to be involved in academic networks, although without recognition for this from their institution: “There’s some frustrations around the fact that I’m publishing myself, so I’ve got a monograph...I’ve got a book chapter due out later, and I’m doing that in my spare time.” Furthermore:

It’s very strange, because they teach [arts and humanities subject]...on our history course, which they...technically they said I could teach on, but I’m not allowed to teach on that, because that’s not in my contract...so they could do with it and I could do it, but it’s not in my contract.

Nevertheless, it was clear that this person was more valued for having a doctorate than if they were without one:

When I started, my line manager said to me that, [although] I was not going to put “doctor” around anything, “put it on your things because it will change the way you’re treated,” and I thought, do I want to, do I not want to, but it does [help]....Some are more respectful...some [academics] have said to me that it really helps them, so that when I’m reading their bids...that I can kind of look at it from a research perspective.

However, this informal acknowledgement was not backed up by formal permission to teach, therefore it represented a situation of some recognition, but not full inclusion. Between interviews they had moved institutions, had added engagement to their portfolio, and managed two early career academics but, ironically, was not accorded the same recognition as they were:

I...now line manage two research associates...to gather evidence for the REF [Research Excellence Framework]....I don’t get to use my research skills in this job, but the temporary people they’re hiring as RAs [research associates]...do...so it’s kind of a lack of valuing....The RAs tend to get more respect than I do because they’re seen as researchers

This person illustrated a dissonance between a lack of formal recognition at the same time as being valued at ground level for their contribution. Despite informal recognition of their academic credentials, there was non-recognition in terms of their formal employment category, thus inclusion on one level but not another. Nevertheless, they had been able to move upwards and onwards in developing their career.

Both educational developers and research enterprise professionals demonstrate how academic and professional activity can be seen as a continuum of effort, although not necessarily an equal relationship:

Universities have this very two-tier system...academics and professional services...we don't call them support services or support staff any more....It's a transition going on...[but] I think there is still a long way to go to make sure they are considered equal colleagues... I just find it, strange, that division. (head of teaching and learning, female, 40s, teaching and research university)

Nevertheless, there were signs that crossovers could occur, particularly for educational developers: "If you want to be considered for the lecturer's title, you can apply, providing you've got some research, if you've got some articles in the area of learning and teaching" (head of teaching and learning, female, 40s, teaching and research university). Overall, of the two groups, educational developers appeared to have more crossover with academic colleagues, partly because many had teaching responsibilities, either in their own discipline or on professional development programmes, and some had academic contracts. They have a developing literature focusing on "integrated practice" (Mcintosh & Nutt, 2022), supported by their dedicated *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Likewise, it would appear that research professionals are trying to establish their status institutionally, notwithstanding the appreciation they receive from individual members of staff, at the same time as developing internationally as a profession (Kerridge et al., 2024). What is also implicit in both sets of narratives is the sense of an employment hierarchy, with academic staff at the top, rather than the sense of a team approach with academic staff at the core.

## 6. Discussion and Theorisation

As well as describing the situation of people working in in-between, or third space, in areas of activity such as educational and research development, the examples have shown how academic staff, particularly those on teaching-only contracts, may have third space elements to their roles that are not accommodated in a binary categorisation of teaching and research. Moreover, these elements are no longer simply a temporary state of being during work on specific projects, as originally suggested by Whitchurch (2013). The findings point to the continuation of a strict definition of, and entry criteria for, being an "academic," particularly in more research-oriented institutions, and to an inflexibility in the structural architecture of at least some institutions. Furthermore, it would appear from the narratives in the study that a sense of exclusion, with associated feelings of a lack of recognition or legitimacy, is likely to be greater for academic staff who, for whatever reason, find themselves working outside purely academic space.

From the doctoral level onwards, academic identity tends to derive from recognition for original work in one's discipline or field, developed throughout a career. This becomes a personal journey as part of an academic community that puts a value on an individual's work through peer review processes. The development of a career is not, therefore, simply a question of taking up a more senior job, or even of finding a job in more conducive surroundings, as it might be for someone in a purely professional role. The person in Exemplar 4 expressed this distinction between academic and allied roles: "The job is [a] job for me, it's not kind of part and parcel of who I am, as I think it probably is for lots of academics, [where] the job is more than just the job." Indicators of esteem such as citations, research grants, and invited lectures are therefore internalised as an element of identity (Blackmore, 2016; Blackmore & Kandiko Howson, 2011). In Bourdieu's terms these represent symbolic, as opposed to economic, capital (Bourdieu, 1988, 1993). Thus, significantly, the person

in Exemplar 1 was less concerned about the financial benefits of promotion to professor, which he saw as minimal, than the personal prestige that would accrue: “The reality is, if I got a promotion, I would be on the bottom [of the] professorial scale. There’s four points on it...I’d be making £7,000 more than I’m making at the minute, less, by the time you take tax [and] USS [Universities Superannuation Scheme contribution].” Any sense of exclusion for those who want to be valued for their academic contribution can therefore seem all the more personal, particularly if an application for promotion is rejected.

It would appear from the study that people specifically employed in what have been described by commentators as third space areas of work, such as learning development or research enterprise, may have less concern about recognition per se by their institution if they see themselves as part of a wider professional community and as having options that they have developed outside the university. At the same time, as argued by Hall (2022, 2024), there is a danger that third space can become “no space” and therefore invisible, although this may suit some people who feel that this frees them from institutional structures and enables them to pursue activity that interests them and that they value. However, it can also lead to a sense of isolation. The development of social and professional capital (Whitchurch, 2024a) would appear to be critical in establishing a better understanding of roles that do not fall precisely within academic and professional spheres, in achieving outcomes that are recognised by institutions, and in engendering a sense of inclusion for associated identities.

Following Bourdieu (1988, 1993), the workplace environment can be seen as a “field of practice,” with its own rules or principles that inform the behaviour of individuals, so that they acquire a disposition or “habitus” associated with that field. Behaviour arising from this disposition is a result of both the agency adopted by the individual and the positions that are available to them within the field. In the case of staff working in third space, depending on how they are formally categorised as either academic or professional, some positions may be unavailable to them. Furthermore, the value of activity within a field (or its “capital”) depends on the degree of recognition accorded to it by dominant actors, in this case senior and/or local managers with influence on the positioning or progression of individuals. In Bourdieu’s terms, therefore, individuals working in third space are subject to the discourse that is created via the dominant organisational field, i.e., the academic field, the definitions accorded to academic and professional staff, and embedded structures such as job descriptions and promotion criteria. Thus, any legitimacy problems that they experience may be attributed, at least in part, to the relative primacy of their institution’s “academic” and “professional” organisational fields.

In Bourdieu’s terminology, third space activity is “embedded” within one or other of these organisational fields, rather than being accorded its own status. Nevertheless, it would appear from the study that those who are able to build social capital between themselves, and/or with key figures inside and outside the university, are able to go some way towards developing third space as a “field of practice” in its own right, even if this is not formally integrated into university structures in the form of, for example, dedicated career structures or promotion criteria. Furthermore, the narratives suggest that groups such as educational and research developers are able to establish a “field of practice” as a collective, nationally and even internationally, to which they have a sense of belonging, even though this may not be the case at an institutional level. However, any sense of exclusion for them tended to be less personal than the kind of regret felt by individuals who felt blocked from making an academic career. Thus, those who had academic credentials in the form of a doctorate, and/or contracts, who identified as academics but deviated from an established academic “field of practice,” as in the case of the first three Exemplars, were more likely to feel

isolated and excluded. In other cases, such as Exemplars 6 and 7, the dissonance between informal recognition and lack of formal accreditation within job descriptions or promotion criteria could lead to frustration and thoughts of pursuing a career outside higher education. Although examples of inclusive practices promoted by educational developers are encouraging, together with evidence of team-building initiatives (Springou, 2023), these could be enhanced institutionally, via institutional sector groups, and nationally. Such developments might include, for example:

- The creation of a third career track for groups such as research managers and educational developers, with associated contracts, job specifications, and promotion criteria to take account of, for example, success in generating new sources of research funding, links with new funders, and innovation in teaching and learning/the digital environment;
- Recognition of applied, user-based Mode 3 knowledge that emphasises situated knowledge, local understandings, and specific contexts, for example via commendation in annual review processes and recognition in promotion criteria;
- The incorporation of crossover points and/or secondments for people who might wish to move in and out of third space activity, for example linked to the term of a project, or the desire by an individual to refresh their thinking;
- A time allowance for those who are appropriately qualified to undertake research and teaching if they so wish, whatever type of contract they have;
- Encouragement in the form of study leave and/or financial support for individuals to pursue doctorates if they do not have them;
- Encouragement to achieve recognition, for example, Fellowship of AdvanceHE for those in educational development roles, which in turn may extend an individual's network;
- The establishment of a national policy statement about individual groupings, using the Technicians Commitment (Vere et al., 2024) as a model, to ensure visibility, recognition, career development, and sustainability.

## 7. Conclusion

Although it is not possible, from a sample of sixteen individuals deemed to be working in third space environments, to be definitive about factors resulting in a sense of inclusion or exclusion, some indicators of likely causes emerged from the study. For individuals, this is likely to arise from a combination of local factors, such as type of institution, conditions of employment, local precedent, the support or otherwise of a line manager, and the availability of help and advice from a mentor or sympathetic colleague. A critical factor is also likely to be whether or not individuals with doctorates, with or without an academic contract, wish to pursue research, and whether this can be accommodated by their institution. For a collective, such as educational or research development professionals, it can depend on the maturity of the group's identity in relation to, for example, local and national support networks, the adaptability of local employment conditions, for example, whether individuals are allowed to research and/or publish as part of their contract, and opportunities for career advancement both within and outside the higher education sector. It could be that an increased blurring of the boundary between academic and professional identities, via crossover roles, activities, and in some cases qualifications, has increased opportunities for a sense of exclusion because of a dissonance between formal and informal systems of recognition within institutions, in turn rendering those in such roles invisible. However, if an individual sees themselves as able to move to another role or sector in

due course, institutional recognition, particularly in relation to career advancement, may be felt to be less critical. For those working in third space environments, therefore, whether on an academic or professional contract, this positioning may, at worst, bring a sense of exclusion, or at least dislocation, and at best a source of social, professional, and knowledge capital that may add to their profile and, if necessary, be portable elsewhere.

### Acknowledgments

This article draws on a study entitled *The Future Higher Education Workforce in Locally and Globally Engaged HEIs*. The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), the Office for Students (UK), and Research England (grant reference ES/M010082/1) is gratefully acknowledged, along with support from the CGHE at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education, London, UK.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data upon which this article draws is deposited in the UK Data Archive.

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## Early Career Researchers as Stakeholders in University Decision-Making in Europe: Comparative Perspectives

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**Submitted:** 22 November 2024 **Accepted:** 10 March 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Načinović Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

### Abstract

The voices of academics have traditionally been strong in university decision-making bodies, where they participated in the shared governance of the university. It has been customary for senior academics to be represented in managing bodies and to exercise control over the key areas of strategy, finance, quality assurance, study programs, and/or human resources. With the new public management reforms that have swept through higher education (HE) systems, the power of academics has been reduced, while managerial guidance has increased, alongside the fostering of universities' institutional autonomy. At the same time, the power of other stakeholders, such as students or industry representatives, has also been increasing as part and parcel of the governance reforms, albeit to different degrees and at different paces across various HE systems. In this context, this article seeks to examine the role that early career researchers (ECRs) play in university decision-making bodies across different countries as internal stakeholders. The research is based on seven case studies from seven European and East Mediterranean countries drawing on documentary data and 55 semi-structured interviews with ECRs and 14 managers, carried out in 2023–2024. Following stakeholder categories distinguished on the basis of their legitimacy, urgency, and power, this

article investigates the extent to which ECRs perceive their voices to be heard. The findings show variance between the case studies regarding formal representation, with most universities in the study having limited representation of ECRs in university and faculty/school-level decision-making bodies. The voices of ECRs, however, are heard in informal ways.

### Keywords

decision-making; early career researchers; power; representation; stakeholders; university governance; university; voice

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, governance models for higher education institutions (HEIs) have undergone several transformations, driven by multiple forces, including the influence of new public management (NPM) reforms. One of the main effects of these transformations is the replacement of collegiality with top-down decision-making models, leading to a concentration of power at the highest tiers, which include professional managers (Leišytė et al., 2023; Želvys et al., 2021). This shift creates tensions between traditional models of academic self-governance (De Boer et al., 2008) and the contemporary demands for centralised administrative control.

For early career researchers (ECRs), these tensions pose particular challenges, since ECRs are in their formative years in the academic profession, often employed on temporary contracts, while at the same time being heavily involved in teaching and research. There is no universal definition of ECRs, since this broad category of academics is shaped by national and institutional historical career structures, cultural disciplinary norms, and the broader academic labour quasi-markets (Finkelstein & Jones, 2019; Musselin, 2005; see also Supplementary File 1 for more details). ECRs in this study are defined as researchers pursuing their PhDs or those within eight years of obtaining their PhDs—typically including doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers.

Nonetheless, their participation in decision-making processes tends to be limited due to traditional academic hierarchies. ECRs already navigate structural constraints imposed by academic hierarchies, where senior academics typically hold decision-making authority. The voices of academics have traditionally been strong in university decision-making bodies, where their participation was a part of the collegial governance model. It has been customary for senior academics to be represented in decision-making bodies and exercise control over a number the key areas of governance, including university strategy, finance, quality assurance, study programmes, and human resources. The implementation of NPM reforms has resulted in a reduction of the power held by academics within HE systems, while the influence of managerial guidance has increased, leading to the fostering of institutional autonomy in HE (Leišytė et al., 2023), and solidifying the professional management and centralisation of university decision-making.

The introduction of NPM policies further exacerbates these constraints, potentially restricting the ability of ECRs to contribute meaningfully to governance discussions. As a result, the voice of ECRs in university governance may be doubly constrained—both by entrenched academic traditions and by the managerialist frameworks that shape modern universities.

The exclusion of ECRs' voices in governance is a critical issue, not only for ECRs themselves but for the broader academic community. Ensuring that ECRs have a platform from which to contribute to governance decisions is essential for fostering inclusive academic environments. Inclusion in governance can provide ECRs with opportunities for professional development, strengthen their sense of belonging, and enhance institutional decision-making by incorporating diverse perspectives. Moreover, a governance system that acknowledges and integrates the voices of ECRs can contribute to the overall health and innovation of the HE sector. Moreover, the inclusion of ECRs in decision-making bodies is crucial as they bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that can drive positive change within HEIs (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Participating in these bodies would enable ECRs to develop the valuable skills and networks that are essential for career advancement (Robinson et al., 2016) while also serving to bridge the gap between early-career researchers and established professionals (Gustafsson et al., 2020; Haider et al., 2018). Furthermore, it would give ECRs the opportunity to effectively articulate the challenges related to their representation and the inherent precarity of their positions (Bonello & Wånggren, 2023; Signoret et al., 2019). Further, ECRs' contributions are paramount for HEIs, in terms of the work they do and the funding they obtain; thus, one may expect this to be accompanied by a rise in the power they possess within the academic hierarchy and organisation, despite the "invisible" nature of their work in HEIs (Carvalho et al., 2022). However, while gender and ethnic diversity in the decision-making process have gained considerable attention (Leišytė et al., 2022), the issue of ECRs has remained underexplored, despite the growing recognition of their role as key contributors to the academic system (Klemenčič, 2012; Leišytė et al., 2023; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015).

Thus, this article seeks to examine what role ECRs play in university decision-making bodies across different countries as internal stakeholders, posing the following research question: What is the agency of ECRs in university decision-making, and how does this agency compare across different HE systems?

We utilise a qualitative research design, drawing on face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews, carried out in 2023–2024, with ECRs, managers, and HR administrators from research universities in seven countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Portugal, and Türkiye.

This article highlights that integrating ECRs' voices in decision-making is key to promoting diversity and inclusion. By examining ECRs' roles in formal and informal decision-making bodies across different case study institutions and countries, we contribute to stakeholder theory and the literature on the governance of the academic profession.

## 2. Challenges ECRs Face in Academia and HEIs

The literature highlights that ECRs face a number of challenges in academia, including employment insecurity, limited resources and access to resources such as funding, networking, and mentorship opportunities, as well as raising concerns about their well-being (Külcür et al., 2024; Mitić, 2022). According to Marini and Meschitti (2018) and Archer (2021), ECRs frequently have limited career prospects, high employment insecurity, and face multiple challenges when attempting to transition to permanent academic positions in various HE systems. Their career success depends to a great extent on the availability of and access to funding, networking, and mentorship (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2013; Grundy, 2023; Woolston, 2019), as well as on factors such as publication records and the ability to attract resources—a dynamic that is deeply influenced by national funding policies and institutional strategies.

ECRs are more likely to encounter difficulties obtaining research funding and building their publication careers, compared to senior researchers (Howe-Walsh & Turnock, 2016; Lee & Bozeman, 2005). Further, the literature indicates that ECRs report elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to factors such as heavy workloads and prolonged work hours (e.g., Biron et al., 2008; Levecque et al., 2017; Woolston, 2019), job insecurity (e.g., Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Menard & Shinton, 2022; Niemann & Dovidio, 2005), and lack of institutional support (e.g., Niemann & Dovidio, 2005). The aforementioned factors contribute to an array of additional concerns, including intense competition, well-being and mental health issues, imposter syndrome (Addison et al., 2022; Cureton, 2023; Petersen et al., 2012; Shen, 2015), and intersectional burdens (Zheng, 2018).

Studies also show that persistent gender imbalances, diversity challenges, and biases affect the experiences and career trajectories of ECRs and contribute to an oppressive environment (Kaatz et al., 2016; Røstad & Aksnes, 2015); these factors are compounded by postcolonial or intersectional issues (Blell et al., 2022). Intersectional research examines the unique challenges faced by ECRs, including challenges and disparities specific to gender roles, underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, and other marginalised groups (Acker, 2006; Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Castelló et al., 2017; Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022; Zheng, 2018).

A number of authors point out the importance of instituting a more supportive culture for ECRs in academia (Kent et al., 2022; Saltmarsh & Matthew, 2011). From a different perspective, some scholars argue that the emphasis should be laid on skills development in teaching, fund applications, career planning, project writing, and management, which are perceived as crucial for ECRs' career development (Hancock et al., 2013; Hemmings & Kay, 2016; Laudel & Gläser, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018).

To address these challenges, studies have shown the need for enhanced institutional support (Guthrie et al., 2017), including the involvement of peers and supervisors, and the co-development of individual coping strategies with line managers to address work-life balance issues and gender-related imbalances (Bailyn, 2011; Iyengar et al., 2020; Müller, 2014; Sala et al., 2019). Effective institutional support would also entail adequate representation of ECR voices across the institution, which is not always the case in HE contexts.

### 3. University Governance and Representation of ECRs in University Decision-Making

One of the ways to address the challenges faced by the ECRs is to ensure the representation of their needs in university decision-making and ensure their voices are heard. The reforms of HE governance in the past decades have been important in this regard (Austin & Jones, 2025; De Boer et al., 2008; Locke et al., 2011; Marginson, 2010; Shattock et al., 2024). They have transformed the key structures of university internal governance, such as university boards and senates, and led to more centralised university decision-making (Antonowicz & Jones, 2024; Bleiklie et al., 2017; De Boer et al., 2008). It has been argued that, over the past decades, the collegial form of governance has been challenged by the more bureaucratic, rationalised forms of governance of HE (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2023).

The power of various stakeholders in university decision-making bodies, such as boards and senates, has increased as part and parcel of these reforms, albeit to different degrees and paces across various HE systems (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002; Austin & Jones, 2025; Klemenčič, 2012; Leišytė & Westerheijden, 2013; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015). Shin (2015), for instance, identified four different types of HE

governance systems based on a comparative study of stakeholders' influence on universities in 19 systems: shared governance (e.g., Italy, Finland), managerial governance, (e.g., Portugal), hierarchical governance (e.g., Mexico), and semi-hierarchical governance (e.g., Germany) (Shin, 2015). Here, historical, policy, legal, and cultural factors have played an important role as shown in selected examples in Supplementary File 2.

We can observe that students as stakeholders are represented and involved in university governance bodies at European universities (Klemenčič, 2012; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015). However, we have limited knowledge of the representation of ECRs in university decision-making (Leišytė, 2024; Papaioannou, 2024). The expectation is that ECRs being at the lower hierarchical levels of the academic career ladders will have limited representation and voice (Smith & Jones, 2020).

The representation of ECRs in university governing bodies is a critical issue in HE governance (Renn, 2019; Smith & Jones, 2020). Despite being an important part of the academic community, ECRs are often underrepresented in leadership positions within decision-making bodies (Johnson, 2019). This underrepresentation is also observed by the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc, 2020), which found that ECRs lack formal roles in university decision-making bodies. Jamali et al. (2023) have identified ECRs as the most vulnerable group within the academic ecosystem. Although some progress has been made in increasing ECRs' participation in decision-making bodies, there is still much work to be done (Eurodoc, 2020; Smith & Jones, 2020).

This lack of ECRs' representation is often attributed to the centralized power structure within universities, where senior academics and permanent administrative personnel hold the most influence (Austin & Jones, 2025). This concentration of power at the top often excludes ECRs from key decision-making bodies such as the Senate or the Rectorate. While ECRs could be involved in formal leadership processes, they are more commonly found in less formal committees (Brami et al., 2023).

Further, the limited representation of ECRs can be related to the prevalent gatekeeping practices in universities that exacerbate power imbalances (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). Senior academics act as gatekeepers within universities, limiting ECRs' ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making bodies (Thornton, 2013). ECRs are also often overwhelmed with numerous responsibilities and face precarious working contracts, which further discourage their involvement in academic committee work (Rajan et al., 2021).

Thus, addressing ECRs' representation in the university decision-making bodies is argued to be crucial to ensure an inclusive and effective governance within HEIs (Smith & Jones, 2020). Only by understanding the challenges and the opportunities that the ECRs are facing, the universities would be able to create a stronger and more competitive academic community (Johnson, 2019).

#### 4. Theoretical Framing

We are concerned with the agency of ECRs in university decision-making. By "agency," we understand "a matter of capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs" (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 196). To understand the agency of ECRs in university decision-making, we turn to the stakeholder theory, as it has proven useful in understanding the power of various stakeholders in

HE, which enables the capacity to act, that is to exert agency (Freeman, 1984). According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives” (p. 46). Accordingly, Freeman (1984) defines stakeholder theory as “the principle of who or what really counts.” The term “stake” can be simply described as a share, interest, or investment that a certain party lay claim to in an entity. This “stakeholder” definition was framed in the move away from a theory of strategic planning to one of strategic management, in which organisations must actively manage relationships with stakeholder groups (Freeman, 2010, p. 53). Identifying relevant stakeholders and managing the corresponding relationships is a significant task, as certain stakeholder groups may be able to prevent the success of an organisation (Freeman, 2010). Moreover, while the prevention of damage to the organisation is a key benefit, stakeholder management can also yield significant benefits for organisations. For example, successfully managing the relationship with employees can lead to a lower turnover rate (Hillman & Keim, 2001, p. 126).

Mitchell et al. (1997) have developed a typology to explain what makes managers prioritise certain stakeholder relationships over others. Their typology employs three criteria to identify the relative importance of stakeholder groups and interests, which go into creating a stakeholder hierarchy. The ordering builds on stakeholder salience, defined tautologically as “the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 868). In order to investigate which stakeholders are most salient, meaning that their interests enjoy the highest priority, the authors used the three criteria of power, legitimacy, and urgency. A party has power in a relationship “to the extent that it can gain access to coercive, utilitarian or normative means” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 865) to impose its will. Legitimacy is described as “socially accepted and expected behaviour” (p. 866), which establishes an actor’s authority. Urgency, which adds the dynamic component, is defined as “the degree to which a stakeholder claims call for immediate attention” (p. 867).

As shown by Freeman (2010, p. 55), in the case of a large organisation, the stakeholders may be members of the organisation, such as employees. Amaral and Magalhaes (2002, p. 2), referring to Freeman’s stakeholder theory, distinguish between internal and external stakeholders in HE. External stakeholders are defined as representatives of interests from the outside world, such as industry partners of the university and potential future employers; their participation is intended to ensure the consideration of external demands and trends in the governance bodies of the university (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002). Academic staff, students, and non-academic staff, such as technical and administrative staff, are categorised as internal stakeholders (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2002). As argued by Jongbloed et al. (2008), in the context of NPM reforms, HEIs are increasingly expected to engage with relevant stakeholder groups, as they become accountable, effective, and efficient organisations that aim to provide quality HE.

Since stakeholder roles have been redefined under the NPM, ECRs will here be perceived as stakeholders forming a subset of the academic staff stakeholder group. To understand the power of ECRs as stakeholders, we will be following Mitchell et al. (1997) in drawing on the notions of legitimacy, power, and urgency in HE settings (Leišytė & Westerheijden, 2014). Previous studies of students’ roles in decision-making in HEIs have identified them as increasingly important stakeholders, especially from the point of view of policymakers, managers, and academics (Leišytė & Westerheijden, 2013; Logermann & Leišytė, 2015), as students have a say—through legitimacy, urgency, and, sometimes, power—in quality assurance processes and programme development, in different European HE contexts. As noted by Leišytė and Westerheijden (2014, p. 84),

adapting Mitchell's criteria: "The power of a higher education stakeholder could be veto power in committees associated with educational quality." They define "legitimacy" as behaviour following "the well-established norms of the academic community and participation in collegial governance bodies of HEIs as defined in laws and regulations" (p. 84). Finally, the urgency of a HE stakeholder can be understood as "their presence and participation in meetings, putting forward proposals and comments, following up on actions and getting their points of view accepted by other stakeholders" (p. 84).

Overall, therefore, three main stakeholder groups with different levels of stakeholder salience can be identified in terms of Mitchell et al.'s (1997) typology, depending on the presence and absence of the attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency: latent, expectant, and definitive stakeholders. *Latent* stakeholders have one of the three attributes following Mitchell et al. (1997). *Expectant* stakeholders would have two of the three attributes. Finally, *definitive* stakeholders possess all three attributes.

Formally, ECRs can belong to any of the above types of stakeholders, based on how university management perceives their power, legitimacy, and urgency regarding a particular organisational policy issue. It may be that their power may differ according to the area, since some policy issues could be strategic institutional priorities for the superiors or university managers, who may therefore need to rally the support of different members of academic staff. This may especially be the case in more collegially oriented HE institutions and systems. Furthermore, ECRs may have more legitimacy to claim expertise in particular areas, for instance, in relation to doctoral education. ECRs who are elected representatives in formal decision-making bodies would be likely to have the legitimacy to voice their concerns and represent their colleagues in those bodies. Here, "voice" is defined as "all of the ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say about, and influence, their work and the functioning of their organisation" (Wilkinson et al., 2020, p. 1). Della Torre et al. (2022) argue that one needs to distinguish between direct voice channels, through which employees have the opportunity to express their opinions directly to managers, and indirect voice channels, through which employee voice is expressed by elected representatives. Accordingly, the current study includes the voices of individual ECRs as well as of elected representatives. Della Torre et al. (2022) further note that both formal and informal communication channels are important for voicing employee concerns; with this in mind, we pay attention to both types of communication channels used by ECRs.

## 5. Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data collected from case study universities in seven countries (Germany, Portugal, Cyprus, Croatia, Lithuania, Türkiye, Israel). The country selection was based on variation in terms of cultural power distances and in terms of HE governance models (De Boer et al., 2008; Hofstede, 2015; Shin, 2015). The level of managerialism following NPM reforms differs across the selected HE systems, with Lithuania, Israel, Cyprus, and Portugal representing the managerial governance model, Germany representing the semi-hierarchical governance model, and Türkiye representing the hierarchical governance model (see Supplementary File 2). Further differentiation among the selected countries relates to their place on the cultural power distance index designed by Hofstede (2015), with Croatia (73) and Türkiye (66) being high on the power distance index, followed by Portugal (63), and other countries being on the lower side, like Lithuania (42), Germany (35), and Israel (13). The cultural differences in power distance were deemed to be important for understanding the hierarchical power relations between employees and managers in organisational environments, with high power distance cultures assumed to be less open to

inclusive governance approaches and to hearing the voices of lower hierarchical levels in organisations (Białaś, 2009).

In each of the countries studied, a research-intensive doctoral-granting university was selected as a case study, also taking into account disciplinary breadth encompassing “hard” and “soft” sciences, since disciplinary range is important for understanding different research cultures and disciplinary hierarchies. These may, in turn, have an impact on ECRs’ influence in decision-making. This selection allowed for a comparative analysis across countries while ensuring diversity in terms of national HE contexts. The data collection was carried out under the auspices of Working Group 2 of the COST Action VOICES project, following the research design developed by the methodology sub-group. The data collection guidelines and the interview schedules were developed for ECRs and managers/administrators and tested in the English language; they were then discussed in two meetings of the methodology group, before being piloted and revised to ensure their applicability to different national contexts. For the data collection, the interviewers in different countries translated the interview instruments into their own language. Each of the interviewees filled out a consent form and was informed about the project and data usage. Their participation was completely voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

In each of the case study institutions, the composition of main decision-making bodies—such as senates, university councils, and faculty councils—was examined with a focus on ECRs’ representation and their diversity in terms of their gender and discipline. The data helped to identify potential interviewees. In each institution, six to eight purposefully selected ECRs were interviewed. We selected two types of ECRs: those who were involved in institutional decision-making, such as being representatives of ECRs in university senates or faculty councils, and those ECRs who have not been actively engaged in representative roles. We also made sure that we included representatives of soft and hard sciences, to reflect different disciplinary cultures (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Additionally, two to three managers and HR administrators at the central and faculty levels were interviewed from each institution. These interviews sought to draw out their points of view to understand to what extent their institutions put forward policies and enact them to ensure inclusive decision-making and address the needs of ECRs at all levels, and how they perceive the power, urgency, and legitimacy of ECRs. In this way, 55 semi-structured interviews with ECRs and 14 with managers/HR administrators were carried out in seven case study institutions in 2023–2024.

The interviews were carried out face-to-face and online based on what was convenient for the interviewees. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded when this was agreed to. All interviewees were asked to sign the consent form, indicating the purposes of the research and ensuring the confidentiality and voluntary nature of the interview. The interviews were de-identified and collected in one central database to ensure a systematic analysis. All the interviews were manually transcribed and each of the interviewers summarised their case studies to ensure that the contextual information was included. To discuss and corroborate findings, two data-sharing and discussion meetings were held among the interviewers.

In this article, we analyse the representation of ECRs and their power, urgency, and legitimacy across different types and levels of formal decision-making bodies of HEIs: the central-level main board or senate and committees; faculty/school-level council and formal committees; and departmental-level boards or similar decision-making bodies. The analysis also highlights the informal ways in which ECRs’ voices are heard and are thus able to influence their universities.

We operationalise ECRs as having power in decision-making when this is manifested in their ability to influence structural change or content of work, or to veto proposed change either through formal or informal voicing of their concerns. Having power vis-a-vis managers means that ECRs have the agency to influence decision-making. Further, the legitimacy of ECRs could be observed in the extent to which they were formally represented as a particular group of employees in decision-making bodies at different levels of the university regarding teaching, research, or administration—in other words, is their representation formally defined in laws and regulations? Since the various EU soft regulations foresee the representation of ECRs and their inclusion in decision-making, this attribute is especially important.

Finally, ECRs' urgency in decision-making can be understood as the extent to which they make their claims a priority for the managers. This could be by acting through an ECR representative or individually through collegial decision-making committees. This could include participating in meetings regarding teaching, research priority-setting, defining performance evaluation criteria, improving working conditions, participating and having a say in hiring and promotion procedures, putting forward proposals and comments for improvement, and following up on actions of other stakeholders regarding the core issues pertinent to ECRs.

For case-studies comparison, a three-point scale was used to indicate the level of ECR influence in their HEIs' decision-making bodies: low, medium, and high. The rating on the scale from low to high is based on the number of respondents answering positively and providing supporting examples in answers to questions about the legitimacy, urgency, and power of ECRs. A low rating indicates no or very few respondents, a medium rating indicates several respondents, and a high rating indicates most or all respondents.

In this article, thematic analysis was used to examine the data and highlight recurring patterns or themes in the data systematically through coding and theme derivation. This method enabled us to compare respondents' views and experiences in academia. Thematic analysis is viewed as a tool that helps researchers navigate the data examination process. Interpretation of complex textual data is facilitated by thematic analysis, which adds depth and clarity. It involves familiarising oneself with the data to understand details and nuances, creating codes to capture key elements, identifying patterns and trends, refining and labelling these themes, and ultimately presenting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, as researchers, we also needed to practice reflexivity during the analysis phase, where we critically assessed how our perspectives may influence data interpretation (Terry et al., 2017). On the other hand, thematic analysis has advanced to include more complexity by integrating it into various epistemological frameworks, like realist and phenomenological perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017).

## 6. Data Analysis

The goal of our analysis is to evaluate the role of ECRs in decision-making through stakeholder categories of legitimacy, urgency, and power, as well as to compare the perspectives of ECRs and HEI managers based on the data collected in the seven-case study HEIs. For this purpose, the interview answers of ECRs and HEI managers were compared in terms of the extent to which ECRs were involved, in which issues they had a say in and drawing on specific examples of ECRs making an impact in their institution at different levels of decision-making. Several of the case study universities had ways for ECRs to be formally involved in departments, faculty, or university boards and committees through elected or appointed representatives.

However, the interviewed ECRs observed that senior academics are often the ones making real decisions, discouraging ECRs from challenging established hierarchies (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Perceived formal influence of ECRs in university decision-making per case study HEI.

Decision-making body	How much legitimacy do ECRs have to influence change?	How much power do ECRs have to influence change?	How much urgency do ECRs have to influence change?
University councils, senates, or similar			
<i>Low</i>	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
<i>Medium</i>	–	–	–
<i>High</i>	–	–	–
Faculty, school, institute board, or similar			
<i>Low</i>	CYHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, LTHEI, ISRHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, ISRHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
<i>Medium</i>	CRHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI	–	LTHEI, DEHEI
<i>High</i>	–	–	–
Faculty-level committees (e.g., education, research)			
<i>Low</i>	CYHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	CYHEI
<i>Medium</i>	CRHEI, DEHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	–	CRHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
<i>High</i>	ISRHEI	–	–
Department/research unit body (e.g., Departmental Board)			
<i>Low</i>	–	CYHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI	–
<i>Medium</i>	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, TRHEI, PTHEI	CRHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, LTHEI	CRHEI, CYHEI, DEHEI, ISRHEI, PTHEI, TRHEI
<i>High</i>	LTHEI	–	LTHEI

Notes: Case studies are presented alphabetically within the same category: CRHEI—the case study HEI in Croatia; CYHEI—the case study HEI in Cyprus; DEHEI—the case study HEI in Germany; ISRHEI—the case study HEI in Israel; LTHEI—the case study HEI in Lithuania; PTHEI—the case study HEI in Portugal; TRHEI—the case study HEI in Türkiye. Source: Based on interview data.

## 7. Legitimacy

The legitimacy of the ECRs' involvement was determined by the extent to which they were formally represented in their HEIs (senates, assemblies, councils, boards, committees, etc.). For all country cases

studied, it was evident that the degree of legitimacy diminishes as the level of the decision-making body increases.

The heterogeneity of the ECRs in different institutions led to ECRs oftentimes being the least vocal members of their HEIs and having very low legitimacy. There was a lack of communication and contact between different sub-groups of ECRs, even though their struggles and challenges might be shared. ECR6 from Lithuania stated that “ECRs are often used to working alone, doing their research alone,” and yet “commonality and social aspects are crucial to having your voice heard and to having a strong and equal presence in the decision-making process.” In contrast, university students usually have organised communities and representation systems, with elected student presidents and representatives in formal university governance structures. The lack of established ECR communities hinders their legitimacy in decision-making when compared to university students. None of the interviewed ECRs from any of the countries studied claimed that they felt truly represented at the top level of university governance.

Several ECRs complained of a lack of access to central administration and a lack of voice in discussions and decisions related to top-level university governance. ECRs seem to have low formal and informal legitimacy, sometimes due to “lack of communication channels, as well as an overly administrative approach through numerous written requests” (ECR7, Croatia), as corroborated by ECR4 from Lithuania, who provided an example of trying to raise an issue of unfair undergrad student evaluation but never hearing back from the central university administration. Another issue raised by different ECRs (ECR5 from Cyprus, ECR3 from Croatia) was the fact that students (master’s and bachelor’s) are more formally represented, as boards and committees often have quotas for student representatives but not for ECRs. The HEI managers’ interviews corroborated these insights and the assertions of ECRs concerning their representation in university governance. According to an Israeli HEI manager, governance decision-making bodies exclude ECRs, allowing them to focus on their research, and they only consult ECRs on issues that directly affect them. As a manager from Cyprus HEI concluded, “small voices are not heard” when it comes to the involvement of ECRs at the higher levels of decision-making bodies in HEIs.

At the meso level of HEI governance, ECRs generally had a higher level of legitimacy as stakeholders than they had at the central level. Many universities have policies to include doctoral students, research assistants, and other ECRs on faculty boards and committees. In the German case study HEIs, not only do ECRs have seats on the faculty council, but they also have a say in the selection process of new professors. In addition, most interviewees from Lithuanian and Croatian HEIs reported that ECRs have been allocated seats on their faculty councils and various committees. ECR inclusion is often enforced by the HEI, as emphasised by ECR7 (Israel), who is a member of her faculty committee: “I was assigned to this committee. It’s not something I initiated.” Personal connections matter in order to gain access to faculty committees, as noted by ECR2 (Türkiye): “ECRs are not in decision-making bodies at upper levels unless they have personal ties with them.” Several Portuguese interviewees described the situation in similar terms, for example, ECR8 noted: “One needs to move in the right arenas, in the right circles, to have important friends or be seen near/with someone important.” Even when ECRs gain access, it is often limited to certain committees, for example, in the case of the HEI in Türkiye, where ECRs are only allowed to participate in committees but not faculty boards, which only include department heads. The lowest observed level of legitimacy at the meso level was in the case of an HEI from Cyprus. According to interviewed ECRs from Cyprus HEI, only staff members with permanent contracts and students have seats in university and faculty decision-making

bodies; therefore, ECRs, who seldom have permanent contracts, are excluded, even if they wish to participate. ECR1 (Cyprus) stated: “I often feel invisible in the department and university. I am involved in teaching and research but am not part of any decision-making.” Nevertheless, the middle level of HEI decision-making bodies is where different institutions diverged in their formal inclusion of ECRs, thus in the legitimacy of ECRs at this level of representation. The case study HEIs from Germany, Croatia, Lithuania, and Israel had policies to encourage ECR representation at the faculty/school level, while the HEIs in Türkiye, Portugal, and Cyprus were less inclusive, especially when it came to the main faculty-governing bodies.

The department or research unit level of HEI decision-making is where ECRs tended to be involved the most across most of the case study HEIs. The Lithuanian case stands out, with both PhD students and ECRs with more advanced careers stating their legitimate high position in decision-making. All interviewees expressed their satisfaction with being included in department-level discussions and having ways to voice their concerns. ECR5 claimed that she did not feel a strong hierarchical distribution in her department and that “doctoral students are regarded as equal members of the community, and their voices are heard.” A similar narrative was repeated by all Lithuanian ECRs interviewed. ECRs from all other case study HEIs generally reported being involved in departmental-level decision-making to some degree. Many stated that these discussions were usually carried out informally, with varying outcomes. For example, ECR6 from Israel claimed that only an informal approach is effective: “I feel that in order to be heard, I have to act informally and on a personal level. Then people will more likely listen to my opinions.” On the other hand, this was not the case for ECR2 from Portugal: “There could be informal moments, like having a coffee or a lunch with colleagues and these issues being talked about among ECRs and some senior staff, but that doesn’t mean that this will be discussed at the formal level.” Examples provided by several ECRs from the case study HEIs in Croatia, Lithuania, and Cyprus showed their active involvement in departmental-level discussions on research, organisation of academic events, teaching, and study process organisation. The analysis of ECR answers to the question about their influence in the decision-making process at the lowest level reveals either a medium (in the HEIs in Germany, Portugal, Cyprus, Croatia, Türkiye, and Israel) or high (in the case of Lithuania) level of legitimacy. The statements from ECRs regarding their legitimacy at the departmental level were supported by the managers’ interviews. Manager 2 from the Türkiye HEI, for instance, stated that ECRs could express themselves or give their opinion on teaching schedules and other matters related to the department.

## 8. Power

The ability of ECRs to influence the outcome of HEI decision-making tended to be rather low in all researched universities across all seven countries. Although power in academia traditionally lies in the hands of academics, and even with the increased institutional autonomy of universities and the centralisation of power, this was limited to senior academics.

Low hierarchical positions and lack of representation in top leadership positions meant that ECRs did not have power at the top level of HEI decision-making (see Table 1). Lack of power was found also at the faculty/institute level, due to the low formal representation of ECRs in faculty decision-making bodies and the fact that “professors outnumber ECRs in decision-making bodies,” as mentioned by ECR1 in Germany. Additionally, when decisions were made, “professors and other higher-ranking positions have first...say” also due to the low hierarchical position of ECRs (ECR5, Türkiye) and the precarity of ECRs’ working conditions,

as confirmed by several ECRs. The only case where ECRs have some, albeit still rather limited, power is at the lowest level of governance, the departmental level, although the situation varies greatly among the case study HEIs in the seven countries. For example, ECRs had a degree of power in the case study of HEIs in Lithuania, Germany, Croatia, and Israel. However, many ECRs emphasised that this power was attained on informal grounds, by sharing their concerns with their supervisors/mentors and raising the specific issue at the departmental level through the supervisor (ECR6, Croatia) or “going to heads of institutes, departments, etc. and talking directly to them” (ECR2, Lithuania). Several ECRs emphasised that they had informal power due to the fact that departmental communities are rather small, so they freely participated in departmental discussions. Yet, there were also ECRs who stated that “some ECRs can feel that they should not express their opinion before obtaining a PhD” (ECR4, Croatia), although this is not a formal requirement. ECR power at the lowest level tended to be polarised in different country contexts, as ECRs in the case study HEIs in Türkiye, Cyprus, and Portugal generally had low power even at the departmental level. In cases where these ECRs could express their opinions, they were not attended to (ECR8, Türkiye) or they were afraid to speak at departmental meetings “due to job insecurity or fear of being bullied” (ECR3, Cyprus). As stated by several ECRs at the lowest level, ECR power greatly depended upon supportive leadership from departmental heads (ECR5 and ECR7, Portugal).

ECRs’ statements regarding the power they had at the different levels of HEI governance were confirmed by the managers’ interviews. The majority of managers mentioned that at the highest level of HEI governance, there was very low representation of ECRs and no possibility for them to have power in the decision-making process. More specifically, the two managers from the HEI in Cyprus stated that ECRs have no power at the highest level of the HEI, and they can only give their opinion informally to their PhD mentors, who may raise the issue if they so decide. A manager from an HEI in Türkiye highlighted the valuable role that ECRs can play in shaping institutional decisions. He pointed out that ECRs often bring fresh perspectives and are more attuned to emerging technologies, making them instrumental in driving innovation. Unlike senior academics who may be more accustomed to established structures and traditional methods, ECRs frequently engage with contemporary research trends, digital tools, and interdisciplinary approaches. Their adaptability and proactive engagement allow them to influence institutional developments, even in the absence of formal decision-making power. As an example, he recalled an instance where ECRs were actively involved in shaping the university’s online educational infrastructure. This illustrates how ECRs, despite their relatively junior positions, can have some degree of informal power, that is: agency in shaping HE institutions. While formal power provides the structural framework for decision-making, informal power allows for flexibility, adaptability, and the introduction of innovative perspectives. Through their expertise, advocacy, and ability to bridge the gap between emerging trends and institutional policies, ECRs can serve as catalysts for meaningful change and long-term institutional advancements.

## 9. Urgency

The present study shows that some HEIs often have regulations and policies for the formal inclusion of ECRs in their governance processes; however, whether this inclusion is meaningful or not is a separate issue. The validity of ECR participation and their actual ability to use their voice in decision-making, as well as the extent to which ECR claims receive immediate attention, is defined by the stakeholder category of urgency (see Table 1).

The lack of representation at the top level of university governance structures, such as senates, assemblies, and committees, excludes the expression of ECRs' opinions and denies their critical importance in discussions and votes. Many of our ECR respondents, from all case study HEIs, in all seven countries, declared their struggle to have any say in university matters and emphasised the delays in attending to their claims. Several ECRs mentioned lengthy processes for expressing their voices as they needed to receive approval at the lower level, before even trying to appeal to the highest level. As stated by ECR6 from Croatia: "If there is such a need, it is communicated with your mentor informally and presented firstly at the Department Council, then at the Faculty Council, and finally at the University Council." In addition, ECR7 from Cyprus emphasised:

There is a 40% chance of having our opinions heard at the departmental level, and this percentage declines as we move higher up. Even though we have views that we communicate to the department, I fear these are distorted or even lost the higher we move up the university decision-making ladder.

Very few cases of immediate response to ECRs' claims and concerns were recalled by the interviewees, one being a doctoral student from Lithuania (ECR5), who provided an example of initiating a discussion with the doctoral administrative department at the central university administration, where the Lithuanian ECR raised an issue regarding graduation requirements. Another example came from ECR8 from Cyprus, who had a permanent position as a lecturer and had the possibility to participate in actions that had immediate effect due to their formal inclusion in a committee: "I am a faculty representative at the Equality Committee, and as a member, I'm involved in the development and application of equality, inclusion, and diversity practices across the university." These few cases, although encouraging, do not reflect the situation of the majority of ECRs, as most interviewees could not provide any examples where their voices received immediate attention and drew a reaction from upper echelons; therefore, we conclude that the level of urgency of ECRs as stakeholders at this level is low for all analysed HEIs. When it comes to the level of urgency that ECRs have at the top level of HEIs, the managers who were interviewed responded that ECRs are consulted more at an informal level and they have to follow the hierarchical structure if they want their matter to be discussed at a higher level; this confirms their low stakeholder urgency.

At the middle level of HEI governance, the degree of urgency attached to ECRs varies depending on whether they are representatives in these bodies or if they know someone who is a representative. Lithuanian and German cases stand out once again as having a substantial level of ECR influence on the main faculty boards and councils. Interviewees from both countries expressed confidence in their ability to participate in and lead discussions and provided several examples when their claims resulted in timely changes in areas such as teaching, programme curriculum, remote work, language of communication, and organisation of doctoral studies. ECR2 from the Lithuanian HEI, who is a doctoral student representative in the research centre's council, explained that her voice was always heard when questions concerning PhD issues were discussed and her opinion was sometimes valued above those of other members of the council in these discussions. In the case of HEIs in Croatia and Israel on the other hand, which reported a high level of legitimacy in meso-level governance, a different situation was revealed when it came to urgency. ECR3 from Croatia, who represents assistants in the faculty council, explained her situation: "I would not say that our voice is heard. We find out about decisions that have been reached at department meetings, or during faculty council"—indicating that, despite legitimacy, ECRs' voices are not considered critical or as needing immediate attention. In the case of the HEI in Israel, the interviewed ECRs commented that they sometimes perceive their participation as not being worth the investment, as ECR3 stated: "Participating in the committee is not

rewarding. Being a member of the committee cannot be considered as an opportunity to influence, in a system which doesn't remunerate. I regard it as a burden." A similar situation was observed in the case of the HEI in Türkiye, where ECRs participated in various committees but only did bureaucratic and tedious tasks of no critical importance. ECR7, who is on several committees, explained that research assistants are asked to do tedious work; for example, they were asked to transport people for a symposium. This was corroborated by ECR2: "We are not asked. We just implement decisions." A manager from the HEI in Türkiye corroborated this and added that sometimes ECRs are appointed to various committees as they are more likely to be more obedient and would follow the orders of the management committee due to their perceived sense of inferiority. ECRs from Portugal also declared their inability to attract any attention in faculty-level boards and committees; and the case of Cyprus stands out, because ECRs did not have any representation at this level, therefore all participation was strictly informal. Although many ECRs who were representatives in their HEIs' decision-making bodies noted their ability to put forward ideas, participate in discussions, and express their ideas, several of them also mentioned that young researchers are often afraid to speak up or argue with senior staff members. According to ECR3 from Germany: "As an early career researcher, you want to complete your studies, so any intense conflict would be avoided." ECR8 from Israel elaborated: "I want to get tenure, and I don't want to fight with anyone." Another issue, presented by several ECRs, was that even though they participated in board meetings, they were not invited to informal and unofficial meetings, which clearly indicates that this stakeholder group is not considered of critical importance and has limited possibilities to put forward their concerns.

Therefore, as corroborated by nearly all interviewees, the best way to raise issues and receive immediate attention was through informal communication with their supervisor or other senior and influential staff members. The importance of informal communication between ECRs and their mentors and heads of departments was supported by the managers' interviews. A manager from the HEI in Israel stated: "In the case of an informal suggestion that is not in the agenda some young researchers participate in the discussion."

The present study reveals that at the lowest level of governance, the urgency of ECRs is similar in degree to their power, as discussed previously. ECRs tended to be active participants in departmental level discussions and their ideas were taken into account. The Lithuanian case again stands out as having the highest level of ECR influence on decision-making. An example was provided by Lithuanian ECR1: "Since the department is small, everyone's voice is heard, and good ideas are often implemented. Sometimes small changes are even implemented without any deliberation." Many other ECRs from all countries described ECRs as being accepted, supported, and included in the decision-making process to either a medium or a high degree. However, the issues on which ECRs were usually consulted appear to be rather limited. The main discussions in which ECRs participated concerned research, day-to-day functioning of their research units, events, purchases, teaching, and student supervision.

To gain a complete view of ECRs' agency in institutional decision-making, this study included ECRs who actively participate in various representative roles and ECRs who do not. In addition, representatives of different research fields (soft and hard sciences) were interviewed to represent different disciplinary cultures. From our findings, it can be concluded that the formal participation of ECRs in senates, committees, boards, etc., correlates with higher legitimacy, power, and urgency, especially at higher levels of HEI governance. It is clear that a seat in such bodies grants more opportunities to formally put forward ideas and

gain immediate attention and support. When it comes to the inclusion of ECRs at the departmental level of decision-making, the formal representation is less crucial, as many interviewees reported rather similar levels of influence at this level, regardless of their representation status. No significant correlation between the disciplinary field and the reported role of ECRs in decision-making was observed, pointing to the importance of organisational hierarchical structures, rather than disciplinary hierarchies.

## 10. Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to examine the role that ECRs play in university decision-making bodies across seven studied countries in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Drawing upon stakeholder theory, we evaluated the agency that ECRs hold as internal stakeholders in HEIs, which represents a neglected topic in the literature to date.

Overall, the study found that there is variation among the studied HEIs in terms of the formal representation and informal influence of ECRs. In the majority of the universities studied, ECRs are not well-represented at central university level and/or faculty level decision-making bodies. The absence of formal representation and structured communication channels enabling ECRs to voice concerns implies that ECRs are limited in their ability to influence decisions—that is, to be agents of change through representation and formal channels. Rather, their voice is heard in informal ways and mainly in relation to educational issues and teaching rather than research. Therefore, structural changes (e.g., setting formal quotas for ECRs in decision-making bodies) may not solve the problem, as cultural changes are also needed.

In terms of the dimensions of stakeholder theory, it appears that ECRs have low legitimacy in central university decision-making bodies and maintain low power across all levels of university governance, whereas the urgency of their interests is often marginalised at higher levels of university decision-making. On the other hand, ECRs can exercise legitimacy and sometimes urgency through informal channels and personal liaison with senior academics; yet their power remains limited even at the departmental level due to the hierarchical structures present at universities. These structures prioritise senior researchers' interests, and it seems they have not changed much despite the calls for increasing stakeholder involvement, centralisation, and professionalisation of university management due to NPM reforms. Here it is also interesting to observe, that despite the NPM reforms, which have increased managerial oversight of academic work, senior academics remain powerful in decision-making, albeit to varying degrees in different studied institutional contexts. This is in line with Marquina's (2024) observation that academic oligarchy can be co-opted by the policy circles and managers, with senior academics asserting power also in the managerial systems.

Comparing the views of ECRs and managers on the levels of legitimacy, power, and urgency reveals discrepancies, but also an overlap in statements from the perspectives of ECRs and managers, leading to the conclusion that changes are needed to strengthen ECRs as a stakeholder group. ECRs should be given better representation at the different levels of HEIs and the opportunity to express their voice and influence the process of decision-making. With low formal legitimacy, ECRs rely on informal channels, e.g., the informal power they have at the departmental level through their supervisors and more senior staff. Even in cases where legitimacy exists as a consequence of the system of representation, ECRs are represented in small numbers which weakens their power and interest in decision-making. Yet, the lack of ECRs' participation in

decision-making is not something that the interviewed HEI managers find dubious, as some mentioned a lack of interest from ECRs, lack of experience and qualifications, and their dedication to research, which implies limited time for committee work.

Our findings suggest that ECRs seem to be, at best, latent stakeholders at the central university level in most of the HEIs studied here; while at the lower levels of hierarchy they become expectant stakeholders and, in the case of the Lithuanian HEI, definitive stakeholders at the departmental level. The dominance of senior faculty and the insufficient formal representation of ECRs in decision-making bodies implies that they are limited in their ability to influence change in HEIs and academia in general. In order to foster a more inclusive university environment, both structural and cultural reforms are necessary to enhance ECR representation at higher organisational levels and to ensure that their voices are meaningfully integrated into governance discussions at all university levels. Given the differences between case study HEIs in different countries, one can see that low power distance countries allow for more representation and participation of ECRs at the lower hierarchical levels, compared to those HEIs in high power distance countries. Informal influence seems to be the key mechanism open to ECRs, irrespective of the governance model. The managerial governance model with top-down decision-making seems to include more representation of ECRs in the formal decision-making structures. At the same time, universities continue to be a specific type of organisation where academic oligarchy and academic hierarchies continue to play a very important role, and opening up university governance to various stakeholder groups is not a linear and straightforward process.

Addressing the structural, hierarchical, and cultural challenges is essential for recognising and appreciating the contributions of ECRs in shaping HE. Our findings suggest that more space should be made for ECRs' voices in formal decision-making governance settings and that their role as definitive stakeholders in HE be recognised across all levels of the university. Representation of different academic career groups when raising questions, discussing, and making decisions not only raises issues relevant to each group, but also contributes to the health of the institution itself by increasing the diversity of viewpoints on the issue under consideration. Unlike students, ECRs do not always have organisations that unite them and represent their interests within HEIs. Thus, we recommend: (a) creating a more widespread system for formal representation of ECRs in various committees at multiple levels of HEIs, in which representation is remunerated or otherwise acknowledged by the institution, (b) creating dedicated advisory roles for ECRs on research/teaching-related issues, (c) creating safe spaces for ECRs to discuss and voice their concerns informally across departments while building networks, (d) raising awareness among university senior academics and managers about the importance of incorporating ECR views in organisational innovation, and (e) monitoring the inclusion of ECRs in institutional decision-making bodies by gender and discipline.

Based on the above findings, several avenues for further research can be proposed. For example, future research may also explore strategies encouraging the empowerment of ECRs in relation to university governance. In addition to ECRs' voices, the perceptions of senior academics may be sought to examine how these influence attitudes towards ECR involvement in decision-making. Understanding these dynamics could inform strategies to bridge the gap between career stages and improve policymaking regarding ECRs' active participation in HE governance. Lastly, further research could investigate the interaction between ECR engagement in university governance and academic job (or study programme) satisfaction, as insights from this line of research could lead to better academic environments.

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank the EU COST Action 20137 VOICES for providing the opportunity for the authors to meet and carry out research within Work Group 2, as well as covering the language editing costs. Further, we are grateful to the TU Dortmund University for the open access financial support through the institutional agreement with the Cogitatio Press. We are particularly grateful to the helpful reviewers and our proofreader for their insightful comments, which have significantly improved the manuscript. Finally, we thank all the interviewees at the case study institutions for agreeing to participate in our study and sharing their insights with us.

## Funding

The COST Action 20137 “Making Young Researchers’ Voices Heard for Gender Equality” (VOICES) project provided funding for language editing and financing conferences and workshops during which the co-authors designed the study and shared interim results. The article was written in the auspices of the EU COST action 20137 VOICES Work Group 2 “Decision-making and Leadership.” Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between TU Dortmund University and Cogitatio Press.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors are members of the COST Action-funded VOICES 20137 project (2021–2025), which aims to address the issues of gender equality among young researchers and investigators across Europe through doctoral training, networking, and research. Some of the authors have been employed in the institutions that were studied, but the co-authors took care in ensuring that comparable data was gathered and that the possible biases were mitigated; for instance, the analysis was carried out and the interim findings were critically reviewed by colleagues from other contexts and institutions. Proofreading of the article was carried out by Prof. Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone (University of Malta, Malta).

## Data Availability

The data has not been made publicly accessible in order to protect the respondents’ anonymity.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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# Embracing Paradox Realities: Racially Minoritised Women and Gender-Based Violence in Higher Education

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**Submitted:** 27 December 2024 **Accepted:** 17 March 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

Although universities often adopt diversity and inclusion policies, the everyday experience of employees indicates multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination. This article discusses how institutional norms and practices reinforce power structures and stop those experiencing intersectional discrimination from voicing their experiences of gender-based violence in higher education. We employ the frameworks of “everyday racism” and “network silence” to analyse 12 interviews with racially minoritised women who experienced gender-based violence in academia and one bystander. Our findings challenge the assumption of universities that gender-based violence and racial discrimination are marginal concerns. The interviews point to institutional factors that generate, coerce, and support silence. They reveal a paradox combination of dynamics of hypervisibility and invisibility, structural barriers, institutional practices, discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices as factors contributing to silencing, othering, and marginalisation within academia. Women from ethnic minorities and marginalised groups demonstrate both self-silencing and the deprivation of their agency and voice due to cultural normative expectations. We conclude by exploring alternatives to promote transformational change that considers intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination. We suggest what change agents in higher education institutions can do to hear unheard voices and reduce the long-standing multiple disadvantages faced by intersectionally marginalised groups.

## Keywords

diversity; everyday racism; gender-based violence; higher education; intersectionality; silence; transformational change

## 1. Introduction

Writing an empirical article with a focus on racially minoritised women researchers and experiences of intersectional discrimination in the context of gender-based violence in academia is a challenging endeavour. We recognise it is important to reflect on our own positionality: Vilana Pilinkaitė Sotirovič is a White feminist researcher from an East European country; Anke Lipinsky is a White mid-career researcher from a family with migration background; and Bruna Cristina Jaquetto Pereira is a Black early career scholar from the Global South. English is not our first language. Nevertheless, we are aware of the different degrees of privileges available to us, as two senior academics and one early career scholar, and respectfully approach the lived realities of our interviewees fully recognising that we can only begin to understand the stories they shared. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the interviewees who placed their trust in us and disclosed their lived everyday experiences on a difficult topic.

Modern universities are globally networked and challenge themselves through research competitions and international higher education rankings, often cultivating an image of being open to an international workforce in connection to academic excellence. In response to the diversity of staff and students, diversity management has become the new standard for establishing equality and inclusion policies in higher education and research organisations. Diversity strategies often consider the diversity of their target groups as both, a starting point and an objective, including universities' educational mission and employment practices (Ahmed & Swan, 2006). For example, the League of European Research Universities (2019) published a manifest in 2019 outlining key steps on how universities can effectively promote a comprehensive approach to implementing equality, diversity, and inclusion policies. These strategies claim to guarantee for people of all gender identities, sexualities, with or without disabilities, as well as the racially minoritised, that everyone should be able to access and participate in academia without discrimination allowing everyone to fulfil their potential, which implies that institutions are prepared to prevent and address discrimination when it takes place. Moreover, in the context of the #MeToo movement, the societal awareness of sexual harassment has changed from a far-reaching normalisation to a behaviour that is not (or no longer) acceptable in the workplace, including academic institutions and associations (Zippel, 2021). Instances of discrimination, gender-based and sexualised violence can place universities and research organisations under immense pressure. Such incidents not only pose a risk to the reputation of these institutions, but also call into question their legitimacy as societal entities (Dee et al., 2023, p. 3).

Despite growing pressure to adopt diversity policies, the assertion by universities that they provide a secure environment for creativity, research, and learning (Gray & Pin, 2017, as referenced in Colpitts, 2022, p. 153) is found to be flawed. Diversity, equality, and inclusion units often lack a voice in major decisions of higher education institutions (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022, p. 44). Given that deep and pervasive transformational processes in higher education can be the result of deliberate top-down planning as well as emerge bottom-up from activists (Dee et al., 2023, p. 9), it is surprising that current practices in developing countermeasures tend to exclude those who experience sexist and racist forms of violence. At the same time, strong institutional resistance to diversity and gender equality initiatives—including those targeting gender-based violence—has been well documented, revealing a persistent reluctance to acknowledge and address structural inequalities (Ahmed, 2012; Verge et al., 2018). In this article, we follow the definition of gender-based violence set forth in the Istanbul Convention report, which refers to it as “any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity” (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 18).

Today, experiences of intersectional discrimination in higher education tend to be the norm rather than the exception (Bourabain, 2020; Eaton et al., 2020; Esnard, 2019; Mählck, 2016). Likewise, episodes of gender-based violence in the context of intersectional discrimination are not isolated cases. Findings of a large-scale survey on the prevalence of gender-based violence amongst staff in academia indicate higher prevalence rates of the six tested forms of gender-based violence among women (78%) and marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities or chronic illness (82%), queer people (77%), and among ethnic minorities (75%), compared to cis-gender heterosexual men (65%) without a disability and no association to a racially minoritised group (Lipinsky, 2024). Ethnic minoritised status is associated with a higher prevalence of gender-based violence overall ( $e^{\beta} = 1.358$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and in all forms asked about in the survey,  $e^{\beta}$  ranges from 1.263 to 2.184, with  $p < 0.01$  (Humbert et al., 2022, p. 78). Every case is one case too many. Focusing on the intersection of gender and race, we examine experiences of intersectional discrimination to make hidden structures and routines in academia visible, raise awareness, and ultimately contribute to transformational change of institutions and values.

Promoted by national governments or institutions, diversity, equality, and inclusion mainstreaming sometimes reach strategies and interventions against gender-based violence (Ahmed, 2012; Huck et al., 2022). However, research on strategies to combat gender-based violence highlights significant shortcomings in effectively addressing individuals of gender-diverse, queer, and racially minoritised backgrounds. A meta-analysis of studies on sexual violence on US campuses found less than 22 percent of them addressed racism (Colpitts, 2022, p. 154). Moreover, studies find a large gap between policy and practice (byrd, 2022), showing how the implementation has yielded few of the desired results (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016), and even founding practices that conceal intersectional discrimination (Vandevelde-Rougale & Morales, 2022). The question of which role is allocated to diversity in policies addressing gender-based violence arises.

In those cases, in which multiple or intersecting discrimination is covered, it is often framed as a specific vulnerability of minoritised groups of students and staff. But the “structural and institutional dimensions of violence are rendered invisible when it is framed as a depoliticised, interpersonal issue” (Colpitts, 2022, p. 153). Regarding vulnerability as a deficient or deviant characteristic of individuals ascribed to people experiencing discrimination may lead to a counterproductive list of vulnerabilities that are set off against each other, creating a form of “oppression Olympics” (Hancock, 2007, p. 68). The challenge is not to eradicate vulnerability per se, but to transform vulnerability itself by recognising its power, meaning, and structure. Assigning vulnerability to specific groups also shifts the focus away from how institutional policies, processes, and norms support the perpetuation and normalisation of inequalities. The individualisation of risk neglects the systemic configuration of power that is central to understanding intersecting discriminations (Christoffersen, 2023; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Institutional drivers like racism, normative expectations, and stereotypes, as well as hostility against racially minoritised groups and homophobia, remain unnoticed and unaddressed. This combines with institutional power dynamics, which contributes to creating a work climate in which gender-based violence is normalised (Atkinson & Standing, 2019, as referenced in Colpitts, 2022, p. 152).

In this article, we analyse the experiences of women researchers from different racial and ethnic groups, cultures and nationalities that are marginalised in European academia and society, and which are referred to as “racially minoritised groups.” Our findings show that in the context of hierarchical structures, power inequalities, and attitudes prevalent in higher education settings, the normalisation of gendered,

homophobic, and racist stereotypes and prejudices becomes an everyday practice that simultaneously supports and participates in gender-based violence. Gendered social and organisational norms interact and work as power structures in higher education. Following the concept of “transformational change in higher education as organisations” (Dee et al., 2023, pp. 8–10), we examine the needs for transformation expressed by people affected by sexist and racist discrimination. We expand on previous work on “network silence,” i.e., how being silent, silencing, and not being heard reveal tacit structures, behaviours, and attitudes that support gendered hierarchies, masculine toxic norms, and prejudices by addressing forms of intersectional discrimination (Hershcovis et al., 2021; Pilinkaitė Sotirovič et al., 2024).

We employ intersectionality as an analytical tool to reveal how gender-based violence is shaped by the intersection of several systems of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). As a concept, intersectionality emphasises that different systems of discrimination—such as gender, race, class, nationality, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression—are mutually constitutive and interrelated, working together to produce injustice (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Additionally, we adopt intersectionality as a transformative framework that connects social analysis with concrete strategies for change (Hill Collins, 2019). Thus, this perspective not only informs our analysis but also shapes our recommendations for change agents within academic institutions.

We define racism as normative and social practices of domination that categorise individuals into different racial groups on the basis of perceived differences related to physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair texture, or eye shape, and cultural attributes such as origin, language, or religion. It operates by asserting the biological and cultural superiority of one group—typically identified as White—over others—Black, Asian, Muslim, among others—thereby legitimising the unequal treatment and subordinate social status of those deemed inferior. Although race is a social construct without any biological basis, it continues to profoundly shape social and societal structures by embedding associations between physical and cultural traits and assumptions about ability, morality, and behaviour (Clair & Denis, 2015; El Tayeb, 2011). In this article, we understand racial identities as socially constructed and focus on how race as a system of discrimination and privilege generates power imbalances through the continuous process of racialisation. Central to this process is Whiteness, understood as a socially constructed identity involved in normalising White experiences and which sustains racial hierarchies (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

We employ Essed’s (1991) concept of “everyday racism” to bridge the structural (macro) and interpersonal (micro) dimensions in our analysis. According to Essed, as it becomes routine, racism manifests not only as open racial offenses but mainly as ambiguous meanings and practices that are regarded as mundane and trivial. To differentiate between everyday racism and other forms of racism, Essed identifies three key characteristics. Firstly, everyday racism is a process whereby socially constructed racist ideas are integrated into practices that are immediately definable and manageable. Secondly, practices with racist implications become familiar and repetitive. Thirdly, underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualised and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations (Essed, 1991, p. 51).

The framework of everyday racism provides a useful lens through which to examine intersectional discrimination as embedded in everyday interactions in institutions of higher education and research. By focusing on the dynamics of individual and institutional (structural) interactions, we gain insights into the complex ways in which sexism and racism intersect and manifest in academia. The network silence

framework is employed to analyse institutional normative expectations towards the academic staff and doctoral students that have diverse minoritised backgrounds and identify the dynamics of interactions between the institutional structures, actors, processes (macro level), and individuals (micro level) through the perspective of victim/survivor and bystander experiences.

## 2. Methodology

The interview material presented in this article is drawn from the EU-funded research project UniSAFE. The project investigated the prevalence, determinants, and consequences of gender-based violence in academia by collecting evidence through a large-scale web survey in 46 European higher education and research institutions. As part of the research, 54 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff and students who had experienced or witnessed gender-based violence in universities. In addition, the study identified and compared the institutional responses to gender-based violence, mapped national and institutional policies, and identified factors that facilitate or hinder adequate institutional responses. The multi-level, mixed-method research design proved an effective basis for the development of practical tools and the formulation of evidence-based policy recommendations for higher education institutions and policymakers. The qualitative interview research in this project was organised and led by one of the authors of this article. All three authors were involved in the research by conducting interviews and/or supervising data collection. The qualitative interview research was approved by the Working Group on the Compliance of Research Ethics of the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences, no. SR-103, on 31 December 2021.

The interviewees were recruited via the UniSAFE project communication channels and project partner organisations' websites, social media platforms (Facebook and LinkedIn), and academic networks, in addition to an invitation link in the exit page of the UniSAFE online survey disseminated in 46 universities, and one network of international researchers. A purposive sample of 54 academic staff and students was drawn up for the study. Demographic information collected included self-reported gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, and position in the university. In total, 13 individuals out of 54 identified as racially minoritised (regarding their racial, ethnic, or national background). Data from these interviewees were subsequently extracted from the corpus and re-analysed for this article. We present the findings of an examination of the experiences of 12 women and one man, who shared their experiences about incidents of gender-based violence in academia where they were studying or working at the time of the interview.

The 13 online semi-structured interviews were conducted in English on an online platform between January and May 2022. Each interview lasted up to 60–80 minutes. Out of the 13 participants, eight were between 30 and 39 years old; two interviewees were in the 25–29 age range; two were in the 40–49 range; one was in the 50–59 range. In terms of academic status, five of the 13 interviewees were doctoral students; three respondents indicated being junior researchers when an event occurred at an early stage in their careers, and four respondents were employed on temporary contracts at the time of the interview. One interviewee was a senior researcher with a permanent employment contract. The one interviewee who identified as male offered insights from the perspective of a bystander.

The interviewees were asked to describe the institutional context of their studies, research, and work. The guiding questions focused on the respondent's perception of and reflections on any misconduct they

experienced or witnessed in the work or study environment, their communication practices with their supervisor(s), the experiences they had during reporting violence or reasons for non-reporting, and consequences for their personal and professional well-being. The questionnaire did not include direct questions pertaining to incidents of gender-based violence. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. Data have been pseudonymised and presented as such in the article.

Because of its many advantages (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 96–97; Naeem et al., 2023), thematic analysis was chosen as the main technique for “thematising meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78) to “unravel the surface of reality” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) of intersectional discrimination. We ask, in the context of gender-based violence, when and how gender and race become relevant in higher education. The data analysis followed the established steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006): Interviews were read several times to identify the keywords the informants used. Thematic codes were then generated following established themes and patterns depicting how the intersection of interviewees’ racial, ethnic, nationality, or migrant status with gender was experienced. By analysing the interview data, we aim to grasp the tacit meanings created by patterns of intersectional discrimination in the interviewees’ descriptions of feelings of being excluded, feeling safe or unsafe, deprivation of space and voice, and victimised in their everyday lived experiences. Using an inductive deductive qualitative method (Creswell, 2013), we grouped the descriptive codes according to the everyday experiences of non-Whiteness, non-Western, non-privileged, being “othered,” being “silenced” and analysed them within the broader context of intersectional dominance, power dynamics and gender-based violence in academia. Finally, we derive from the findings how change agents in higher education could better embrace the paradox realities and propose concrete measures.

### 3. Results

The results of our research can be assigned to either the interpersonal or structural level, although this is not always unambiguous, as identities and experiences, including everyday discrimination (Essed, 1991), are necessarily associated with inequality structures and systems of discrimination (Christoffersen, 2023). Experiences of intersectional violence often involve an interplay between these two levels, while the pattern of silencing and being silent is more evidently cross-cutting. Nevertheless, we have processed the results according to thematic considerations and present them in four broad thematic clusters: (a) the paradox of visibility, (b) precarity and discrimination as barriers in early careers, (c) institutional factors undermining diversity policies, and (d) attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices maintaining everyday racism.

#### 3.1. *The Paradox of Visibility in Academic Spaces*

The first set of findings addresses the interpersonal level (micro) and unveils problematic cultural norms and values within higher education. These norms can be considered as signs of ongoing colonial discourses, manifesting in discriminatory practices and gender-based violence against racially minoritised women. Racially minoritised researchers are perceived and addressed as “other,” “inferior,” or “deviant” based on the implicit norm of Whiteness (Tate, 2014). As researchers, racially minoritised women experience doubt-raising instead of support for their career aspirations and academic abilities. Instead, gendered and racialised stereotypes take hold and lead to a hyper-sexualisation of their bodies. In addition, there is a subtle expectation of gratitude, servitude, and subservience on their part, especially if they are early career

women researchers: “Being a women, being from the [non-Western European] region, being a temporary employee—you constantly experience not exactly the same rights as the rest of the faculty” (women/researcher at an early career stage). Tasks that come with a certain amount of prestige are not assigned to them; instead, their White colleagues and superiors expect them to take on academic care work that has little visibility and is not valued (see also Section 3.2).

Universities are generally regarded as sophisticated and post-racial even though they can be described as White and male-dominated institutions (Diallo, 2019). They are permeated by processes leading to the marginalisation of bodies racialised as non-White, including barriers in access to career opportunities, hostility, lack of progression, and overall career success (Arday, 2022; Bourabain, 2020). Within academia, these processes are often experienced by racialised women as being overly visible, while at the same time not having a voice. Hypervisibility as a Black researcher in a White university is paradoxically coupled with minimisation of merit and low visibility accorded to the academic work and achievements of racialised and racially minoritised women academics. The interviews reveal dynamics generating hypervisibility when “you are the only Asian and non-native speaker among the staff” (woman/researcher at an early career stage), or “the only one from the Global South among the other White European PhD students” (woman/PhD student) that increases the feeling “that I am not equally treated, and I do not have the same resources” (woman/researcher at an early career stage). The discomfort does not stem from being “unique” in this environment but instead from being regarded as “bodies out of place” (Tate, 2014, p. 2478). The presence of racialised and racially minoritised women in higher education challenges traditional power relations as operative structures of oppression. The contributions of racially minoritised women to research and other forms of scientific work tend not to be adequately acknowledged. One interviewee described that being an early career researcher she prepared an entire project proposal, but the supervisor “did not let me say a word in the project presentation” and “when I stayed [voiceless], I actually granted him the project” (woman/senior researcher).

Research on physical hypervisibility and concurrent professional invisibility of these women reflects upon patterns of White male organisational norms which serve to maintain the status quo of privileges (Nash & Moore, 2022). In her study on racism and sexism in Danish universities, Guschke (2023) identifies patterns of marginalisation, especially feelings of not belonging and discomfort, embodied by racially minoritised individuals, and conversely, feelings of superiority associated with White bodies. Investigating the experiences of Black women, Showunmi observed that their hypervisibility within the academy, without commensurate inclusion, reflects the practices of being “seen but not heard” (Showunmi, 2023, p. 5). Our findings corroborate the observations made by Guschke (2023) and Showunmi (2023) on how Whiteness in the academic environment is a driver of structural domination by not-hearing, devaluing, and not recognising the merits and contributions of non-White doctoral students and early career researchers.

### **3.2. Structural Barriers for Career Progression: Precarity, Exclusion, Discrimination**

The interviewees report processes and practices in higher education (structural level) that tend to perpetuate a culture of silence and being silent in complicity regarding intersectional discrimination and gender-based violence. Universities’ practices include the pattern of referring to the interpersonal level as a rule, effectively delegating general decisions to the interpersonal level. This is particularly apparent through the ways in which precarious employment and informal career support are structured. Subtle mechanisms of

career advancement and disadvantage become apparent in the allocation of underappreciated tasks. The structural conditions that only allow academic independence in the position of professorship make early career researchers even more dependent on informal forms of support based on homosocial co-optation.

Racially minoritised interviewees express concerns about the lack of recognition and feeling disadvantaged in their academic environment. The analysis suggests that having completed a doctorate, attaining an academic position, teaching courses, doing research, and publishing in high-impact journals—these academic merits were devalued by White peers, senior professors, and university leaders, who had formal power over the professional prospects of the early career researchers. Two interviewees expressed concerns about being treated fairly because of the lack of diversity at the top of the hierarchy. The authority to include or exclude early career staff, and even to impede their career progression, is vested in White senior staff. This authority may be exercised based on vague doubts about a person's commitment to an academic career (as one woman/PhD student said: "The professor constantly said that I was not working for the project, or [that] I did not make any kind of progress"), the degree obtained, and the accuracy of publications (a woman/researcher at an early career stage told us: "[The professor] accused me of plagiarising and fabricating my degree"). In this sense, both Mirza (2006) and Tate (2014) refer to constant doubt-raising surveillance practices employed by colleagues, superiors, and students, questioning whether women from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds are even fit for the job.

Since informal career support mechanisms dominate in higher education, it is particularly important for early career staff to make themselves heard and to present their work, skills, and ideas to established researchers. Failure to be recognised and listened to by seniors and professors contributes to feelings of not-belonging among doctoral students and academic staff from racially minoritised groups. Endeavours to conduct oneself in a manner that is perceived as appropriate, acceptable, or accommodating—simply "to fit in"—in the absence of an estimation of the expectations of powerholders, elucidate the effects that precarious employment and dependence on informal career support have. Controlling oral re-presentations in class ("I used to give my opinion in my courses, now I'm one of the most silent participants," said one female PhD student) and monitoring one's behaviour ("I retract myself") to escape possible public ridicule and enforced feelings of being devalued ("I think what I'm going to say might not be worth it, or it might not be well received," said a female PhD student) emerge in the data and reveal the strategic use of being silent to comply with the assumed expectations of academic supervisors.

Experiences of unequal treatment and exclusionary practices towards colleagues who do not use the dominant language as their first language at times become very subtle and nuanced but can also take a more contentious form. The feeling of non-belonging and non-recognition is reinforced by professors and team leaders by switching to the dominant language of the country (the first language of the state): "They will start speaking in [national language]. And that's a way to push you back, because then you will not be integrated into the conversation because they [leaders, supervisors, professors] don't want to talk to you" (woman/PhD student).

These practices also emerge as symbolic distancing when professors or team leaders mock the accents of non-native doctoral students or junior and sometimes senior academics. For example, a White woman director demonstrates their domination by instructing in the national language regardless of the diversity among a group of international doctoral students and researchers: "There were some meetings when the

director said: ‘I’m now going to speak in [national language] and you have to learn it’ (woman/PhD student). Respondents describe similar situations in which they felt unwelcome and alienated because professors and team leaders distanced them from domestic peer group members. However, learning the national language of the country does not guarantee that a person will be accepted on an equal footing in the academic environment. For example, one interviewee observed that a name that is perceived as a “Muslim” name becomes a marker to treat a person as a migrant, non-European, and non-White—regardless of when the person migrated to the country of current residence. The interviewee shared her impression that a White migrant colleague was treated “more like a native” by colleagues than she was (woman/researcher at early career stage). The examples illustrate how the challenges associated with the perception of status and assumed otherness are mediated by the intersections of several axes of discrimination, including race and ethnicity, in addition to gender.

Domination manifests in a hidden way in everyday practices, including informal mentoring and task-assigning practices, such as providing orientation to junior researchers about the courses they need to teach to secure an academic position in the future. As indicated by the respondents, the courses and teaching responsibilities they were assigned to were regarded as “unattractive” courses that were not considered a priority for the department. They were given “leftovers,” so-called “rubbish courses that nobody wanted to teach, and the workload was so heavy that there was no time left for research and other academic activities” (woman/researcher at early career stage). In academia, racially minoritised women are assigned the most challenging and undesirable tasks, while the most prestigious and decision-making positions are largely occupied by White men and, on occasion, White women. Women lecturers and doctoral students, especially the racially minoritised, are called “cleaners” (woman/researcher at early career stage) or “young secretaries” (woman/senior researcher) that “have the honour to do those things” and are expected to “honour majors” (woman/PhD student)—implying a need to defer to them. This reinforces the idea that some people are not seen as legitimate academics and that their presence on university campuses has no value in the pursuit of new knowledge. The prevailing assumption among university professors from the Global North seems that researchers from the Global South are deserving of a lower social and academic status “than they [university professors] have” (woman/PhD student). The informal mechanisms of career support in academia thus lead to social closure instead of a true opening for international researchers. As one interviewee noted:

[She was] a part of the diversity quota that the institution tries to fulfil, saying that they are diverse and embrace identities, races, ethnicities. However, when they [university] opened new positions for PhD students almost all students are of White backgrounds. Thus, the same pattern is repeated. (women/PhD student)

Although higher education institutional policies for equality, diversity, and inclusion claim it in the public sphere, there are still no equal prospects for a scientific career for racially minoritised researchers, especially women.

### **3.3. Institutional Factors Undermining Diversity and Inclusion**

Our findings indicate that experiences of inequality are understood and categorised differently by different positionalities. Academic institutions do not care to design equality, diversity, and inclusion policies from the

perspective of racially minoritised women as a standard practice, thus the problems affecting them remain unintelligible. In addition, minor incidents, those that are not legally actionable, are not taken seriously by the complaint services, or the services are unable to offer any remedy, even if they would like to address it. Without the necessary skills and the will of the top management to address racist, discriminatory, and exclusionary practices of silencing, universities are failing to live up to the values of diversity and inclusion that they promote in the public sphere.

The discrimination, othering, and silencing experienced by racially minoritised women make it difficult for them to create networks of support that are essential for sustaining and advancing careers and leadership (Showunmi, 2023). Some respondents (woman/researcher at early career stage; woman/researcher on temporary contract; woman/professor) illustrate that the persistence of White networks of men hampers their career prospects and increases risks for gender-based violence:

When we as women come into academia, we don't have the network, the old-boys-network to benefit from. So, if they do something wrong to us [sexually harassing], there won't be any boomerang effect on them....[When] my young male colleagues...enter a new university, or new position, they are very much embedded in an old-boys-network. (woman/senior researcher)

These feelings of exclusion mechanisms lead racially minoritised junior women scientists to turn to more senior racially minoritised women scientists, from whom they expect informal support, a solidarity-based assessment of the professional situation, or a mentorship. This overburdens the senior scientists in purely numerical terms and makes their position appear exceptional. Regarded as role models, they lack the formal authority to represent the interests of racially minoritised women researchers as a group or to address their needs. It is the university's remit to ensure safety and address the specific situations of racially minoritised early career women scientists, particularly at the intersection of sexualised harassment and racial discrimination.

The unequal access to and outcomes of career advancement of racially minoritised women limits the bottom-up emergent transformation of higher education towards inclusion and equality. The issue lies at the apex of the institution and the prevailing values and policies are unfit to resolve it top-down. One interviewee, a researcher in a Northern European country expressed frustration that keeping quiet seems to be an acceptable way of dealing with problems in their workplace.

[People around here] do not want to look like they are very opinionated or very negative. So, when bad things take place, people stay quiet....They want everything just quiet on the surface, regardless of what is happening underneath. (woman/researcher at early career stage)

The social norm and the resulting practice of maintaining silence potentially cause significant issues when the legal protection of employees, which is the responsibility of universities, is compromised as a result of such silence. Another example of silencing describes inaction of the leadership in the case of racist language use:

We had [a professor using] really racist language and racist features [were included] in the individual assessment at the end of the course. We [international students] informed the [faculty dean] about it, but nothing happened. So, he [the professor] is still [teaching] there [at this university]. So yeah, I just think that they [the leadership] just don't care. (woman/PhD student)

On the one hand, the short-term sense of helplessness regarding the situation and the early career researcher's perception of the university leadership's behaviour as unjust affects the relationship between the researchers and the university as an institution. On the other hand, these experiences of violence have the potential to impact negatively on the researchers' well-being and on the pursuit of their scientific careers, respectively considerations regarding their future role in academia considering these norms and practices of network silence.

Dissatisfaction with leadership practices, including all varieties of silence, from looking the other way, rebuking that one should not raise one's voice, or refusing to provide help and support, is present in many of the interviews. One doctoral student shared her observation about women leaders adopting the behaviours of male dominance in leadership:

We [PhD students] could notice that she [supervisor] was harsher to us women...We tried to look for help and talk with the director, who is a woman. And it didn't work. Basically, she [the director] said: 'Yes, I know that she's a very difficult person, but that's the way she works. And she brings a lot of money to the institute.' (woman/PhD student)

The absence of a commitment to acknowledging diverse realities and positioning at the highest levels of an organisation has an impact on the limited implementation of diversity, equality, and inclusion policies. This is evidenced by the findings of our interviews and also by the academic literature on the subject. However, European universities still claim to be inclusive and caring for equality and diversity. Attracting international talent is one of the goals of the European Research Area (Council of the European Union, 2021). In practice, however, this frequently remains as "window dressing" (woman/PhD student). For example, one interviewee noted that, "in Europe, there are some [policy] measures for gender inclusion, but we [non-European women students] are not going to be taken into account in those measures" (woman/PhD student). Discrimination and abuse continue by favouring the "domestic" over the international students even though they have the same degrees (women/PhD students). Interviewees expressed their concern that postdoctoral positions are usually offered to male graduates from European countries (women/PhD students) and that European women are recruited or promoted over non-European women. Gendered and racialised practices emerge and continue as a consequence of the very limited practical impact of diversity policies in higher education institutions (Bourabain, 2020). Similar observations were made by other scholars who demonstrate that universities are willing and committed to meeting equality and diversity standards, but fail when it comes to implementing them (Ahmed, 2012; Showunmi, 2023).

### ***3.4. Attitudes, Stereotypes, and Prejudices Perpetuating Everyday Gendered Racism***

Racially minoritised doctoral students and junior researchers additionally experience everyday racism in the form of being treated as less knowledgeable and less advanced compared to juniors who enjoy more privileges (woman/PhD student; similar observations were made by the other female PhD student). The findings of our research show similar trends in scholarly work where racially minoritised women in academia are often positioned as "others" and are constrained by being labelled as "intellectually inferior" or "lacking leadership ambitions" (Nash & Moore, 2022, p. 697). Such practices stabilise the racial stratification of academia and negatively impact opportunities for career progression. Interviewees noted that being a racially minoritised women researcher often means being questioned about the commitment to an academic

career. Even when benefiting from talent attraction actions of diversity, inclusion, and equality programmes, they are assumed to have priorities other than their academic careers. Showunmi and Tomlin (2022, pp. 43–46) describe the phenomenon of superficial disapproval of racism, while the systemic nature of racial discrimination is not acknowledged as “sophisticated racism.” In the interviews, we find evidence of prejudice whereby racially minoritised women researchers are perceived to be primarily interested in obtaining a European passport: “They just think that I’m not serious because I’m Latina, Black, I’m looking for a European passport” (woman/PhD student; similar observations were made by the other female PhD student). Such prejudices reveal gendered and racialised expectations of the sexual behaviour of racially minoritised women and their persistent representation as hypersexual (Diallo, 2019). In such environments, students and researchers identify barriers to sharing their experiences and prefer to keep them hidden and silent.

Racially minoritised women also experience discriminatory practices regarding the curriculum, the research agenda and the adoption of marginalised epistemological perspectives. Interviewees point to informal ways of intersectional power dynamics that demonstrate the unwillingness of White European professors to engage in “welcoming diverse communities and decolonising the curriculum” (woman/PhD student), and assume the Western view of knowledge to be taken for granted: “I [the professor] will teach you [doctoral student from global South] how we in [Global North] contribute to feminist knowledge” (woman/PhD student). The same interviewee expressed:

[My] way of doing gender, performativity of gender in the department is not welcomed....I have been isolated and the comments that I have heard, not in a direct way, but mostly in a very diplomatic way saying, ‘You are not welcome, nor your approaches of gender.’ (woman/PhD student)

This creates contradictory norms and practices on the part of institutions: on the one hand, women researchers from racially minoritised backgrounds are portrayed in their brochures to advertise the university’s openness to staff diversity and attract new international students; on the other hand, their academic contributions are invalidated (Bourabain, 2020; Mirza, 2006; Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022).

Being a racially minoritised postgraduate student and/or researcher often involves experiencing racist prejudice fuelled in everyday interactions:

Because I know what it can be like to be a Black woman. As a Black [person] you have to be prepared that [other people can behave badly]. So, I don’t have deep conversations that I know might turn into comments that I don’t want to hear. (woman/PhD student)

Other examples illustrate that the harassment experienced was based not only on gender “but because my appearance and behaviour showed that I am not a native. If I were a man, things would not have been the same” (woman/researcher at early career stage). Interviewees describe that professors keep abusing and harassing junior researchers (woman/PhD student), misusing and sexually abusing Erasmus students (woman/PhD student), allowing themselves to make comments about “hot Latin American girls” (woman/senior administration staff) and “gaze at you” (woman/PhD student). The incident of sexual harassment happened when a male supervisor “waited for the moment [to unpleasantly hug me and feel my body] and at some point, took advantage” of the doctoral international student. However, “nothing will happen [if you complain], and you just keep going” (woman/PhD student).

A more nuanced situation of harassment occurs when senior professors or supervisors behave in a patronising way (Bourabain, 2020), that marginalises while claiming to protect. One example of this was the relocation of Black women students' workspaces from the main building and into some remote rooms as a "safety" measure, at the instigation of their supervisor. The supervisor later explained that the majority of students were men and to protect the women doctoral students, their places of work were moved out of the main building. "All European doctoral students get offices in the main building, but women doctoral students, especially those from minority backgrounds, got offices in remote buildings" where they felt less safe (woman/PhD student). Bourabain (2020) argues that such gendered racism occurred through the practice of monitoring and controlling women's appearance, body, and sexual behaviour. One interviewee added in frustration:

[Professors are] constantly checking my uterus, asking: 'Are you planning to have babies soon? Do you have a boyfriend? Are you planning to get married?' These questions are asked every six months because they will plan in advance whether to include you in [a] project. This doesn't happen with the male students. (woman/PhD student)

Our empirical findings show that those who experienced any form of gender-based violence and discrimination sought support and help. Support resources most often came from colleagues, team members, friends, or close family members. The existing support channels and units available in universities were not often used by victimised students or staff, both because of mistrust of institutions and the fear of re-victimisation. Understanding the hostile atmosphere faced by racially minoritised women in universities, we contribute to explaining how this paradox situation originates in everyday gendered racism.

#### 4. Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

The silence around racism and sexism is part of the reality of women researchers and students with racially minoritised backgrounds. Our results indicate that on the one hand, higher education institutions need to establish tools to be able to hear the voices of the persons concerned by gender-based violence, and on the other hand they need to develop more meaningful implementation mechanisms for established diversity, equality, and inclusion—if they want to ensure effective safeguarding from intersectional, multiple discrimination and gender-based violence. Our research demonstrates how listening to academic staff from a variety of national, ethnic, and racialised backgrounds can play a fundamental role in fostering emergent transformations in higher education. However, our examination of how universities advance inclusive environments, and the limited extent to which they succeed in achieving it, show how norms and practices fail to do justice to racially minoritised women researchers. The pervasive presence of sexism and racism, which are too often silently facilitated and tacitly accepted, have a detrimental and enduring impact on the social integrity of higher education institutions. The higher education sector in Europe has been too slow to address institutional gaps and failures in this regard.

The impact of how the perceived "other" and "inferior" come to matter within and for the organisation is often overlooked. Instead of acknowledging the systemic nature of gender, racial, and intersectional violence, policies and practices tend to focus on the individual level only, which ultimately hinders the transformation of higher education institutions. Policies and practices that focus exclusively on the vulnerability of racially minoritised and marginalised individuals seem unfit to drive meaningful change in

higher education. By individualising vulnerability, policies and practices inadvertently hinder the agency of minoritised and marginalised groups within the academy. In addition, diversity, equality, and inclusion policies and practices in higher education can become smokescreens for racism (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2022, p. 46) as they often perpetuate the legacy of colonialism, including in practices that aim to address gender-based violence.

Despite the good intentions of policies aimed at fostering equality, diversity and inclusion, instances of sexism and racism continue to persist. Our analysis of the stories of the racially minoritised early career researchers suggests that the practices of silencing, appropriation of their work, and expectation of obedience and appreciation reveal how colonial legacies shape academia. The findings are consistent with research confirming that such practices reinforce the reproduction of White male power relations (Hershcovis et al., 2021) and reinforce homogeneity ensuring who maintains “control, predictability and order” (Essed, 2004, p. 120). Following Essed (2004), homogeneity embedded in Whiteness and masculinity is a key trait of modernity that guarantees the uniformity of structures and processes. Nevertheless, racially minoritised early career women, as a marginalised group, demonstrate both self-silencing and the deprivation of their agency and voice due to cultural normative expectations. It would appear that the act of voicing one’s own experience as a victim of gender-based violence is not perceived as acceptable, largely due to the prevailing expectation of submissiveness of racially minoritised individuals. In our study, we find that their silence is both a strategic angle of their own actions to “fit” in the normative expectations and a result of external forces, i.e., self-silencing and being silenced, based on institutional practices. Those belonging to marginalised and racially minoritised groups are expected to conform to the dominant norms of White privileges (submissiveness). In such situations, a lot of room for power abuse emerges. The hypervisibility of difference plays a significant role in this process. Racialised minorities hardly fit into the normative expectations that have emerged from preferences for homogeneity. A wilful decision by leadership would be required to critically question these norms and mindsets, disrupt them, and transform the culture and practices in universities to the benefit of the whole academic system in the long term.

A cultural turn is needed to make all employees, students, and members of higher education institutions aware of the scope and processes pertaining to racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and their consequences. Higher educational institutions should establish platforms for discourse that enable an open discussion of, e.g., racial and intersectional discrimination and sexual harassment, which should no longer be considered taboo subjects.

The increasing precarity of academic jobs (Arday, 2022) and the dependence on informal relations to advance in the academic career are structural factors that further contribute to silence racially minoritised women. Structures of power imbalances, which privilege men and Whites, are deeply entrenched in everyday interactions and practices, and are frequently overlooked or inadequately addressed by policies and procedures. Our findings resonate with research on managerialism and organisational culture in universities which show that women in academic leadership positions remain in a minority and therefore, precarious (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). Being in such a minority position makes it difficult to create change, as their minority status is constantly challenged as being different or as being seen as different within the leadership of academia. The findings reveal that universities serve to perpetuate the reproduction of White male power relations. This is facilitated through the managerial organisational culture; whereby White women leaders frequently align themselves with men, in accordance with the prevailing masculine organisational culture, to overcome their status as a minority in leadership. However, this simultaneously

serves to perpetuate White male structural dominance (Burkinshaw & White, 2017). The representation of White men in leadership positions, their privilege to maintain power, and their support of White male networks, that uphold White cultural and gendered norms, create conditions that tend to increase gender-based violence (Amstrong et al., 2018). Therefore, the representation of gender and racialised minorities in leadership roles must be increased as must the necessary skills to address the structural factors that facilitate silence around racism and sexism within higher education institutions in Europe. Participation in training programmes on intersectional discrimination and sexualised and gender-based violence should become a standard practice and access criteria for all positions in higher education that include leadership as well as supervisory and teaching roles, including project team leaders and principal investigators.

The structures of knowledge production, i.e., of performing White research (Swan, 2017), also need to be addressed. Although the UniSAFE study did not intentionally open a space for questions about racism, and therefore, must be considered a White research project, the issue of multiple and intersectional discrimination clearly emerged in the qualitative and quantitative parts of the research and subsequently in the project's recommendations to policy-makers. Intersectional perspectives on violence and discrimination should be considered in the development of, e.g., evidence-based sexual harassment policies. The collection of data pertaining to the prevalence of intersectional violence can be a valuable exercise for any university seeking to gain an understanding of the scale of the issues it is required or willing to address, and for raising awareness on the topic at the same time (Lipinsky, 2025). In order to obtain a reliable estimation of the problem at the organisational level, repeated survey data collection must be carried out.

We conclude that change agents aimed at reducing discrimination and gender-based violence in higher education institutions need to take the intersectional discrimination of minoritised groups into account, e.g., by diversifying professional skills in established contact points and complaints offices as well as at the leadership level. It would be valuable to enhance the expertise on intersectional discrimination and step up the resources of equal opportunities and gender equality officers for monitoring and evaluation in this field. Providing additional funding for advice and complaints units for the racially minoritised, who experience racialised violence would be conducive to the advancement of this field of practice in higher education. It is imperative that the deeply entrenched norms and practices in higher education are acknowledged and tackled by any measure aiming to reduce sexism and racism if transformational change is to be achieved.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to cordially thank the interviewees who shared their stories and the researchers who contributed throughout the research. In particular, we express our gratitude to Giedrė Blažyte, Frederike Freund, Zuzana Andreska, Nathalie Wuiame, Sophia Häuser, and Rahel Bleile for collecting interview data, transcribing and preparing the interview transcriptions for the analysis.

### Funding

The data collection was funded by the European Research Framework Programme Horizon 2020 (project number 101006261). Bruna Cristina Jaquetto Pereira, in addition to her involvement as a researcher in the UniSAFE project, received funding under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 847635 for her project to implement intersectional research on sexual harassment of women from racial or ethnic minorities in Spanish universities. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences and Cogitatio Press.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The data presented in this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

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# Views of Women Doctoral Students and Dropouts on Doctoral Education in Türkiye

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**Submitted:** 30 December 2024 **Accepted:** 28 April 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

Countries must adapt their higher education systems to address the demands of 21st-century knowledge societies. Türkiye, a developing country (OECD, 2025), ranks 48th in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). Despite improvements, gender inequality remains a significant issue in Türkiye, with women often dropping out of educational programs due to household and caregiving responsibilities (Conger & Long, 2010; Gür & Bozgöz, 2022; Quinn, 2013). This study explores the experiences and challenges of women in doctoral education, highlighting their roles as change agents in higher education. It presents the views of ten current women doctoral students and ten dropouts from various programs of public universities in Türkiye. The study’s qualitative research captures diverse perspectives by including voluntary participants who were single, married, or divorced; with or without children; and employed outside academia. Data collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the participants’ experiences and perceptions. Two themes were identified through IPA: (a) challenges, which include the imposition of traditional roles, financial constraints, and unconstructive relationships with faculty members or advisors, and (b) the need for constructive relationships, defined by support from faculty, advisors, and peers. Suggestions for support mechanisms are also discussed.

## Keywords

doctoral student agency; gender gap; higher education transformation; inclusive doctoral education

## 1. Introduction

The multidimensional transformation of higher education (HE) is critical for meeting the needs of 21st-century knowledge societies. To achieve this, countries must improve different aspects of their HE systems in the face of growing demands (Olo et al., 2021). One key aspect is doctoral education, which contributes to empowering doctoral students who can effectively meet the country's needs for development (Sarrico, 2022) while fulfilling their own potential. Countries emphasize doctoral education to ensure sustainable development through a professional population (Chaló et al., 2023).

Türkiye is classified as a developing country (OECD, 2025) and ranks 48th out of 191 countries and territories in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). While its position is improving, there is still a significant gap between Türkiye and developed countries regarding achievement as measured by certain indicators such as gender inequality (Encinas-Martín & Cherian, 2023). The World Bank stated that the Covid-19 pandemic widened gender disparities and raised the potential for inequality in Türkiye (Gunes & Chang, 2023). According to national data, doctoral education is nearly equally accessible to both genders in Türkiye (TÜİK, 2023a). However, women perceive more challenges and tend to drop out more often compared to men (Karaduman, 2024).

Although increasing numbers of women have earned doctoral degrees in recent years worldwide (European Commission, 2019), feminist research continues to identify gendered patterns reflected in academia that perpetuate historical hierarchies (Ivancheva et al., 2019). A combination of different factors maintains gender inequality (Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023), significantly affecting the attrition and retention of doctoral students. In particular, women are viewed as having a higher likelihood of leaving educational programs because of their roles as caregivers and housewives in patriarchal societies like Türkiye (Conger & Long, 2010; Gür & Bozgöz, 2022; Quinn, 2013). Women students, especially those married or divorced with/without children, often face more challenges than their male counterparts in the domestic sphere (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011). Research indicates that women enrolled in programs that are predominantly male-populated tend to have a decreased sense of academic worth, receive less support from their departments when facing family-related challenges, and show lower levels of commitment to their careers (Ülkü-Steiner et al., 2000). Furthermore, women, especially mothers, face severe disadvantages in the labor market (Correll et al., 2007). Even those who complete their doctoral studies and procure academic employment suffer additional challenges due to insufficient academic representation of women (Sümer & Eslen-Ziya, 2023). Gendered challenges have increased further in Turkish academia since the Covid-19 pandemic (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021; Parlak et al., 2021).

According to Savigny (2014, p. 798), "giving voice to experience is a key mechanism through which feminist and critical theories seek to challenge existing power structures." Thus, amplifying the voices of these relatively less-heard women students in Türkiye will contribute to improving doctoral education and transforming HE. Recognizing these students as active change agents will help in achieving more inclusive, diverse, and equitable doctoral education in diverse settings. Accordingly, this study explores the voices of the diverse experiences of single and married women with or without children who were currently enrolled in or had dropped out of a doctoral program. The study aimed to identify and analyze the personal, institutional, and academic factors that shaped their experiences and the specific challenges they encountered throughout their doctoral journeys. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the personal, social, and economic experiences of women doctoral students throughout their educational journeys? Do these experiences influence their education, and if so, in what ways?
2. What are the experiences of women doctoral students within their universities, departments, or programs throughout their educational journeys? Do these experiences influence their education, and if so, in what ways?
3. What strategies and mechanisms do women doctoral students recommend for overcoming challenges and supporting persistence in doctoral education?

## 2. Literature Review

Doctoral education plays a vital role in developing research capacity in HE. The doctorate is considered the highest academic qualification, and its completion is often a challenging process characterized by complex academic and institutional dynamics. Common problems include long timelines, student attrition, and inadequate academic integration (Altbach, 2007; Lin & Cranton, 2005). While structures vary across countries, a number of common concerns intersect, such as pressure to publish, limited access to supervision, and financial constraints (Horta & Mok, 2020). Although some of these issues are discussed in the international literature, this study focuses on doctoral education in Türkiye. The following subsection outlines the key features of the Turkish doctoral education system to situate the participants' experiences in a specific context.

### 2.1. Doctoral Education in Türkiye

Doctoral education in Türkiye has recently evolved, influenced by rising enrollment and global academic trends, to align more with the American model (Shin et al., 2018). The number of universities has also increased under the Eleventh Development Plan (Presidency of Strategy and Budget of Turkey, 2019). That plan led to the rapid expansion of doctoral programs, with the number of doctoral students nearly tripling and requirements adjusted to accommodate the expansion (YÖK, 2024). Systemic challenges persist, however, despite the increase in the number of institutions and students. The demand for doctoral education has exceeded the capacity of faculty and institutional support (Deniz, 2022; Kavak, 2011). The growing number of students combined with limited resources has had a negative impact on academic performance and the overall quality of graduate education (Nidup, 2022). Current data show 13,583 PhD graduates and 108,933 registered PhD students in Türkiye. Only 15,931 of them are new entrants (YÖK, 2024), suggesting that many students remain in the system longer than expected.

International comparisons in the literature suggest similar pressures in some other countries. For example, Iran has expanded its doctoral sector with stringent output expectations, leading to concerns about research quality and oversight (Keykha et al., 2024). In contrast, countries with long traditions of doctoral studies, such as Germany and Japan, maintain higher completion rates while also facing academic pressures and demographic changes (Yamamoto, 2023). Despite efforts to expand doctoral education, Türkiye still lags behind: Germany graduates 29,000 doctoral students and Japan 16,000 yearly, while Türkiye produces about 8,000 annual PhD graduates (YÖK, 2022). Gendered patterns are particularly concerning. Women in graduate programs are more likely than men to leave academia before graduation (Schwartz et al., 2021). Some may decide not to pursue a doctorate due to structural and societal barriers. Although no official statistics on dropout rates exist, research highlights a significant increase (Gür & Bozgöz, 2022). Recognizing

this problem, the Turkish Council of Higher Education organized a national workshop in 2022 where experts emphasized the need for targeted studies on doctoral dropouts (YÖK, 2022, p. 16). Recommendations included flexible scheduling for working adults and reduced supervisory burdens to facilitate completion, especially for women students (TÜBA, 2006). Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring equal access, retention, and success in doctoral education.

## 2.2. Turkish Women in Doctoral Education

Women entered universities in the Ottoman Empire in 1914 and began working as academics in the 1930s, following the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye (Zubarioglu, 2024). Their early presence in high-status roles such as educators, judges, and medical professionals reflected the Republic's modernizing reforms, including women's suffrage in 1934, before many European countries (Öztürkmen, 2007). Despite this progressive history, recent comparative analyses suggested that Türkiye lags behind many other countries regarding gender equality at the societal level (Sart, 2022). In the context of HE, structural reforms driven by EU harmonization efforts have promoted gender equality since the early 2000s and significantly increased female enrollment in doctoral programs (YÖK, 2024). As of 2024, women constituted 46% of doctoral students in Türkiye (TÜİK, 2023b). They often choose academia to gain social acceptance (Öztaş & Doğan, 2015).

Turkish women face significant challenges in their PhD journeys, including traditional gender roles, limited institutional support, and domestic responsibilities that impede academic progress (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Karaduman, 2024). Despite women constituting nearly half of all PhD students, only 33.2% of the professors in Türkiye are women (Günsan, 2024), reflecting ongoing structural barriers and a "glass ceiling" in academia (Karaman et al., 2022). In addition to the challenges of cultural norms and patriarchal expectations, married and/or mothering doctoral students in particular report emotional difficulties (Alkan & Kamasak, 2024; Schwartz et al., 2021). Even successful women continue to face barriers to publication, recognition, and advancement in male-dominated fields (Trapido, 2022).

In particular, women's intersecting identities, such as marital status, economic background, and caring roles, create complex challenges to persistence and success. Feminist institutionalist research highlights how formal structures can ignore or reinforce gender inequalities in doctoral education (Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Krook & Mackay, 2011). These systemic patterns are evident in dropout trends and in the lack of targeted academic and emotional support from supervisors, departments, and institutions (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021). While national reforms have improved access, the literature and the voices of this study's participants indicate an urgent need for inclusive policies and empowering campus climates (Verge, 2021).

## 3. Conceptual Framework

Emerging as a result of the struggles experienced by particular marginalized groups regarding education inequalities, social inclusion aims "[to improve] the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, economic or other status, through enhanced opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights" (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, 2016, p. 20). Although social inclusion was historically considered in connection with social exclusion, the relevant literature proposes models of possibility (Gidley, Wheeler, &

Bereded-Samuel, 2010, p. 5). Social inclusion accordingly encompasses three dimensions supported by various ideological frameworks: access, participation, and empowerment (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010).

Access, the first dimension of social inclusion, is related to improving human capital due to the primary concern of global economic competitiveness and is predominantly ingrained in neoliberal ideologies. The central assumption of the access dimension of social inclusion is the financial benefit of education, as individuals will have more employment opportunities with high-level schooling (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010; Raffo & Gunter, 2008). This dimension generally involves HE through increased enrollment rates with little or no attention to the complexities of such initiatives on a deeper level, such as power inequalities (Gidley, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). Seeking profitability and competitiveness (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010), HE policies focused on access frequently result in deficit-based interventions such as financial support, counseling support for students with health difficulties, or support for students with disabilities (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014).

Participation, the second dimension of social inclusion, is considered more inclusive as it is promoted by social justice theory focused on diversity, human rights, and egalitarianism (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010). Drawing from critical pedagogy, partnership theory, and feminist theories, the participation approach to social inclusion takes the access dimension as a starting point but also recognizes the value of community engagement (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014). Social inclusion practices in HE aimed at participation can facilitate university-community collaborations to build settings where students can meaningfully participate and develop confidence and a sense of belongingness, allowing diverse populations to develop meaningful relationships with others and experience artistic and cultural ways of being and doing (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010; Grinblat & Kershaw, 2008; Raffo & Gunter, 2008; Simpican et al., 2015).

Empowerment, the final dimension of social inclusion, draws from theories on human potential and seeks to maximize the potential of individuals. This entails considering that, regardless of their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, individuals are multidimensional beings with unique needs and interests (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010). Consequently, social inclusion policy and practice must extend beyond neoliberal-oriented access and justice- and human rights-oriented participation to address power issues and structural factors resulting in social exclusion. The empowerment approach to social inclusion accordingly emphasizes diversity, dialogue, and different voices as sources of social transformation (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010; Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014). HE institutions employing social inclusion as empowerment draw from pedagogies of hope and postcolonial theories and aim to create institutional climates prioritizing the voices of marginalized groups and facilitating critical dialogue among different cultural groups (Gidley, Hampson, et al., 2010).

Discourses of inclusive campuses and diversity have led to various HE policies that are yet to be efficiently practiced in real life (Hughes, 2014) as institutional culture, curricula, and access in HE remain unequal in terms of gender as well as race, socioeconomic status, and class (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019). Similarly, as discussed in the previous section, the increased enrollment of women in doctoral programs in Türkiye has not meant inclusive institutional, academic, and employment conditions for women doctoral students, especially for those with multiple minority identities such as single, divorced, or married mothers and women of lower socioeconomic groups (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Misra & Castillo, 2004; Ülkü-Steiner et al., 2000). In exploring such complexities, intersectionality theory (e.g., Crenshaw,

1989) allows more refined insight into the complexities of the challenges women experience as doctoral students in the patriarchal structure of HE settings. Related research has revealed structural and political inequalities resulting in normalized and multilayered forms of discrimination that impact women with multiple and mostly overlapping identities (e.g., single women of color with children; see Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Furthermore, feminist institutionalism has built on the substantial feminist and institutionalist research of the last three decades to explore the “chronic minority of women” in diverse settings (Krook & Mackay, 2011, p. 2; see also Clavero & Galligan, 2020). These perspectives can help in examining how institutional structures and gendered power dynamics influence women’s progression in doctoral education, providing valuable insight into the unique and layered challenges women face in doctoral programs in Türkiye.

#### 4. Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted in line with the objectives stated above. In doing so, the aim was not to generalize the results to the overall population but to explore participants’ perceptions and experiences to provide a deeper understanding of a social issue (Creswell, 2013). The study sample consisted of 20 participants, including 10 current women doctoral students and 10 dropouts from various programs of public universities in Türkiye, to explore the perceptions and experiences of the research participants regarding their doctoral programs. The study focused on public universities because, out of approximately 7 million students in 208 Turkish HE institutions, more than 6.2 million students were enrolled in 129 public universities, representing about 90% of the university student body, according to statistics from the Turkish Council of Higher Education for the 2023–2024 academic year.

The study employs phenomenology (Creswell, 2013) as the research design to understand different aspects of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon of doctoral education and how they reflected on and made meaning from those experiences. Such a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and characteristics of a small group of individuals significantly enhances the interpretive depth and social context of a study (Creswell, 2013) and can deepen our comprehension of the various challenges related to women’s academic journeys and the reasons behind their decisions regarding the (non)pursuit of doctoral degrees (Smith et al., 2021).

There were two groups of research participants. One group included 10 women who were continuing in their doctoral programs. Their ages ranged from 25 to 45. They worked in different fields including education, psychological counseling, medicine, and the corporate world. Seven were married, four had one or two children ranging in age from 10 months to 11 years, and three were single. The husbands were all at least university graduates with jobs in engineering, the aviation industry, education, academia, and business. These participants started their doctoral programs between 2019 and 2024, mainly in the fall term. They were enrolled in various faculties, including education, medicine, business administration, science, and social sciences, and were at different stages of their doctoral programs. Specifically, seven students were taking courses, one was preparing for her qualifying exam, and two were writing their dissertations.

The other group included 10 women who had dropped out of their doctoral programs. Their ages ranged from 30 to 48 and they worked in different fields including teaching, architecture, counseling, civil service, nursing, archaeology, and NGO management, or were self-employed. Two were married and one had three children.

Their husbands were both graduates of HE institutions. These participants had started their doctoral programs between 2008 and 2021 and dropped out between 2021 and 2023. They had been enrolled in different fields including education, architecture, business administration, science, and social sciences. Three dropped out in the stage of dissertation writing, two dropped out before that, and three dropped out after the qualifying exam. Two failed the qualifying exam and then dropped out.

This comparative approach was essential for identifying the challenges women doctoral students face and the factors contributing to persistence or dropout. The decision to include these two groups allowed us to explore (a) common experiences and differences between those who persisted and those who dropped out, (b) key challenges (e.g., personal, financial, academic, institutional) that influence doctoral persistence, and (c) effective support strategies and coping mechanisms from the perspective of those who successfully persisted.

The sample size of 20 was determined based on the principles of qualitative research, where the goal is to achieve data saturation, the point at which additional data collection will not yield new insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selecting 20 participants ensured diversity of experience and a balance between depth and breadth, allowing for rich in-depth narratives while maintaining a manageable scope of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, previous qualitative research on doctoral students' experiences showed that 20 participants were sufficient for capturing patterns, themes, and variations (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This sampling also allowed us to explore how family dynamics and external responsibilities influence doctoral education.

For data collection, we developed an interview protocol to capture the participants' demographic data and their perceptions and experiences regarding their doctoral programs. During the interviews, participants shared their reasons for enrolling in a PhD program, their expectations, how doctoral education had impacted their lives (personally, socially, and professionally), their relationships with their professors and advisors, their support mechanisms, and their challenges. Dropouts were also asked to describe their reasons for dropping out. The interviews were concluded with suggestions on how doctoral programs could be improved, particularly to support women students. To ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative research, after the institutional ethical approval process was completed, a pilot study was conducted with two women to finalize the interview protocol and improve the overall effectiveness of the study (Van Teijlingen et al., 2001). Subsequently, data were collected by one researcher, transcribed by another researcher, and analyzed by another researcher.

In the data collection process, a researcher gathered data through in-depth semi-structured interviews, employing a purposeful sampling method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to ensure rich variation in demographic variables. Participants were recruited via social media announcements and the researchers' networks. The online interviews conducted with Zoom lasted between 50 and 100 minutes and were recorded with the interviewees' consent. After the data collection, the interviews were transcribed and the data were anonymized with a pseudonym assigned to each participant. The 20 participants were deemed sufficient for data saturation.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Eatough & Smith, 2017) was used to analyze the data and determine the emergent themes. Robinson and Williams (2024) described IPA as one of the most popular

approaches for interpreting data, especially in educational fields. In this way, the study participants are given agency and the researchers reveal educational, psychological, and even conceptual meanings of their experiences (Conroy & de Visser, 2015; Nizza et al., 2021). Using IPA, we gained valuable insights into the factors influencing persistence and dropout in doctoral studies.

## 5. Findings

The data analysis revealed two themes related to the experiences and perceptions of women doctoral students and dropouts in Türkiye. The first theme highlighted their challenges, which could be divided into three sub-themes: the imposition of traditional roles, financial constraints, and unconstructive relationships with faculty members or advisors. The second theme highlighted the importance of constructive relationships with three sub-themes: support from faculty members or advisors, support from doctoral peers, and suggestions for support mechanisms that could enhance the educational experiences of women doctoral students.

### 5.1. Challenges

#### 5.1.1. Traditional Role Imposition: A Sense of Division and Insufficiency While Managing Multiple Roles

Pursuing a doctoral degree is a challenging and demanding long-term process for all students, regardless of gender. Both the women who were continuing their studies and those who had dropped out reported significant difficulties, with married women who were working and raising children often experiencing the most challenges. Guilt, insufficiency, and being torn apart were feelings frequently mentioned by these women. For instance, Zuhale and Şule, who had dropped out of their doctoral programs, shared their frustrations as follows:

You have the role of a wife, and you have the role of a mother. You have the role of a student doing a PhD. You're being torn apart....You feel half in each of them. You think you can't care for your child very well, and your conscience gets pricked. At the same time, your doctoral study is a child for you....You can't actually take care of it. You can't give yourself [fully], and that's another feeling of guilt, a sense of incompleteness from every angle. (Zuhale)

When I was doing my PhD and sparing time for studying, there was also such a thing as a guilty conscience. I can't keep up with my child, I can't keep up with my house, or fulfill my responsibilities. How many pieces should it be divided into? You know, I was putting pressure on myself because I couldn't do this job. Frankly, it wore me out a little, and I even had to get psychological support during the period when I was trying to study for the qualifying exam. (Şule)

The women who expressed exhaustion and negative feelings attributed them to traditional roles that imposed demanding domestic responsibilities on them. Zuhale, for example, explained this as follows: "It is seen as my duty...to take care of the children at home, or the order of the house is seen as my responsibility...cooking, cleaning."

The challenges posed by traditional roles were also described by the students currently pursuing their doctorate degrees, including Aslı and Nevin:

Under the conditions I mentioned, I would still pursue a professional career and have a child if I were a male student. I'm guessing it could have been a little easier. Maybe a little bit of traditional code is having an effect as well. You take on more responsibility even if someone doesn't impose it. (Aslı)

What society expects from you is that you are a very good mother, a very good wife, and a very good doctoral student. You have to be very good at all of them. (Nevin)

One participant discussed the imposition of these roles while sharing her frustrations about her husband, who was also pursuing a doctorate:

He is currently working on his dissertation. For example, he steps aside after breakfast and focuses on his studies. However, I must do the laundry and other chores. Once I finish those tasks, I can sit down to study. As a woman, I feel that we are not as relaxed as men are, and that's quite evident. (Rana)

Consequently, these challenges made it difficult for her to have a child:

There is always a barrier in front of me to having a child. I couldn't see what I would do if I had a child...We think in much more detail than men. My husband doesn't think about such a thing in detail. (Rana)

All of these difficulties and impositions led some to avoid marriage. A participant who had dropped out of her doctoral program explained:

Being a mother and being a woman in academia—those feminine roles are not easy in terms of the expected feminine roles. I preferred a different kind of womanhood, single womanhood, and childless womanhood. You know, to be able to do what I want to do there more comfortably. (Didem)

### 5.1.2. Financial Problems: “If You Don't Have a Rich Husband, It's Challenging to Get a PhD”

In addition to the challenges posed by traditional gender roles, financial difficulties were described as a significant obstacle for women doctoral students and a primary reason for decisions to drop out of their programs. This challenge was particularly prevalent among single women doctoral students:

You will be a strong woman; you will have had economic freedom imposed on you since you were a child. But you can't do that, and you're approaching thirty....I was leaving class and going to give private lessons....So getting a doctorate is challenging if you don't have a rich husband to sponsor you, because the scholarships given are limited, nothing supports you as a woman. (İpek)

A participant who had dropped out of her doctoral program due to financial difficulties expressed similar feelings:

Coming from a lower social class, the lack of economic resources is a problem at the doctoral level. Therefore, my financial condition was essential to my mental departure from the [doctoral program]. To concentrate and do what you want to do in the PhD, you should not be thinking about the rent or the bills while studying. For me, it was all a problem. Therefore, I had little chance to focus only on my academic work. (Didem)

Although she stated that she had not preferred to marry due to the difficulties imposed by traditional feminine roles, Didem also recognized that marriage could be a financial advantage: “You know, it’s a man or a woman. They support each other in marriage, and maybe it may have been an advantage.” Gökçe, married with no children, shared this view: “Being married can be a plus....When you’re married, it’s two incomes.”

Financial issues can also be problematic for married mothers with children who have to work. For example, a participant who dropped out of her doctoral program stated that if she had financial support, she would have been able to fulfill her responsibilities at home more easily:

If I could have gotten seventy percent of my salary for six months and the remaining six months at work, and then if I had the right to unpaid leave for a year, for example, or six months, I could have raised my child very well and done [the PhD] very comfortably during that period. (Zuhal)

### 5.1.3. Unconstructive Relationships With Faculty Members or Advisors: “I Don’t Want to Invest in Vain”

Several participants reported feeling less supported and facing more negative attitudes than their male counterparts. For example, Hande, currently pursuing her doctorate while managing the responsibilities of being married with children, stated that male students received more encouragement in their courses. She also shared her experience of seeking an advisor, noting that she received a dismissive response from a male professor she had approached:

Women students receive much less praise, if I think about it personally, because I am married with two children and older. For example, when I asked one of my instructors to be my advisor, he replied, “I don’t want to make investments in vain.” I understood that men and women who do not have children and are not married would be preferable [as advisees]. (Hande)

Zuhal, married with children, expressed her frustration with some faculty members’ harsh words and dismissive attitudes. She highlighted the emotional impact of her experiences and her decision to drop out:

Some instructors make fun of it by saying: “Well, we don’t want anyone with children anymore. Doing a doctorate is very difficult. I mean, how are you going to study?...You’re a mother. Just enjoy your motherhood.” I can’t deal with this mentality, you know. I said that it would be beyond me to get over these walls, and I said it’s okay if it doesn’t work, just let it go. (Zuhal)

## 5.2. Constructive Relationships

### 5.2.1. Support From Faculty Members and Advisors

Our analyses revealed that women doctoral students, especially those continuing their doctoral programs, have mechanisms that support and contribute to their educational processes. The most important sources of support are faculty members, advisors, and peers.

In contrast to Zuhail, Asli enjoyed positive relationships with her professors and advisor, beginning from her interview for the program:

Yes, when I applied there, I was five months pregnant when I went to the university for interviews. My professor, whom I am about to work with on the dissertation now, welcomed this very well and made positive comments. We had a female professor on the interview team [who said]: “If it will encourage you, I was pregnant with my first child during the coursework period and my second child during the dissertation period, and I went through this process with them.” She shared her own experience. Thankfully, my professors, whether men or women, made it very easy in this regard. (Asli)

A participant who was married with children and continuing her doctoral education similarly explained how the support of instructors and advisors positively affected her:

In this respect, I was immensely relieved that my advisor supported me in both my academic and private life. I remember her saying something to me, that she was translating while rocking her baby and telling her these things and so on, that’s how it was settled in my mind. Frankly, she provided my motivation. (Selin)

### 5.2.2. Support From Peers

The participants of this study indicated that the doctoral process harms the social lives of women doctoral students. However, they also noted that many women derived primary motivation from supporting one another in the groups they formed with fellow doctoral students. Participants who were continuing their education found value in providing solidarity and encouragement to other women students:

I can have lunch with people who have experiences or with similar backgrounds, and I think that the doctoral process has improved my social relations by easing some thoughts in my head. (Hande)

We have a group for studying. For example, we send messages between us: “I’m going to the library this weekend. Would you like to come too?” We communicate with each other like that....There are such motivational speeches, and support is provided. (Nur)

### 5.2.3. Suggestions for Support Mechanisms: “We Need All Kinds of Support”

Whether they had dropped out or were still enrolled, and whether they were single or married and with or without children, participants consistently emphasized the need for more significant support than their male counterparts. They argued that women do not have equal conditions while pursuing their degrees:

Why don't women become philosophers? I don't know why women can't be. Could it be that [men don't] have the responsibility of cleaning up after you? So we're not competing on equal circumstances with men. We need support in every way. (Zuhal)

As a result, this participant suggested support from the government, particularly regarding childcare issues:

It doesn't matter if they are married or single, but especially for women with children and women who are trying to do something in academia, substantial support mechanisms must be given, both as a society and at the state level....The child support package, the empowerment policies for the mother and the woman involved, and daycare are essential. (Zuhal)

This study revealed that financial challenges are often more pronounced among single women than their married counterparts. In light of this finding, Nevin, an unmarried doctoral student, suggested the following method of financial support for women doctoral candidates: "Supporting women can be done through projects for women, such as postdoc positions, since it is more difficult for women to continue with financial independence in Türkiye. I would love to have such support."

An unmarried doctoral dropout described the difficulties of traveling to another city to attend classes at a university there and suggested accommodation support to help alleviate such financial burdens:

A great deal of support can be provided regarding accommodation and housing, especially for women. As a doctoral student, I should be able to stay in the university dormitory for a day or two [if I travel to another school]. I couldn't stay there. I was staying at a hotel, spending from my own pocket. (Belma)

In addition to financial support, psychological support was one of the most important needs described by the participants, stemming from their disadvantaged positions and feelings of loneliness:

Women should be provided with psychological support in this doctoral process....I think it would be very nice when I think about it. We are a little disadvantaged. Morale and psychological support are needed for women trying to do a doctorate, not to be alone, and to know they are not alone. (Belma)

Support from other women as academics and mentors was one suggested way to receive guidance and find role models. Hande, continuing her education, stated: "At the very least, women academics should provide more support to women doctoral students." Nevin, also continuing her education, shared a similar view: "I think there are points where our women academics should guide us more while setting an example."

One final suggestion made by the participants was that informal solidarity groups formed by women students should be established officially within programs, departments, or universities. This was explained by Hayal, a doctoral dropout, as follows: "There are clubs like that, and we have student clubs. It would be nice if we could do it again in such a social environment, as support for both studies and social life."

## 6. Discussion

This study's data analyses revealed that many women doctoral students experience extensive difficulties across several dimensions of doctoral programs, resulting in some dropping out. Our findings cut across various dimensions of our participants' personal experiences and observations in their social, cultural, and educational lives and their development and educational persistence as single, married, or divorced women with or without children in doctoral programs. As our findings for the three research questions overlapped, we discuss them below in two sub-sections. The first sub-section presents findings related to the first (personal, social, and economic experiences of women doctoral students and dropouts) and second (institutional and departmental experiences) research questions of the study, focusing on the struggles our participants experienced and observed during their doctoral studies. The second sub-section addresses the third research question and presents implications for empowering inclusive practices in light of the participants' struggles.

### 6.1. *Womanhood and Doctorates: When Two Worlds Collide*

Drawing broadly from their own experiences and observations, our participants shared their perceptions of two distinctive and inherently distant collective identities (Goodman, 2006; Rorty, 1989). On the one hand, they had a strong connection to womanhood as a collective identity formed historically by society, while on the other hand, they were trying to belong to the collective identity of doctoral students constructed over time in the context of HE. Due to this shared sense of belonging to womanhood as a collective identity, our participants felt that they needed to comply with particular norms. As women, several of our participants emphasized that most of their time and energy must be devoted to responsibilities related to pregnancy and giving birth, childrearing, and physical domestic work such as cleaning and cooking. Because of these socioculturally constructed roles and responsibilities, they could not focus on duties related to their intellectual identity as doctoral students, such as reading, writing, and doing research. In relation to their collective identity of womanhood, several of our participants also noted that women doctoral students are more prone to have more financial struggles than men, as they are frequently the ones dealing with domestic matters and childcare, while men tend to be the ones supporting the family financially. This becomes a particularly complex struggle for single and divorced women in doctoral programs, leading a considerable number of them to drop out.

Considering gender as a manifestation of collective identity is particularly relevant in womanhood as it is not a biological construct but has rather been formed by society through social and cultural expectations and norms over the course of centuries (Acker, 1990; Azari & Smith, 2012). As members of this collective gender identity, women have historically been considered to have certain ways of being and doing due to the sociocultural construct of womanhood. They are expected to fulfill various feminine roles and responsibilities such as "life-giver," "nurturer," and "housekeeper." Because they are inherently members of the collective gender identity, a much stronger identity than their intellectual identity, they have no choice. In other words, they cannot *not* be women; among other patriarchal dimensions of society, they must comply with the appropriate ways of being and doing as "women," which frequently results in the sacrifice of their ambitions as doctoral students, leading them to drop out of their programs (Conger & Long, 2010; Gür & Bozgöz, 2022; Quinn, 2013).

Our findings are in line with other studies emphasizing that traditional gender roles pose similar challenges for women in other patriarchal societies (e.g., Barthwal, 2024; Evans et al., 2022; Kurian, 2024; Zadeh, 2024). These findings make visible how single, divorced, and married women with children struggle as doctoral students in HE programs in Türkiye and provide explanations regarding the underlying reasons and complexities of the persistent gender inequality in academia, despite the recent increase in enrollment rates as explained above. These struggles of women once again show that the recent changes in Turkish HE are insufficient as they have targeted only the access and participation levels of social inclusion (Gidley, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010). The literature emphasizes women's systemic oppression and struggles against patriarchy (Afacan Findikli et al., 2021; Sultana, 2010). As feminist scholars' studies indicate, women have dual roles as citizens and workers in the public sphere and as mothers and caregivers in the private sphere (Chiva, 2009; Lister, 2003). While in developed countries these dual roles are relatively reconciled by support for women's participation and empowerment in many areas of economic life through regulations and incentives provided by legislators, in developing countries such as Türkiye, despite all structural practices and regulations, difficulties remain due to the influence of gendered cultural norms. These conflicting roles are deeply embedded in the sociocultural norms that influence perceptions of women's roles within the domestic sphere.

Our findings indicate that women in doctoral programs in Türkiye face struggles of being "divided" due to conflicting roles, as explained above, rooted in social and cultural dynamics. Predominant issues such as work/life imbalance or traditional gender expectations within family contexts continue to hinder the academic progression of women in Türkiye's doctoral education system. These findings point to enduring societal norms and patriarchal frameworks that shape collective beliefs about "appropriate" roles and behaviors for women, adding significant barriers (Uzgoren, 2020) to their educational attainment and career prospects. The persistence of patriarchal values within Turkish society, reflected in both social and economic structures, reveals an underlying tension between traditional domestic norms and the aspirations of women in HE, particularly in doctoral education.

Research has demonstrated that sociocultural norms have the potential to conflict, compete with, or support and reinforce decisions made by formal institutions (Azari & Smith, 2012; Grzymala-Busse, 2010). This is particularly pertinent for women doctoral students who are pursuing or are compelled to suspend their doctoral studies in Türkiye, where gender inequality is deeply embedded in historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and political structures (Afacan Findikli et al., 2021; Bugra, 2014). In this context, the internalized expectations pertaining to family obligations and gender roles lead to increased cognitive and emotional burdens for women pursuing doctoral degrees, making the educational process more challenging.

## **6.2. *Toward an Empowering Campus Climate***

Research shows that PhD students' study habits and confidence are linked to the quality of supervision, peer support, and sense of belonging (Matheka et al., 2025). In line with this, our findings highlight that among the array of struggles women face in achieving equality with men during their doctoral studies, one of the primary reasons for the inability to complete the doctoral program is the lack of academic and emotional support from their academic advisors, faculty members, and peers. The absence of such support can lead to a loss of motivation and discouragement to continue with one's studies alongside the numerous responsibilities arising from one's identity as a woman and the overlapping identities discussed above

(Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Crenshaw, 1991; Krook & Mackay, 2011). One recurrent theme seen in our analyses is that doctoral students who receive adequate academic and social support from their academic advisors are more likely to complete their doctoral education successfully. Those who do not receive such support are more likely to drop out. This study has demonstrated that non-supportive attitudes from academic advisors and faculty members negatively impact the role and identity conflicts experienced by women doctoral students. Insensitive or inadequate behaviors from academic advisors and faculty members, such as a lack of support or a perceived lack of appreciation, potentially accompanied by negative conduct, contribute to a decline in students' personal resources on multiple levels, marginalizing women doctoral students. This decline includes decreases in motivation and emotional and psychological well-being, making it more challenging to complete the doctoral program.

Likewise, the related international literature stresses current norms and structures in HE that perpetuate the marginalization and mistreatment of women scholars. Perez et al. (2020) found that equity, diversity, and inclusion were rarely integrated into discussions in academic departments, resulting in tokenized and marginalized graduate students with minoritized identities. Similarly, Douglas et al. (2024) reported negative experiences of marginalized early-career women scholars at the research, department, and professional field levels. They emphasized the existence of "less psychological safety and greater intragroup conflict at the research group level, more negative diversity climate at the department level, and diminished professional climate of scholarly inclusion at the professional field level" (Douglas et al., 2024, p. 11). Others have stressed that women in HE institutions, both academics and doctoral students, experience more academic and family stress and inequalities and receive less support for work/life balance from peers and colleagues than men (Acker, 1990; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Reggiani et al., 2024; Zimmerman et al., 2016).

The literature provides extensive evidence of the inequality women face in HE institutions, and there is a need for empowering campus climates considering the recent intersectionality, feminist, and institutional research (Clavero & Galligan, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Krook & Mackay, 2011). Creating sources of support for women through courses, programs, and centers provides intentional social and emotional support (Douglas et al., 2024; Perez et al., 2020; Reggiani et al., 2024; Zimmerman et al., 2016). Our participants particularly emphasized clubs and informal solidarity groups as promising in the Turkish context.

Another significant finding is that in order to guarantee that underrepresented groups like women continue their education and graduate, universities must consciously work to foster an inclusive campus environment (Palmer & Williams, 2023) without leaving behind or excluding men (Barone et al., 2007). Although there is rising awareness of the issues of equity and inclusion worldwide on paper (Linder & Cooper, 2016), universities—including those in Türkiye—need more concrete action and support for creating gender-inclusive campuses and practices (Beemyn & Rankin, 2016; Marine et al., 2017). Such support mechanisms are not unprecedented, and the literature offers examples of how to provide women students and scholars with much-needed resources (e.g., Byrne, 2000; Davie, 2001; Kasper, 2004; Thomas & Hughes, 2025).

## 7. Conclusion

A significant amount of research has highlighted the inequalities women experience in HE institutions. This study also shows that Turkish women pursuing doctoral degrees often face many challenges throughout that complex and demanding journey. It illustrates various aspects of their lived experiences and insights within

their social, cultural, and educational contexts. The gender norms with which they are expected to comply inherently cause Turkish women to struggle in academia, masking their academic qualifications and knowledge. As a result, Turkish women often struggle to balance the demands of academic and domestic life, leading to a form of maternal invisibility within academic settings and intellectual invisibility within the family sphere. These women need recognition of their academic achievements and greater flexibility in addressing challenges stemming from traditional gender roles. They must be empowered to perceive themselves as equal to their male counterparts throughout all stages of their doctoral journeys within inclusive and supportive academic environments.

Our findings have both theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical implications encompass the insufficiency of pursuing only the access and participation dimensions of social inclusion theory in a developing country where marginalized individuals are not empowered, considering the structural factors and power issues leading to social exclusion. Supported by significant evidence from the literature on the inequality experienced by women in HE institutions, our findings emphasize the need to empower campus climates in the country. Hence, scholars in the field should reconsider the theory and focus more exclusively on the empowerment dimension instead of addressing access and participation as the first two dimensions. As discussed above, structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and feminist institutionalism (Krook & Mackay, 2011) provide relevant insights.

In line with the theoretical implications, this study's practical implications provide insights to advance social inclusion policy and practice in HE by demonstrating how neoliberal or merely human rights-oriented practices contribute to the process of marginalization for many women. One of the most noteworthy implications of this study is the need to focus on the multiple roles and responsibilities of women doctoral students as multidimensional individuals in a developing country. Policymakers, leaders in HE, and NGOs should collaborate to establish frameworks that empower and stabilize women pursuing doctoral studies. Another significant practical implication of this study is the importance of equipping university academic and administrative staff with valuable insights, knowledge, and tools regarding the struggles that marginalized women doctoral students might experience and potential ways to support them successfully. Furthermore, Turkish universities and policymakers should take actions such as implementing flexible timelines, establishing formal peer support networks and resource centers, and providing supervisor training on gender sensitivity to maximize the potential of women students.

Overall, this study sheds important light on the experiences of women doctoral students in Türkiye and the complex factors that may contribute to decisions to drop out. While it offers valuable insights, certain limitations should also be acknowledged. The small sample size and the focus solely on public universities limit the generalizability of the findings, which may not fully reflect women's experiences across diverse institutional contexts. Including perspectives from both public and private universities could provide a more comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, the research findings may not align with global trends, which underlines the need for more cross-cultural research to better understand the broader challenges in doctoral education. Without longitudinal data, tracking how students' experiences and decisions evolve is difficult. Although this study focused on women, it did not compare their experiences with those of men. A comparative analysis could yield deeper insights into the roles of gender in doctoral education. Finally, incorporating faculty perspectives, and particularly those of academic advisors, and employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods could significantly enrich future research.

## Acknowledgments

The authors appreciate the valuable suggestions provided by the academic editors and reviewers.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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# Intersectionality at German Universities: Empowering Teaching Staff as Change Agents With Higher Education Didactic Workshops

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**Submitted:** 30 December 2024 **Accepted:** 13 March 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

The increasing diversity at German universities has been accompanied by the demand to widen participation among all groups of students. This challenges higher education teaching, requiring learning environments that acknowledge diverse experiences and needs. While diversity-sensitive approaches have been the dominant response, they often address single diversity dimensions in isolation, neglecting intersectional interdependencies and structural power relations. An intersectional perspective, however, shifts the focus to power dynamics, knowledge production, and inclusive educational practices. This article argues that such an approach has a good potential to enable lecturers and students to become change agents by fostering critical thinking, reflective agency, and ethical commitment to dismantling systemic inequalities. This is particularly challenging in the German higher education system, where critical, antidiscriminatory pedagogical perspectives are mostly limited to certain disciplines. At the same time, the teaching staff enjoy extensive teaching autonomy, which provides them with freedom for individual engagement in this area. Therefore, implementing intersectional approaches in teaching requires targeted educational interventions that support teaching staff. Building on the concept of intersectional pedagogy, we introduce a case study of a higher education didactic workshop that was designed to raise awareness of intersectional perspectives in teaching. The findings highlight the potential of such workshops to influence teaching practices and promote the engagement of disciplinary teaching communities with intersectionality. This article concludes by discussing the implications for further developing workshop concepts and empowering teaching staff and students as agents of change within the German higher education system.

## Keywords

change agents; German higher education; intersectionality; teaching students; university didactics

## 1. Introduction

Alongside the massification of higher education (HE), the German HE system has experienced not only a quantitative expansion of student numbers but also a diversification of the students' educational backgrounds, motivations, interests, and prerequisites (Bosse, 2015; Mergner et al., 2019; Wolter, 2013). This diversification is not only limited to students but also extends to teaching staff (Aufferkorte-Michaelis & Linde, 2022). While these developments have broadened access to HE, they have also brought new debates on how institutions and teaching staff engage with an increasingly diverse student body (Mergner, 2024). In Germany, diversity in HE has primarily been addressed through policy measures aimed at widening participation, yet this often remains at the level of demographic representation rather than deeper structural or pedagogical change (Gaisch & Aichinger, 2016; Walgenbach, 2014). Diversity initiatives in German HE often operate within predefined categories, such as gender or migration (Frierson, 2022). While such classifications offer valuable insights, they risk oversimplifying the complex realities of students and teaching staff. This perspective often remains single-categorical, addressing specific diversity dimensions in isolation rather than considering intersectional interdependencies and structural power relations, overlooking how multiple dimensions, such as gender and disability, interact to shape access and participation (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). This limitation is particularly relevant in teaching contexts, where standardized curricula and institutional structures may not adequately account for the varying needs, expectations, and challenges of an increasingly heterogeneous student body (Aufferkorte-Michaelis & Linde, 2018).

From a critical perspective, an intersectional approach to teaching introduces a differently nuanced discourse on "participation" by placing power relations and the inclusion of the individual's experiences at the center. Such an intersectional perspective calls for a broader reflection on how knowledge is produced, whose perspectives are valued, and how educational practice can become more inclusive. This article explores how an intersectional approach to HE teaching can be implemented through didactics. We argue that integrating intersectional perspectives into HE teaching can empower teaching staff to critically engage with power relations and privileges while fostering strategies to develop an intersectionality-sensitive learning environment. In doing so, it is important to consider the specific characteristics of the German HE system. While critical perspectives on HE teaching exist, they are limited to certain disciplines. At the same time, German teaching staff have a high degree of autonomy and a low degree of external control (Stichweh, 2016). This combination offers both challenges and opportunities for institutional change. Here, HE didactic workshops can empower teaching staff to take an active role as change agents to innovate their teaching approaches. These workshops are widely recognized as effective mechanisms for fostering the competencies and skills of the teaching staff to respond to diverse student needs (Hoffmann et al., 2024; Johannes et al., 2013; Kröber, 2011; Stes et al., 2010).

To examine these dynamics, this article addresses the following research questions: How can HE didactic workshops support teaching staff in integrating intersectionality into their teaching practices? And what are the key components of didactic workshops that promote an intersectional approach to HE teaching?

To address these research questions, this article begins by outlining the specific context of HE in Germany and HE didactics before defining intersectionality and the concept of intersectional pedagogy (IP). Drawing on the principles of IP, a case study of a pilot workshop designed for teaching staff is presented, aiming to raise awareness towards intersectionality in HE teaching. The methodology section details the workshop's

evaluation design, followed by a comprehensive description of the workshop's design and implementation. The evaluation findings are then presented to assess the workshop's effectiveness, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. *The Need for a Critical Perspective of Diversity in German HE*

Over the last few decades, German HE has undergone significant transformation thanks to widening participation policies, demographic changes, and internationalization (Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020). These developments have led to a more diverse student and teaching staff population, which necessitates a shift in pedagogical approaches (Wild & Esdar, 2014; Zervakis & Mooraj, 2014). While diversity-sensitive teaching has gained prominence, these approaches often focus on accommodating different student backgrounds without critically examining the intersecting power structures that shape educational experiences (Archer, 2007; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009). This limitation calls for an intersectional perspective, which moves beyond a single-dimensional understanding of diversity and instead considers how various social categories, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, interact and create unique experiences of privilege and marginalization (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989).

Despite the growing attention to diversity in German HE, the integration of more critical pedagogical approaches to HE teaching remains limited. Unlike in the USA and the UK, where critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and social justice education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) are more institutionalized, the German HE system has traditionally prioritized knowledge production over pedagogical innovation. More precisely, social justice-oriented teaching in Germany tends to be confined to specific disciplines, such as sociology and gender studies, rather than integrated into the curricula across all disciplines. Additionally, the prevalent notions of “objective,” “value-free,” and “merit-based” education (Münch, 2007) reinforce the perception that critical pedagogies are ideological rather than academic (Harris & González, 2012; Wångren & Milatovic, 2014). While issues such as racism and gender inequality are acknowledged in policy frameworks, they are often treated as administrative concerns rather than pedagogical imperatives, influenced by Germany's legalistic approach to antidiscrimination (Mecheril & Castro Varela, 2010).

However, recent national and European initiatives, such as the Erasmus+ programs, have contributed to a growing discussion on intersectionality in teacher training, the social sciences, and the humanities, particularly among early career faculty members (Pietzonka, 2016; Wild & Esdar, 2014). As a result, several didactic handbooks and toolkits have been developed to support diversity-sensitive teaching (Hörr et al., 2020), including projects such as JoinMe2, which focuses on fostering diversity-sensitive competencies among teaching staff. However, a critical review of these initiatives reveals that they primarily emphasize diversity-sensitive rather than intersectional approaches. This conceptual distinction is crucial—while diversity-sensitive teaching acknowledges student differences, intersectional approaches actively examine how power structures shape educational inclusion and exclusion (Walgenbach, 2021).

A further structural challenge in implementing intersectionality in German HE teaching is the principle of *Lehrfreiheit* (teaching autonomy), which grants faculty members full discretion over their pedagogical approaches and is constitutionally protected (Stichweh, 2016; Teichler et al., 2013). Here, university

management has limited control over teaching practices due to traditional governance structures (Krücken et al., 2013; Leišytė, 2016; Leišytė & Dee, 2012; Leišytė & Wilkesmann, 2016). At the same time, unlike in other educational sectors, university lecturers are not required to undergo formal pedagogical training; instead, they often develop teaching skills informally through experience (Wildt, 2009). This combination of high teaching autonomy and minimal institutional control mechanisms allows faculty members to decide independently whether or not to engage with innovations in university teaching and curriculum development (Wilkesmann, 2016).

In summary, this system provides both opportunities and challenges: On the one hand, autonomy allows faculty to engage with intersectional perspectives voluntarily; on the other hand, it means that such approaches remain dependent on individual initiative rather than institutionalized structures. Moreover, the predominance of mid-level academic staff in teaching positions, many of whom hold fixed-term contracts, further complicates the implementation of long-term pedagogical innovations (Krücken et al., 2013; Leišytė & Dee, 2012).

In response to these challenges, HE didactics (*Hochschuldidaktik*) has gained importance in Germany, particularly following the Bologna Process reforms, which introduced bachelor's and master's programs to align with European HE standards (Hüther & Krücken, 2018; Peksen & Zeeman, 2019). Emerging in the 1960s as a response to student movements demanding better teaching conditions, HE didactics has since played a central role in promoting pedagogical innovation in German HE (Wildt, 2009, 2013). Didactic centers offer workshops and consulting formats that encourage reflective teaching practices and student-centered approaches, with research indicating that such training enhances teaching competencies and self-efficacy (Hoffmann et al., 2024; Stes et al., 2010). Importantly, HE didactics highlight the impact of the instructors' beliefs on their pedagogical behavior, emphasizing the need for systemic support structures alongside individual competence development (Kröber, 2011).

These developments present an opportunity to integrate intersectionality into HE teaching. While voluntary engagement remains a key driver of innovation, didactic workshops provide a promising avenue for fostering awareness of intersectionality, particularly among intrinsically motivated lecturers seeking institutional support. In order to explore how the concept of intersectionality can be integrated into HE teaching, the following section introduces the theoretical foundations of intersectionality and its implications for HE didactics.

## **2.2. Intersectionality as a Critical Framework in HE**

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that examines how multiple social identities (e.g., such as race, gender, class, disability, and sexuality) intersect to shape privilege and oppression. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality moves beyond single-axis analyses (e.g., racism or sexism) by introducing matrix thinking, highlighting how different forms of discrimination are interconnected and embedded in societal structures (Crenshaw, 1989; see also Sim & Bierema, 2023). Unlike traditional diversity approaches that treat identity markers separately, intersectionality emphasizes the role of structural power dynamics and institutional mechanisms (e.g., education, law, or labor markets) in maintaining social hierarchies (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This perspective not only serves as an analytical tool but also has normative implications, advocating for systemic change to address inequities in policies and practices (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 2011; Walgenbach, 2014).

In the context of HE, although intersectionality is often used to critique exclusionary structures, curricula, and teaching practices, concrete applications remain underdeveloped and inconsistent. Some scholars argue that it has become an academic buzzword rather than a driver of substantive institutional change (Ahmed, 2012; Davis, 2008). Others point to a lack of concrete methodologies for its integration into curricula and teaching practices (Case, 2016; Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011). Although universities increasingly incorporate intersectional language into diversity policies, these commitments often remain at the rhetorical level rather than influencing pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, or institutional structures (Ahmed, 2012). For example, while syllabi may include diverse perspectives, classroom power dynamics and teaching approaches frequently remain unchanged, thereby perpetuating inequalities (Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011). These challenges highlight the need to move beyond theoretical discussions and establish structured approaches for embedding intersectionality into HE teaching (Sim & Bierema, 2023).

Despite these difficulties, research suggests that integrating intersectionality into teaching fosters equity, cognitive diversity, engagement, and learning outcomes, benefiting both students and lecturers (Case, 2016). First, research demonstrates that students with intersecting marginalized identities often face compounded academic disadvantages, such as implicit biases, stereotype threats, and institutional barriers (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Addressing these issues through intersectional teaching can mitigate such barriers and create more equitable learning conditions. Second, empirical studies indicate that exposure to diverse perspectives enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Antonio et al., 2004). When intersectional experiences are considered in course content and teaching methods, students engage with richer, more nuanced discussions that enhance their cognitive flexibility, which is an essential skill for the twenty-first century. Moreover, research on student engagement shows that curricula reflecting students' identities lead to higher persistence and academic success (Kuh, 2001; Tinto, 1993).

In conclusion, research strongly supports the claim that integrating intersectionality into HE teaching is not just an ethical imperative but a pedagogically effective strategy. To make intersectionality more practically relevant, lecturers must move beyond theoretical discussions and actively transform curricula, pedagogies, and institutional cultures to ensure meaningful inclusion and equity. But how can we do this? Here, the concept of IP is of special interest because it can serve as a bridge between theory and practices, offering concrete strategies for fostering more intersectionality-sensitive teaching.

### **2.3. IP: A Framework for HE Teaching**

IP is an educational approach that fosters critical awareness of how interlocking systems of oppression shape experiences at individual, group, and societal levels (Sim & Bierema, 2023). Rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), IP emphasizes structural inequalities rather than focusing solely on individual differences (Case, 2016).

Unlike traditional diversity approaches that emphasize representation and inclusion (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2008), IP critically analyzes power structures, knowledge production, and dominant narratives (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). It moves beyond additive perspectives that treat social categories in isolation, instead examining the simultaneous interaction of power relations. Furthermore, rather than merely celebrating diversity, IP critiques dominant knowledge structures and amplifies marginalized perspectives (hooks, 1994).

Based on hooks' (1994) notion that the "classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12) to actively engage with radical critique and social change, an intersectional approach equips lecturers and students with critical frameworks that acknowledge marginalized knowledge, expose power dynamics, explore the complexity of identity, and foster strategies for empowerment (Sim & Bierema, 2023). Here, intersectional awareness is positively associated with openness to new experiences, the ability to adopt others' perspectives, intentions to drive social change, and engagement in rights-based activism (Case, 2016). In fact, research confirms that IP enhances the student's ability to address inequalities in professional settings, contributing to diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in their later workplaces (Ong et al., 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Williams et al., 2020). Moreover, institutions that implement intersectional curricula report increased student engagement and trust, particularly among marginalized groups (Museus et al., 2017).

To integrate intersectionality into HE teaching, professional development programs must be grounded in key pedagogical principles. Based on a literature review, we identify seven core principles that are essential for fostering intersectional awareness among teaching staff:

1. Creating safe spaces: Encouraging open dialogue and vulnerability fosters an inclusive learning environment where students and lecturers can critically discuss power dynamics (hooks, 1994; Sim & Bierema, 2023).
2. Building a strong theoretical foundation: Understanding how intersecting social categories shape privilege and oppression is essential for implementing intersectional teaching (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).
3. Self-reflection on positionality: Lecturers must critically examine their own identities and biases to develop more equitable teaching practices (Ahmed, 2012; Case, 2016).
4. Considering the student's lived experiences: Acknowledging and integrating the student's diverse backgrounds enhances engagement and learning outcomes (Sim & Bierema, 2023; Tinto, 1993).
5. Reviewing teaching content and methods: Assessing curricula, teaching materials, and assessments helps dismantle exclusionary practices (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).
6. Developing intersectionality-sensitive teaching concepts: Encouraging the integration of diverse perspectives fosters transformative learning experiences (Case & Rios, 2016).
7. Promoting community building and sustainability: Institutional commitment, peer exchange, and collaborative learning are crucial for embedding intersectionality into long-term teaching practices (Sim & Bierema, 2023).

These principles provide a holistic framework for equipping teaching staff with the tools to create inclusive and critically reflexive teaching environments. Effective training should go beyond theoretical instruction to focus on critical reflection, structural analysis, and practical change.

### 3. Methodology

Building on the above-mentioned IP principles, a pilot professional development workshop for HE staff was developed as a case study. This workshop aims to equip teaching staff from all disciplines at one regional university with concrete strategies for implementing intersectional teaching practices, fostering a more inclusive and transformative academic environment. The workshop was accompanied by a mixed-methods convergent evaluation design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), which served two main purposes. First, due to the

workshop's pilot nature, it aimed to identify potential for further development by gathering feedback on areas that could be improved or expanded. This ensured that future iterations of the workshop would remain responsive to the participant's needs and evolving pedagogical challenges. Second, the evaluation sought to determine how the workshop had supported teaching staff in integrating intersectionality into their teaching practice.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the evaluation design assessed the participant's awareness, attitudes, and behavioral changes related to integrating intersectionality in teaching. Participation in the workshop, follow-up, and evaluation was voluntary for all participants.

Data collection occurred at two key points in time: before the workshop in July 2024 and after the workshop in December 2024. The pre-workshop phase included a structured survey of the participants' prior knowledge, motivation, and interest ( $n = 11$ ). At the end of the workshop day, a focus group discussion was executed using the five-finger feedback method (Gibbs, 1997). Here, participants were encouraged to reflect on key aspects of the workshop through questions about their key takeaways, enjoyment, challenges, areas for further exploration, and suggestions for improvement ( $n = 11$ ). The postworkshop phase used a follow-up survey to measure changes, followed by a reflection session one week later to explore the participants' application of intersectionality in their teaching practices ( $n = 4$ ).

## 4. Case Study: Workshop Design and Implementation

As a case study, a pilot workshop that was titled "Intersectionality in Higher Education Teaching" was developed as part of the workshop program of a HE didactics department as a voluntary offer for teaching staff from all disciplines at a research university in Germany. The workshop was held at the beginning of July 2024 with 11 participants and two workshop leaders.

### 4.1. Workshop Objectives and Structure

Based on the previously mentioned literature on IP, the primary objective of the workshop was to support the participants in integrating intersectional approaches into their teaching to foster safe and intersectionality-sensitive learning environments. This was achieved by raising awareness of intersectionality's importance in HE teaching, reflecting on power and privilege dynamics in teaching contexts, critically assessing the participants' learning environments in terms of who is privileged and oppressed, and analyzing the integration of intersectionality into teaching practice.

The workshop comprised five sessions, combining online and in-person components. Three sessions were conducted in a single day, covering (a) theoretical foundations of intersectionality (definitions and approaches), (b) reflection on intersectionality among participants and their students, and (c) an assessment of intersectionality in learning environments, teaching materials, methods, and assignments. The fourth session was a self-learning phase, where the participants developed an intersectionality-sensitive teaching concept. The final session was an online follow-up meeting where the participants shared their experiences of implementing their concepts. In the following subsections, the implementation of the workshop will be described in more detail according to the previously identified principles of IP that were covered by the pilot concept.

#### 4.1.1. Principle 1: Providing Safe Spaces

Given the potentially emotional and controversial nature of intersectionality, the workshop prioritized creating a safe and welcoming environment. It began with the “net of similarities” activity, in which participants identified commonalities beyond appearances. They recorded these on a shared poster, visually connecting their names. This activity was conducted informally before the official start of the workshop and fostered initial interactions in a relaxed setting.

The workshop then formally began with a short questionnaire of the participants’ expectations, followed by introductions, an overview of the objectives and agenda, and a discussion of the rules of communication. A reflection on the “net of similarities” activity highlighted the key message of intersectionality, which is that meaningful communication is essential for recognizing shared experiences.

#### 4.1.2. Principle 2: Theoretical Foundations of Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was introduced through the animated video *Two Blue Crocodiles and the Gap in the System*, which illustrates the concept of intersectionality with the help of a metaphorical example. This was followed by a guided discussion in which the participants were invited to share their impressions and interpretations. This led to a brief theoretical introduction that covered the main definitions, approaches, and axes of intersectionality, and emphasized its relevance in HE teaching.

#### 4.1.3. Principle 3: Self-Reflection of Privileges and Position as a Lecturer

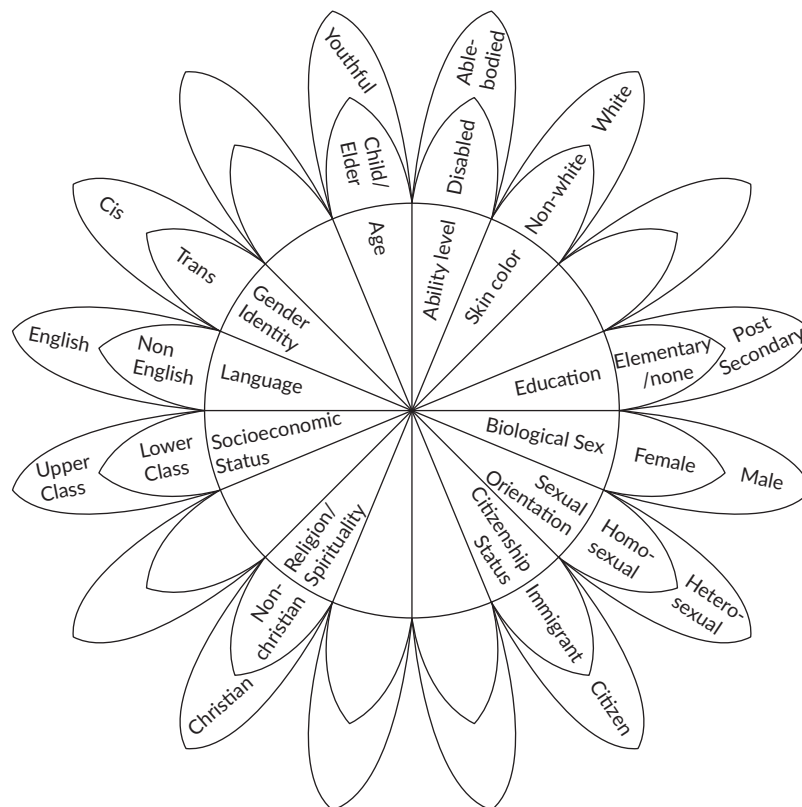
Teaching through an intersectional lens requires self-awareness of privilege, inequality, and bias. To facilitate this, the participants engaged in the Power Flower activity, which is a tool from antidiscrimination pedagogy (Figure 1). They completed a worksheet with petals representing different social categories, with the inner petals representing privileged groups and the outer petals representing marginalized groups. Small-group discussions followed, exploring how it felt to belong to different categories. Finally, a plenary discussion linked privilege to teaching practices, prompting reflection on how the instructors’ positions influence their students’ perceptions and experiences.

#### 4.1.4. Principle 4: Analysis of Axes of Intersectionality Among Students

After reflecting on their own positions, the participants considered the diverse identities of their students. In small groups, they discussed the axes of intersectionality that they had observed and shared classroom situations where these dynamics became visible. Their insights were documented on moderation cards, which were then presented and discussed in a plenary session. This sharing facilitated peer learning about creating intersectionality-sensitive learning environments.

#### 4.1.5. Principle 5: Reflection of the Participants’ Teaching Practices

The next session focused on critically examining learning environments, materials, methods, and assignments for intersectionality. The participants first defined “learning environment” and then discussed the factors that contribute to inclusivity. Small groups evaluated their own courses, identifying strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement. They then considered challenges and opportunities for implementing changes.



**Figure 1.** Power Flower worksheet. Source: Toolkit from WeRise (n.d.).

The second session focused on teaching methods and materials. The participants grouped themselves according to commonly used methods (e.g., text-based discussions) and assessed their sensitivity to intersectionality using an eight-question framework (e.g.: “For whom is this method easy or difficult?”). The results were shared in a plenary session, which sparked further discussion and sharing of intersectionality-sensitive teaching strategies.

The final component examined the student assignments. The participants formed groups based on common assessment formats (e.g., written exams) and discussed strategies for making them more inclusive, considering factors such as material selection, diversity of learning paths, flexibility, and accessibility. Their findings were documented and shared in a final plenary discussion.

#### 4.1.6. Principle 6: Developing Intersectionality-Sensitive Teaching Concepts

After analyzing their teaching practices, the participants were introduced to good practice examples from a literature review of intersectionality in HE teaching to inspire new approaches. They were then asked to develop an intersectionality-sensitive teaching concept in a following self-learning phase based on their reflections and the examples presented. The participants were invited to submit their concepts before the next semester to receive individual feedback from the workshop facilitators. At the end of the day, the participants provided feedback on their key takeaways, challenges, most valuable insights, and areas for further exploration.

#### 4.1.7. Principle 7: Community and Network Building

A follow-up online meeting in December 2024 provided an opportunity for the participants and facilitators to reconvene and discuss the implementation of intersectionality-sensitive teaching innovations. They shared successes, challenges, and strategies for further refinement, fostering an ongoing exchange of ideas and professional support.

## 5. Evaluation Findings

Given the small number of participants, the triangulation of evaluation data provides a richer understanding of the participants' learning experiences. To systematically assess the effectiveness of the workshop, Kirkpatrick's evaluation model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) is applied, which provides a four-level approach to measuring reaction, learning, behavior, and results. However, to gain a better understanding of our participants, this section will start with a short overview of the respondents' characteristics.

### 5.1. Overview of the Respondents

The gender distribution among the participants was relatively balanced, with 54.5% identifying as female, 36.4% as male, and 9.1% preferring not to disclose their gender. Teaching experience varied, with 54.5% having one to three years, 27.3% over five years, and others reporting less than one year or three to five years. Consequently, all of the participants belonged to the status group of mid-level academic staff. All of the participants were from the social sciences and humanities, highlighting the relevance of intersectionality in these fields. Participants had a moderate understanding of intersectionality, with 36.4% rating their prior knowledge as "low," another 36.4% as "neutral," and 27.3% as "high." Most had no prior workshop experience on the topic, with only one participant (9.1%) having previously attended one on intersectionality. This highlights a foundational gap in understanding and presents a significant opportunity for professional development in this field. Concerning motivation, the workshop participants primarily aimed to improve their teaching skills (45.5%), reflecting a practical interest in addressing intersectionality. Additionally, 36.4% valued learning about intersectionality and obtaining a certificate, while 18.2% were interested in its theoretical foundations for research. Regarding specific interests, 36.4% focused on integrating intersectionality into teaching, 27.3% on understanding its theoretical approaches, and 18.2% on addressing diverse student needs and exploring various aspects of the concept.

### 5.2. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 1: Reaction

The feedback collected during the focus group discussion at the end of the workshop provided insights into the participants' experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement. The participants shared several key takeaways from the workshop, focusing on practical inspiration for integrating intersectionality into their teaching. Many found the workshop valuable for generating concrete ideas on promoting intersectionality and addressing diverse student needs. The most appreciated aspect was the opportunity to share experiences and learn from peers, fostering camaraderie and collective insight. The participants also valued the "net of similarities" that emerged across disciplines, highlighting common challenges and strategies. The Power Flower activity further enriched this experience by creating a supportive and reflective environment, particularly when discussing privilege.

The participants also identified challenges, especially in understanding and applying intersectionality in their teaching. Combining group work on diverse topics, such as learning environments and exam practices, sometimes made it difficult to maintain focus. Some also found that the Power Flower activity required deeper reflection to fully grasp their privileges.

Several participants expressed interest in further exploring intersectionality, particularly through practical examples and additional resources. They suggested incorporating more hands-on exercises to illustrate different levels of intersectionality in teaching scenarios. There was also a strong interest in preworkshop readings to build foundational knowledge and facilitate in-depth discussions. The participants proposed the creation of a shared Moodle space for ongoing resource sharing and discussion.

Constructive feedback on the workshop structure included suggestions for improving session flow and effectiveness. One recommendation was to schedule practical methods presentations after lunch, followed by group work on learning environments and assessments. The participants felt that this reorganization would better support the application of intersectionality in real-life teaching. Additionally, they advocated for a stronger focus on specific scenarios and practical methods to deepen their understanding and implementation of intersectionality.

### **5.3. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 2: Learning**

All of the participants agreed that the workshop provided a strong foundation for understanding intersectionality. However, the complexity of the concept made it challenging to translate theoretical insights into concrete teaching strategies. The tools introduced encouraged self-reflection and critical engagement, but their impact varied. While some activities facilitated meaningful discussions, others felt too abstract or needed clearer guidance on integrating intersectionality into HE teaching. Notably, all of the respondents reported having implemented or are planning to implement intersectionality in their teaching, indicating that the workshop successfully motivated the participants beyond the training session.

The participants suggested a more structured learning model to enhance the workshop's impact. They recommended introducing a preparatory phase with pre-readings, short videos, and guiding questions to build foundational knowledge before the workshop, which would allow the sessions to focus more closely on practical application. However, ensuring that the preparatory workload remains manageable is essential. Additionally, ongoing support beyond the workshop was emphasized. A shared digital platform, such as a Moodle forum, could facilitate further discussion, resource sharing, and peer support.

### **5.4. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 3: Behavior**

One workshop participant successfully integrated the concept of intersectionality into their teaching and shared their experiences and reflections. This implementation took place in an elective academic writing course for bachelor's students ( $n = 20$ ). This participant introduced the concept in the third session through the Power Flower exercise. To facilitate reflection, the students engaged in two structured activities. First, they examined how their personal experiences and social positioning influenced their choice of seminar paper topics, considering whether personal experiences or biases played a role. Second, the exercise aimed to raise awareness of diversity in teamwork, prompting the students to reflect on their strengths and challenges in group work and how different backgrounds and perspectives shape collaboration.

This workshop participant observed notable differences in student engagement compared to previous semesters. According to this lecturer, after the Power Flower exercise, the students demonstrated a heightened awareness of how their identities influenced their academic work and engaged more critically with their topic choices. Additionally, discussions of the group dynamics revealed increased sensitivity to diverse perspectives and potential power imbalances in collaboration.

According to this workshop participant, the Power Flower exercise fostered deeper self-awareness, enabling the students to make more informed and reflective academic choices. It also promoted a more inclusive and considerate approach to teamwork, reducing conflicts stemming from differing expectations or working styles. However, challenges remained. For example, some of the students initially struggled to articulate how their intersectional identities affected their academic work, requiring additional guidance and scaffolding. Others felt uncomfortable openly sharing their responses. Furthermore, integrating this approach into the broader curriculum was difficult because the students were unaccustomed to structured self-reflection in academic settings. Looking ahead, this participant expressed interest in refining this approach by providing more structured prompts to guide student reflection and incorporating similar exercises across multiple sessions rather than limiting them to a single session.

### **5.5. Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Level 4: Results**

Although all of the participants who responded to the postworkshop survey had either implemented or planned to implement intersectionality, this was driven by individual commitment rather than institutional support. The low participation rate suggests that intersectionality may not be a priority for many beyond the workshop setting, which underscores the need for a systematic follow-up. Without institutional mechanisms to support long-term engagement, there is a risk that intersectionality will remain a temporary focus rather than a sustainable teaching principle.

For intersectionality to become a sustainable teaching principle rather than an isolated individual effort, institutional embedding at both the departmental and university levels is essential. Without structural support, such as department-wide initiatives, integration into teaching guidelines, or incentives for IP, individual efforts risk fading over time. A more systematic follow-up mechanism, including ongoing peer exchange, dedicated institutional resources, and formal recognition of intersectionality in teaching frameworks, is needed to ensure a long-term impact.

## **6. Discussion**

German HE teaching is an interesting case for understanding the agency of teaching staff in fostering intersectionality in teaching and learning due to the country's unique academic structures and historical approach to diversity. German HE has traditionally emphasized academic autonomy, with teaching staff enjoying significant freedom over their curricula and pedagogical choices (Stichweh, 2016). This *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom of teaching) provides opportunities for lecturers to integrate intersectional perspectives into their teaching. However, it also presents challenges because there is limited institutional oversight or incentive to do so, while at the same time, didactic training for university teaching staff is obligatory (Wildt, 2009). Furthermore, unlike in the Anglo-American context, where critical pedagogy and social justice education are

more established (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), critical pedagogical perspectives of HE teaching are rather limited to certain disciplines.

Consequently, intersectional teaching approaches are not yet widely institutionalized and rely heavily on the personal commitment of individual lecturers. These characteristics underscore the importance of professional development programs, such as HE didactic workshops, to support teaching staff in integrating intersectionality into their teaching practices.

The findings from the case study of a pilot workshop on intersectionality in HE teaching highlight both the potential and challenges of integrating intersectionality into HE teaching. The evaluation results indicate that while the participants found the workshop to be an insightful introduction to IP, its implementation in teaching practice remains contingent on individual motivation and institutional support. The workshop succeeded in raising awareness, fostering self-reflection, and equipping participants with conceptual and methodological tools for intersectionality-sensitive teaching. However, the limited postworkshop engagement suggests that further measures are needed to sustain long-term impact.

One of the main strengths of the workshop was its participatory design, which allowed for the exchange of experiences among teaching staff from different disciplines in a protected space that was characterized by appreciation and mutual understanding. The use of interactive exercises, such as the Power Flower and case discussions, facilitated an embodied understanding of intersectionality beyond theoretical abstraction. Furthermore, the follow-up phase provided a crucial opportunity for the participants to reflect on their application of intersectionality in their teaching, demonstrating that at least some of the participants were able to translate workshop insights into practice.

Nevertheless, several challenges emerged. First, the abstract nature of intersectionality made it difficult for some participants to immediately see how to integrate it into their specific teaching contexts. This aligns with critiques of intersectionality as a concept that, while powerful in theory, lacks clear guidelines for practical implementation in HE (Case, 2016; Sim & Bierema, 2023). Second, the participants highlighted the need for additional structural support, such as institutional incentives, curricular frameworks, and continuous professional development opportunities. Without these elements, the integration of intersectionality risks being left to individual initiative, which can limit its sustainability and impact.

Nevertheless, the workshop participants acknowledged their influence in shaping, changing, and developing curricula and teaching practices within their departments, highlighting the potential of such professional development workshops to foster institutional change towards intersectionality. However, they also voiced the need for further institutional and didactic support (e.g., follow-up sessions or digital resources) for the implementation phase. Overall, we observe that the cultural value of *Lehrfreiheit* in our case can give both opportunities and barriers to implementing intersectional practices in teaching (Hüther & Krücken, 2018; Stichweh, 2016), emphasizing the importance of voluntary didactics workshops (Wilkesmann & Schmid, 2014; Wildt, 2013) given that high intrinsic motivation of those who attend such training (note that this could be different if they were “forced” to do so).

## 7. Conclusion

Concerning our research questions, this article underscores the importance of didactic workshops as a means of introducing intersectionality into HE teaching. The case study of a pilot workshop demonstrated that intersectionality can be introduced as a reflective and critical framework in HE teaching, fostering increased awareness and self-reflection among lecturers. The evaluation highlights that such training enhances the participants' awareness, fosters critical reflection, and inspires changes in teaching practices. However, for these efforts to translate into lasting institutional change, additional measures are necessary.

Future iterations of the workshop should incorporate a more structured learning model, including preparatory readings, extended peer support networks, and institutional recognition of intersectional teaching practices. Additionally, fostering a broader commitment at the departmental and university levels through policy frameworks, interdisciplinary collaborations, and incentives for intersectionality-sensitive teaching would strengthen the impact of IP.

In line with the two sides of academic freedom in teaching (Stichweh, 2016), this workshop recognized the opportunities and challenges that the academic staff face and empowered them to experiment with innovative teaching tools. However, for the longer-term impact and sustainability of intersectional approaches in the participants' teaching practices, institutional support (Böhm et al., 2018) would be needed. Thus, by combining professional development initiatives with structural reforms, universities can move beyond diversity rhetoric toward meaningful and lasting intersectionality in HE teaching.

However, there are several limitations when it comes to transferring our evaluation findings of the case study to other settings. First, the didactic workshop is only a small-scale pilot that was implemented in one university in Germany. We by no means aim to generalize our findings regarding the empowerment effect, as well as the agency of academic staff to promote intersectionality in teaching and learning in universities overall. More case studies are required to account for the differences in the participants' prior experiences, academic status groups, as well as disciplinary backgrounds. At the same time, this example from the German HE context illustrates the importance of raising awareness of intersectional approaches in one's own teaching, which brings to light the reflection of one's own teaching situation, as well as the way of approaching the students' needs from a completely new perspective that sheds light on the privilege and oppression in one's own class.

This evaluation has faced limitations in terms of the self-perceptions of the participants and the definition of pre- and post-test scales to measure changes in the lecturers' attitudes, competencies, teaching concepts, and knowledge. We need to further examine to what extent the participants have shared their knowledge and experience within their disciplinary communities, and hence serve as change agents for their departments and faculties. An important aspect for future research in this regard is the academic status of the participants given that they might have different opportunities to impact developments at their faculties. Thus, further research is required to uncover the impact of such workshops and the extent to which the agency of the teaching staff is used to influence processes and structures going beyond the concrete courses that they teach. It would also be interesting to understand the impact of intersectionality training workshops on teaching practices and student outcomes. Finally, to increase the power and the generalizability of the findings, a comparative analysis across different disciplinary cultures and different types of universities and HE systems would be desirable.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and insightful suggestions. We also extend our thanks to the InterHEd project partners and the workshop participants for their engagement and valuable feedback. Furthermore, we acknowledge the financial support provided by the German Research Association and Technical University within their funding program for open access publishing.

## Funding

The workshop was developed as part of the collaborative research project Intersectionality in Higher Education (InterHEd), which is funded by the European Union in the context of Erasmus+ (2023-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000160620). Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between TU Dortmund University and Cogitatio Press.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

## Data Availability

The data has not been made publicly accessible in order to protect the respondents' anonymity.

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# Language Policy as a Channel of Inclusion for Researchers in the Internationalized University

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**Submitted:** 30 December 2024 **Accepted:** 13 May 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

Internationalization has increased diversity in Finnish universities, yet the meaningful inclusion of international faculty remains challenging. This study examines how institutional language policies shape the professional integration of international researchers, highlighting tensions between national language protection and internationalization rationales. Through interviews and document analysis, the findings reveal structural barriers limiting participation, including unclear expectations, inadequate support, and the perceived low professional value of national languages. The study critiques a narrow approach to diversity, arguing for comprehensive support systems—like peer networks and workplace-based language opportunities—and policy reform that fosters genuine inclusion. Framing language policy as a negotiated space shaped by habitus, community, and power, the study calls for institutional changes prioritizing collaboration and engagement with linguistic diversity.

## Keywords

English lingua franca; inclusion; international scholars; internationalization; language policy; national language

## 1. Introduction

Universities worldwide seek to attract top researchers to enhance academic excellence and global visibility. Studies of faculty mobility, however, underscore the importance of inclusive practices and institutional support to ensure their success and the enrichment of the academic environment (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2017; Rumbley & de Wit, 2016; Yudkevich et al., 2016). Language policy, as I argue in this article, is one of the most critical areas of inclusion. Particularly in non-English-speaking countries, it shapes the conditions for international scholars’ participation in academic and institutional life, either facilitating their integration or reinforcing exclusionary structures.

International scholars contribute to the linguistic diversity of universities, yet this does not always lead to multilingualism on an institutional level. Instead, as Lindström and Sylvén (2014) point out, their presence often leads to an increased reliance on English as a lingua franca. In the Nordic context, this shift has sparked concerns about the declining role of national languages in higher education, leading to debates on language protection (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; T. Saarinen & Rontu, 2018).

This perspective reinforces a binary view of language use, juxtaposing national languages and English while overlooking the broader linguistic diversity within the academic community. It also portrays international faculty, particularly in language policy, as a problem to manage, not a valuable contribution. For instance, limited proficiency in national languages among internationally recruited researchers (Lindström & Sylvén, 2014) is framed as a problem, rather than an opportunity to examine systemic barriers to language learning. As a result, diversity is often reduced to the inconvenience of accommodating English, instead of prompting deeper engagement with structural challenges that limit equitable participation.

From the perspective of habitus, universities interpret national and international influences, pursuing the standardization and legitimation of language practices. These ongoing processes create specific conditions that govern language expression and shape the perception of individuals within the academic environment (Bourdieu, 1991).

The tension between national language protection policies, specifically those for Finnish and Swedish, and the push for internationalization—which often defaults to English—mirrors the conflict Rutherford (1990) described. Rutherford noted how language policies frequently aim for linguistic homogeneity, while cross-border mobility fosters hybrid identities and multilingual practices. Globalization not only promotes these diverse identities but also challenges equality, positioning policy as a potential mechanism for justice. Within the Nordic countries, and particularly in Finland, university language policy faces a fundamental challenge: defining its purpose while also determining who belongs to the university's linguistic community.

Kuteeva et al. (2020) emphasize that multilingual realities within universities are often more complex than official policies acknowledge. T. Saarinen and Rontu (2018) similarly highlight a gap between policy and practice, showing how the University of Jyväskylä presents its language policy as rooted in a traditionally Finnish identity; this approach clashes with community perspectives and the country's constitutional bilingualism. Likewise, at Aalto, T. Saarinen and Rontu (2018, p. 115) observe that while official documents promote national languages, practical situations favour English. Furthermore, the parallel use of Swedish and Finnish, often suggested as a policy tool, is discussed theoretically but rarely implemented in practice.

Conversely, Soler (2020) critiques image-making strategies that promote English at the expense of national languages to showcase universities as international. While English indeed plays a central role in university practices due to its high communicative potential (de Swaan, 2001), this does not negate the complex interplay of other languages within the university. These studies consistently highlight that university language policy remains an evolving and contested field with undefined objectives and scope. Consequently, the full complexity of the university's multilingual community remains underexplored and insufficiently addressed in policy and practice.

The internationalization of universities, which has resulted in increased diversity and multilingualism, faces a challenge. This challenge concerns whether genuine inclusion can be fostered, particularly through its language policy, or if institutions will continue to rely on symbolic acknowledgment. As Ahmed (2012) critiques, institutional diversity policies frequently signal inclusion without enacting structural change. Similarly, Finnish university language policies articulate support for Finnish and Swedish and mention internationalization, but often fail to outline clear strategies for including international staff. This dynamic creates hierarchies: Even with the growing use of English, Finnish-speaking faculty often retain power, while non-native speakers or non-speakers of Finnish face systemic exclusion. This highlights that language learning isn't merely an individual effort; it's deeply embedded in institutional power structures.

The absence of specific language skills and understanding of implied rules can disempower individuals, hindering effective action and upholding sanctions of the field. Habitus involves stable dispositions that not only predict social standing (Wacquant, 2014) but also allows for agency and adaptation to new and challenging contexts. In language policy, however, the influence of actors varies according to their power, resulting in decision-making shaped by dominant discourses that perpetuate linguistic, economic, ethnic, and social hierarchies (Ball, 2006).

A narrow approach to diversity in language policy—for instance, merely offering language courses without addressing deeper structural barriers—fails to recognize the university as a complex language community. As A. Saarinen and Jäppinen (2014) highlight, the absence of migrant voices in policy discussions limits genuine inclusion. Consequently, fostering genuine participation necessitates that universities, rather than operating under the assumption that language acquisition alone ensures involvement, acknowledge diverse linguistic backgrounds, cultivate inclusive environments, and involve affected individuals in shaping policies. Moving beyond “harmonious empty pluralism” (Mohanty, 2003, as cited in Ahmed, 2012) demands structural transformation over mere performative gestures. Indeed, Hoffman (2007, p. 119) and Lehtimaja et al. (2021, p. 12) further problematize equity, demonstrating how seemingly neutral policies can inadvertently produce inequalities for both international and local scholars and students.

This production of inequality also manifests when language policy adopts a principle centered on national language protection. Language policy approach based on this overlooks the broader socio-economic and institutional forces that shape language use. As Mufwene (2006) and Hultgren (2014) argue, language policies alone cannot drive significant change without addressing structural conditions, professional incentives, and power hierarchies. T. Saarinen's (2020) research further highlights how policies promoting national languages in higher education are often entangled with nationalist discourse, potentially creating exclusionary environments rather than fostering integration. By prioritizing language preservation over institutional inclusivity, such policies impose expectations on international scholars without providing the necessary support, career incentives, or social integration.

This study examines how institutional language policies in Finnish universities, shaped by the dual pressures of national language protection and internationalization, influence the inclusion and participation of international researchers. My central argument is that language policy, rather than arbitrarily regulating linguistic practices, is best conceptualized as a mechanism for genuine inclusion. Such inclusion extends beyond mere presence, encompassing voice, influence, and active participation in decision-making, leadership, and institutional practices, far exceeding simply fostering positive workplace interactions. Going

beyond the analysis of rigid language protection policies, this article explores how institutional structures can better reflect academic realities and promote meaningful multilingual participation, including opportunities for learning national languages.

## 2. Methodology

This research explores language policy as a negotiated space of power, not a static set of rules, by integrating Bourdieu's habitus, Spolsky's language community, and Ahmed's critique of inclusion. It examines how diverse habitus, shifting community norms, and power structures influence the language integration of international researchers, and investigates language policy's potential to foster participatory inclusion.

Within this framework, Spolsky's concept of language community is particularly relevant. Unlike a notion of linguistic community centered on a single language, Spolsky (2007) emphasizes the negotiation of multiple languages to produce rules of coexistence. Language policies and practices, which shape belonging, participation, and power dynamics, consequently highlight the need for inclusion beyond symbolic acknowledgment. A language community, in this view, is defined not only by the language(s) spoken but also by the social rules and expectations governing language use within that group.

This analysis explores how linguistic habitus influences the language learning of international researchers and the misalignment of their motivation and integration with institutional expectations. The concept of habitus refers to the deeply ingrained linguistic dispositions that shape how individuals use and perceive language in social contexts. Formed through one's social background, education, and experiences, habitus influences language acquisition, usage, and the perceived legitimacy of different languages (Bourdieu, 1991). Habitus also reveals how proficiency in a powerful language, as a socially constructed advantage, influences participation in university life. An internationalized university often favors individuals with strong, native-like, standard language skills in the key languages. Conversely, those lacking such proficiency may struggle to fully participate, which can hinder their effectiveness.

This issue is often compounded by a significant gap between policy and practice: While multilingualism is promoted in official discourse, English continues to dominate the everyday realities of teaching and research for international students. Such practices can devalue local language learning while implicitly favoring native-level proficiency. This disconnect is illuminated by Ahmed's critique of inclusion, which reveals how universities often perform symbolic gestures of inclusion without addressing underlying structural inequalities. Ahmed (2012) notes that inclusion frequently involves bringing in marginalized individuals into existing frameworks without changing those frameworks, leading advocates to face resistance for challenging established norms. To illustrate a more inclusive vision of language policy, I turn to Darwin and Norton (2016) in the conclusion, whose discussion of cosmopolitanism—as a counterpoint to dominant narratives of globalization and internationalization—provides a valuable lens for envisioning more equitable and multilingual learning spaces for language community members.

The empirical data for this study were gathered through a multi-faceted approach. First, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023. These interviews, lasting 40 to 80 minutes, explored the academic and linguistic experiences of PhD students, postdocs, and assistant professors (both international and local) across five Finnish universities. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure a

diverse representation of disciplines, countries of origin, and language backgrounds. The semi-structured interview script focused on participants' experiences with language use and their views on language policy. While guided by the script, specific questions also probed unique experiences, including language background and academic interests, informed by prior background research. The ethics statement for this research was submitted to the granting agency, and all participants provided informed consent, confirming their full awareness of the nature of the research and the use of their data.

Complementing the interviews, institutional documents, including language policies, strategic plans, and website materials, were analyzed to trace the evolution of institutional stances on language use over a ten-year period, from 2013 to 2023. Further insights were derived from observational data collected through formal recordings and field notes, documenting language-related discussions in both formal and informal university settings. Thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software, following a six-phase approach by Braun and Clarke (2021), with coding performed both inductively (to capture emergent themes) and deductively (informed by the theoretical framework of habitus, power, and language community). The final list of codes is presented in Table 1.

To establish dependability, which is the qualitative equivalent of reliability, this study implemented a rigorous and transparent research process, documenting all phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This included detailed records of interview protocols, document analysis procedures, observational field notes, and coding decisions made during the thematic analysis. I undertook iterative analysis, aiming to minimize researcher bias and enhance the dependability of the findings by ensuring conclusions were grounded in the data and supported by multiple perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Table 1.** Final list of codes.

Theoretical codes	Codes from the data
Inclusion as active participation	Misunderstanding of language challenges, differing perceptions of willingness vs. ability
Language policy as a tool, resource allocation, and power	Workload as a barrier to language learning
Tension between language protection and internationalization	Limited opportunities for language practice socially and professionally
Language policies: linguistic homogeneity vs. global movements and hybrid identities	Unclear value of Finnish for career advancement, bilingualism further challenging the value of learning one national language
Language policies masking underlying power dynamics	Tension between local and global publishing priorities, institutional influence on language value
Faculty mobility and internationalization	Insecurity about teaching, increasing prevalence of teaching in English
Language skills as socially constructed	Missed opportunities for integration, language skills as a means of professional and community engagement
Individual's ability to navigate the institutional structures	Language learning as professional development (or not)
Power dynamics and language use, motivation for language learning	Flexibility in language requirements
Language community, diverse language practices within universities	Ambiguous language policies
Cosmopolitanism as a counter discourse	

This study primarily focuses on prevalent linguistic experiences within Finnish universities. While a few cases of advanced Finnish proficiency among highly educated migrants were selectively included for diversity, these were notably tied to strong language support communities, indicating that inclusion fostered learning, rather than the reverse. This aligns with literature on the rarity of such proficiency (Rodriguez-Kaarto & Hahn, 2014). Therefore, this analysis prioritizes common trends, dedicating a detailed examination of successful language acquisition to future research.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Devaluation of Linguistic Labour

Insufficient national language proficiency among international university staff in non-English-speaking countries creates inequities in task distribution, e.g., administrative work, and complicates collegial relations. Such differences in linguistic habitus impact collegial relationships. These challenges extend beyond mere language barriers, potentially leading to misunderstandings and fostering exclusion. One research participant illustrates a misinterpretation of the international researcher's situation:

I have, for example, a colleague who has been living in Finland for 15 years but refuses to speak Finnish with me. We always speak in English. And I think it's sad. I've told her several times: "Look, I'd love to speak in Finnish with you." But she says: "I can't express myself well enough." And I tell her: "Of course you can if you just practice." But if she doesn't want to speak, speak, speak, uh, Finnish with me. This is on a personal level.

This misinterpretation often stems from the difficulty local colleagues face in discerning whether individuals are unable or unwilling to learn the national language. The phenomenon of "second language shame" (Galmiche, 2018) further highlights how self-expectations in competitive environments can generate feelings of shame and communication barriers. This underscores that motivation is socially conditioned (Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2022). This dynamic creates significant communication challenges at the institutional level, often overlooking the emotional dimensions of language use, such as confidence, anxiety, or perceived legitimacy associated with speaking a particular language.

From an institutional perspective, alienation and a lack of understanding regarding the challenges of learning Finnish or Swedish impede the development of an inclusive language policy. Norton (1995, 2000, 2013) explored the social dynamics of language learning, arguing that commitment to learning should not be reduced to individual motivation and that power relations often limit opportunities for learners. She emphasized that the binary of motivated/unmotivated fails to explain why highly motivated learners may resist speaking in unequal situations.

Then, the working conditions of researchers show challenges of dedicating time and sustaining a long-term commitment to language learning. As one participant described:

I tried that many times, I have made many attempts to learn Finnish, but...at some point, I am getting lost due to too much work, and it starts getting impossible. You cannot put in as much time as you want to learn the language. I mean, the work and the whole new things in the country, the whole culture, and stuff like that.

Others echoed this sentiment, often citing heavy workloads and adjustment challenges as reasons for lagging in national language skills. This often led to a sense of failure and self-blame regarding their lack of progress.

Researchers report that existing language support inadequately prepares them for professional application, leaving them struggling to utilize Finnish in work tasks. This included a lack of advanced, profession-specific courses. This structural challenge, tied to the devaluation of academic care work (Cardozo, 2017), reveals a failure to create effective support systems, particularly as Finnish-speaking colleagues may lack the resources to facilitate language acquisition. Fostering genuine inclusion necessitates a shift towards nuanced language policies that prioritize community-driven linguistic spaces, rather than solely focusing on formal, individual language acquisition.

### **3.2. Social Aspects of Language Learning**

Many internationally recruited employees experienced social isolation, with their primary interactions occurring in the workplace. As one participant explained:

Just like I said, I didn't have a single Finnish friend; I only had international friends. So, we would either speak in English or in their languages, or something else, but we never use Finnish together.

Participants' habitus, favoring exclusive international socialization, limited their Finnish practice and workplace communication. This, coupled with a lack of socially constructed motivation—evidenced by the absence of advanced language courses and limited negotiation of linguistic participation within the academic community—hindered integration and language development.

Although some participants were contractually required to learn Finnish, this requirement often lacked follow-up from employers, and workplace communication often provided no opportunities for meaningful interactions in the language, rendering it impractical. This raised a broader issue of ambiguous understanding regarding the role of the Finnish language in career advancement. Some participants expressed frustration with learning Finnish, seeing little value in it for their professional growth, as one participant explained:

I have time now, but my brain and my subconscious are against it. Subconsciously, I think that there is no sense in learning Finnish. Despite how well I would have learned it, you are not going to be accepted in the Finnish environment, you are not going to know Finnish on a native level. They will tell you that your Finnish is not enough, we cannot give you this job. Your Finnish is good, but not good enough for this job.

Some respondents raised concerns over the requirement for bilingualism in the Finnish labor market. They pointed to instances where colleagues who already learned Finnish were denied jobs due to insufficient knowledge of Swedish, reinforcing the doubt that language proficiency in either national language would be valued or rewarded.

While officially bilingual in Finnish and Swedish, Finnish universities operate as complex language communities. While local staff must demonstrate proficiency in both, international employees are often exempt—yet this exemption does not translate into real inclusion or access to opportunities. Instead, the institution's habitus

prioritizes English for career development, even for local researchers, reinforcing ambiguity about the role of national languages in professional advancement.

Despite the symbolic capital inherent in national languages in the academic context, the prioritization of English in research and teaching diminishes the perceived professional value of Finnish and Swedish for international researchers, hindering their motivation to learn. This lack of structured support and clear institutional expectations reduces language learning to a mere symbolic gesture, isolating staff and impeding meaningful linguistic practice.

However, while institutional failures create ambiguity, Finnish remains relevant in underexplored contexts, offering opportunities for enhanced work integration. Recognizing these nuances necessitates a shift towards negotiated linguistic practices and a stronger institutional commitment to systemic changes that support language acquisition, moving beyond symbolic acknowledgment to practical application.

### **3.3. Professional Potential of the National Languages**

Some researchers were uncertain about their specific goals for learning Finnish. While many acknowledged its usefulness for daily interactions, this goal was often not motivating enough, and they questioned its relevance for academic success. As one participant noted:

It is hard to demand that people publish in Finnish or Swedish because, mostly, publications in international journals are counted. This is currency; they are not counted equally.

Some argued that publishing in Finnish could be valuable for scholars aiming to impact both national and international academic spheres, as it reaches local professional audiences. While most local colleagues were fluent in English, a share of their professional discussions occurred in Finnish. This view suggests that publishing in Finnish could help include internationally recruited researchers in the Finnish academic community.

Even when opportunities to use Finnish exist and language proficiency is acquired, the prioritization of English in publishing influences decisions regarding language use. The tension between local and global language practices in academia makes internationally recruited faculty most vulnerable to such situations due to their precarious employment conditions. It is also crucial to consider the role of institutional influence in how Finnish is valued in publications. The next quote highlights the tension between local and global language practices in academia, particularly regarding the use of Finnish for publishing. The participant describes an international researcher with adequate Finnish skills who undervalues publishing in Finnish. This attitude reflects a broader trend where university policies prioritize international visibility and funding, often making publishing in English essential for career advancement:

In Finland, publications in Finnish...are highly valued, but for her [a colleague], the idea was straight away: "No, we don't publish in Finnish." Her Finnish skills are OK, she's been living here for years. But of course, if we were writing with her, I would be the one checking the text. In the end, she would be able to discuss and write with me in Finnish, but this was not the question. The question [is] that she doesn't think that Finnish is a valuable language. If we have this attitude in academia in the future, we

won't write in Finnish at all. It also comes from their university leaders [who say] we get more money if [we] publish in international publications.

This situation underscores the importance of institutional support not only in promoting language proficiency but also in demonstrating the value of academic expression in local languages. Even if an individual can write in Finnish, the lack of institutional recognition can diminish their value, revealing the interplay between personal motivations and systemic pressures.

The importance of Finnish also became apparent in research dissemination. One participant reflected on a missed opportunity to engage with the Finnish media:

I realized that my work is interesting to the audience here. So, if I had learned the language, I would have been able to communicate it better. I did not know what would happen when I completed my PhD. If I had known that I would stay, I would have learned the language more, which would have enhanced my integration into this community.

This comment underscores a missed opportunity for full inclusion in the Finnish academic community. Knowledge of Finnish was seen as a way to strengthen connections with the local community, enhance professional opportunities, and foster a sense of belonging.

Insufficient national language skills lead to missed opportunities in areas like establishing stronger connections within the local academic community and society, research dissemination to local audiences and media, and teaching in the local language.

The issue of teaching in Finnish also raised insecurity, with many participants uncertain about language expectations, particularly whether they could teach in Finnish or if English would suffice. As one respondent noted:

Maybe one needs to know Finnish to teach, but the idea that one needs to know English after university to be able to work in it is also gaining ground. At least at our faculty.

This researcher struggled to see how their limited language skills could be used in academia, noting that teaching in English is increasingly common and considered beneficial for students. However, in a few cases, internationally recruited researchers successfully transitioned to teaching in Finnish, supported by colleagues and resources like proofreading services. They explained that the need to teach in Finnish became clear early on through workplace inclusion, enabling a strategic approach to language learning and sustained motivation.

These observations highlight missed opportunities for integration, underscoring the importance of language skills for professional and community engagement. It remains unclear, however, whether these potential benefits are fully realizable through language learning or if native-level skills would still be preferred.

Institutional ambiguity regarding teaching in the national languages creates an environment where international researchers' habitus prioritizes navigating instability, leading many to undervalue Finnish as a

career asset. This mirrors findings in Chinese universities (Chen et al., 2020), where learners of non-English languages often perceived their studies as a leisure activity, struggling to connect language proficiency with tangible professional advantages. Similarly, in Finland, while research dissemination in Finnish is seen as valuable for local integration, the overall lack of perceived professional applications diminishes language learning motivation. As Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) and Papi et al. (2019) suggest, demonstrating the practical applications of Finnish could foster a more motivated and integrated research community.

### 3.4. Absence or Presence of Formal Requirements

While comprehensive data on national language proficiency among international university employees is lacking, language acquisition is a recognized challenge in Finnish universities. This mirrors broader Nordic concerns about national language domain loss (Hultgren, 2014) and prompts discussions on language requirements. However, the need to prioritize competitiveness and attract top researchers often undermines these requirements. As illustrated by Siiner (2016) at the University of Copenhagen, research productivity in English frequently outweighs national language proficiency. Similarly, although Finnish universities have considered language requirements (Lindström & Sylvén, 2014), current policies tend to frame national language proficiency as something to be encouraged rather than a strict requirement. This approach is exemplified by Aalto University's guidelines (n.d.):

1. The various university bodies, groups, and committees use the working languages flexibly, making sure that all members have equal opportunities to participate in discussions.
2. Aalto University supports the integration of international students and staff and offers them the possibility to study Finnish culture.
3. Students and staff are encouraged to study Finnish, Swedish, and English.

Ambiguous language policies, lacking clear obligations and supporting infrastructure, create uncertainty and exacerbate precarity for international employees, revealing institutional unawareness of their challenges. Though employees described a lack of guidance and difficulty applying learned skills at work, and an absence of formal requirements, informal expectations still impacted professional development. For example, one participant described a situation where there was no expectation to learn Finnish:

As part of my job, there was no requirement for me to speak Finnish. But [within my unit], I think it was two or three times a year they'd have a big meeting with the head of the language center, and [it was] not conducted in Finnish....And then they would have these...professional development days, and those would all be in Finnish. And I understand...that there are people who would like to have those events and those meetings in Finnish. Of course, I understand...that I am in Finland after all....But, yeah, [you are] excluded because you couldn't understand....I'm reluctant to say that I felt excluded and I should have been included because, at the same time, I think, well, maybe I should have tried harder to learn Finnish....Although I don't feel that my circumstances allowed me to do that particularly well.

Participants acknowledged their responsibility in language learning, but the absence of clear workplace paths and delayed university expectations fostered feelings of exclusion, underscoring the need for realistic communication about language. Some researchers noted that this could limit their career mobility, as it might tie their professional prospects to the university, restricting future opportunities:

The only opportunity without learning the language is that I might end up in the research field. If I want to move to the industry, I will have to learn the language. I am learning it on my own, but I am not sure how fast I will go.

Opportunities for further career development within academia were also affected by the lack of sufficient Finnish skills:

When it comes to applying for local opportunities and local grants, being able to communicate in the Finnish language, potentially achieving some status, would be very useful.

Another participant noted the impact of language on career advancement:

Now I am worried that not having [a Finnish or Swedish [language skills], I cannot move on with my career here. I cannot teach in Finnish, Swedish, or both, so I cannot get a position as a university lecturer. Administrative positions are also not possible for me, since they have not given me a grant this year, [so] I cannot find a temporary job at the university.

While some participants see learning the language as part of a stable career path, others, particularly those in temporary positions or planning to leave Finland, are less motivated to invest in language learning. This diminished motivation could limit their opportunities further. Uncertainty about the future often influences the decision to learn Finnish. Some senior researchers shared that they only began learning Finnish once they realized they were likely to remain in Finland long-term.

Overall, the need to learn the language was rarely unclear for internationally recruited employees. Instead, the problem lay in concrete pathways to progress with language skills and make them relevant for their workplace. The paradox of language policy in Finnish academia is that both the presence and absence of formal requirements create challenges for international researchers. Required proficiency lacks clear benchmarks and career incentives, while its absence still leads to implicit expectations and exclusion. This ambiguity deepens precarity, making it unclear whether language learning offers real professional benefits. This complex interplay of uncertainty and perceived professional value reveals how participants' habitus—shaped by individual circumstances and institutional ambiguity—significantly impacts their motivation and engagement with Finnish language learning.

### **3.5. University-Provided Language Courses**

Offering language courses was the most widely discussed form of inclusion support through language, both within the interviews and document data. Some problems with their provision were also noted:

I mean, for people who come to Finland [to work] at the university, we should offer language courses. From day one. And because people learn in different ways, it's hard to say how long the timeline would be. Let's say, for example, somebody comes here and lives with a Finnish speaker at home. [They] can probably learn faster because [they have] more possibilities to use the language, but let the language courses be one thing, and [they should] start from level zero. But then it seems to be, for me, that if you come to Finland, you can start at the university and you can do level one or two or whatever. But then

it stops...that we don't actually offer courses...so we should have this continuum here that we start and we push the people through, we motivate them. And if we talk about researchers at the university, as we know, there's always a question of time, which is most [important/limited]. And then it should be, I think, it would be a good idea to have the language learning courses as part of your work plan. I mean, it should actually be in your work plan that this is where you go to the courses, you learn Finnish.

Incorporating language courses into employees' work schedules could ensure they have time to attend classes and practice their skills, making language acquisition an integral part of researchers' work. However, this approach raised concerns about program effectiveness, particularly given the often unclear practical application of these skills in academic work. Another issue was the need for tailored, flexible language programs at all levels, accommodating individuals' varying acquisition paces throughout a researcher's tenure at the university. Specific requirements and progress measurements were also criticized.

The perceived purpose of language learning explained resistance to formal progress measurements; it was considered that language was needed for life, rather than for fulfilling some formal requirements:

Yeah, I don't know. For example, when I teach Swedish as the second national language, we have very strict levels. [Students] have to reach level B1, and it's very strict. But for people who come to Finland, and... when the language skills [are] not officially, you know, regulated, why do we need to test the people anyway? I mean, we're testing, and [suppose] you didn't pass the exam. You failed. I don't know. I don't think it's necessary [for people] who come to Finland to work at the university and take courses in order to cope with the language in the country. I don't think language testing is needed... For example, the situation you described: There's somebody taking a course over and over again. The teacher should just say: "Go on, you can go on here now."...Yeah, you can take a test, but then, during the course, I mean, it is just Finnish...in the beginning [it is] a little bit different. It can be a little bit demanding, and if you don't...if you're always all the time saying the exam...doesn't give you any hope, really, but OK. Oh, lovely language. I want to learn this.

When the goal was to acquire enough language skills for the workplace, practical language use was prioritised over formal assessment. Rigid language requirements and formal progress measurements were viewed as demotivating, especially for those struggling with Finnish. Instead, emphasis was placed on practical language use over formal exams.

This concern reflects the realities of international researchers juggling multiple responsibilities, making formal testing and rigid assessments challenging. However, the lack of clear goals or accountability could undermine both institutional responsibility and the quality of language courses. This led to discussions about whether universities do enough and if language courses adequately support a balanced approach to language learning. As one speaker put it:

Give people time, integrate it in their work plans, and then give [them] the possibility to work with somebody who...speaks Finnish, that you would have a colleague who would....But this again, when everybody is so busy at the university, this demands time. You could create a system where you would have a language tutor or a tutoring teacher, [so] that when you would want to start teaching in Finnish that somebody would be there with you in the beginning and help you.

Current university language support, lacking consistent integration into work plans and reflecting ambiguous requirements, fails to facilitate professional integration or the development of an inclusive linguistic *habitus*. This gap between acknowledged value and systemic provision necessitates community-based approaches, including tutors and peer learning. However, resource limitations remain a critical barrier, demanding a stronger institutional commitment to language support as a core aspect of academic development and integration.

Another researcher also doubted the university's commitment to allocating sufficient resources to address language-related issues in other spheres as well:

I don't know how the system works at the moment, but if we think, for example, that Finnish speakers teach in English, I think they should get a little bit more resources to plan their teaching, because it takes more time to prepare for an international course....I know it will be really hard at the university because we are short of money all the time and short of resources, but this will be kind of the ideal situation for you because you need more time when you plan your course than in Finnish.

This concern extends beyond internationally recruited employees, reflecting a broader trend of declining language support in higher education (e.g., Gallagher-Brett & Broady, 2012). While some researchers argue that English dominance is excessive, they also face challenges working in English and may need additional support.

### **3.6. Example of Successful Peer Support**

In addition to limited university support, the importance of collaboration and community-based decision-making for progress was acknowledged. From an institutional perspective, this would require fostering a strong sense of community and collaboration across diverse groups, all seeking equitable access to resources. One potential solution was demonstrated when a Finnish colleague, a Swedish language teacher, supported another Finnish colleague in developing Swedish-language teaching:

What we did, he did his lectures and gave them to me...I was listening to him and helping him. It was actually him who did the whole work, but I was helping him there. Yeah. And this is the system we could have now. It was about the Finnish speaker, who...promised to teach in Swedish and did it, and he did it brilliantly. Of course, he made some mistakes...but who cares? He could do it. He's a marvelous person. He could do it....But this could be something you could do, but it should be a system.

This highlights the need for a long-term perspective, a system providing support for skill development:

That would be fantastic. But I mean, I know it's probably not realistic when we talk about our universities or the university. I don't know if the university has the rationales to do it, because it also doesn't seem that this is very much stimulated from the top.

Research participants' calls for greater support reveal a tension between internationalization ideals and institutional constraints, where national language protection for native speakers limits inclusive practices and intensifies power imbalances. This necessitates a counter-discourse promoting equitable support

and community integration, fostering a new linguistic habitus through collaborative learning and practical resources.

However, insufficient university resources, indicative of power dynamics privileging other forms of capital, hinder this process and create ambiguous language policies, thereby impeding effective inclusion. As Spolsky (2007) argues, language communities are shaped by negotiated rules of coexistence, yet the current institutional framework fails to adequately facilitate this negotiation, resulting in a lack of genuine integration.

Darvin and Norton (2016) highlight how globalization can construct new inequalities, advocating for cosmopolitanism to challenge these dynamics. Similarly, international faculty face a burden akin to Ahmed's "diversity fatigue," where they are expected to perform unpaid linguistic labor without adequate institutional support. Their struggles are often framed as personal failures, mirroring the resistance encountered by diversity workers. The symbolic nature of language demands, coupled with administrative dominance of Finnish and unrealistic national language standards, further underscores institutional inertia and the need for resource-backed inclusion.

#### 4. Conclusion

Language policy in internationalized universities is more than a set of formal rules; it is a negotiation site shaped by power dynamics, habitus, and institutional structures. While formally committed to both national language protection and internationalization, Finnish universities often prioritize English due to its role in research, funding, and career advancement, even while proclaiming national language value in formal documents. This creates linguistic hierarchies where Finnish and Swedish, despite being institutionally valued, offer limited professional incentives for international faculty. This English dominance, functioning as a socio-economic commodity (Mufwene, 2006), contributes to a disconnect between policy and practice, hindering meaningful integration.

Unequal power relations and a lack of structural support mean that language learning is not merely a matter of individual motivation but is deeply shaped by social and institutional contexts. Even highly motivated researchers may resist learning Finnish if it reinforces their marginalized status or if conditions for meaningful participation are absent.

The concept of linguistic habitus helps explain why international researchers experience exclusion despite language policies that ostensibly encourage language learning. Their linguistic dispositions—formed by prior experiences and professional trajectories—often misalign with dominant institutional norms that favor English for professional success while expecting national language acquisition without sufficient support.

Universities reinforce this contradiction by offering language courses without embedding practical opportunities for language use within the workplace, leading to what could be described as "language learning fatigue." This reflects Ahmed's critique of diversity work, where inclusion is performed symbolically rather than meaningfully institutionalized. Furthermore, the expectation to learn Finnish without adequate support mirrors the broader devaluation of care work in academia, where mentoring and peer support for language learning remain informal, unpaid, and unrecognized in professional evaluations. This misalignment,

coupled with unrealistic expectations and a lack of institutional support, creates exclusion, mirroring the undervalued care work highlighted by Cardozo (2017).

A more inclusive language policy means moving past rigid linguistic hierarchies to foster a genuine language community. Communication challenges in multilingual settings often arise not from a lack of shared language but from unclear expectations and limited opportunities for language negotiation. Rather than treating language learning as an individual's sole responsibility, institutions must embed multilingual practices into daily academic life and offer structured support for linguistic inclusion. Recognizing language policy as a contested, rather than fixed, space allows for a more dynamic approach. This approach acknowledges the evolving linguistic landscape of universities and seeks to include international researchers not just as English-speaking academics, but as members of a diverse academic community. Drawing on Norton's understanding of power relations, this study argues for a shift from individual responsibility to institutional commitment. Universities can move beyond symbolic gestures by fostering a truly multilingual environment through negotiated linguistic norms (Spolsky, 2007) and addressing structural inequalities. A cosmopolitan perspective further challenges rigid language binaries, advocating for shared responsibility and embedding multilingual practices into academic life.

### Acknowledgments

I'm grateful to the EduKnow research group at Tampere University for their insightful comments on this article.

### Funding

This project was supported by the Academy of Finland funding, grant number 3121325157. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Tampere University and Cogitatio Press.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

Following completion of project publications, some data will be destroyed for privacy, while other data will be archived via the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD).

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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# Intersectional Dynamics of Platformed Scientific Labor in e-Science

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**Submitted:** 20 October 2025 **Accepted:** 5 February 2026 **Published:** 16 March 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

e-Science, multidisciplinary research that operates with large-scale data sets across distributed networks and grid systems, has largely been examined in relation to knowledge production within international and interinstitutional collaborations in higher education and research (HER), supported by shared e-infrastructures and advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs). As such, the rise of e-Science constitutes a major socio-technical change agent within HER. This article approaches e-Science as a digital science platform and investigates how it reshapes knowledge production practices and their intersectional gendered implications. The analysis draws on findings from a year-long qualitative study on a Swedish academic e-Science platform, hereafter referred to as eSci. The study identifies multiple and overlapping forms of work extension and intensification within eSci, including multi- and co-locational, (inter)disciplinary, translational, and interactional, as well as extension of work in the form of project-based recruitment of contingent staff. These transformations generate distinct responses from tenured and contingent staff, producing varied gendered effects and positioning precarity as a crucial intersectional dimension in gender analysis. Ultimately, the findings suggest that these dynamics undermine the inclusive potential of e-Science, limiting its capacity to attract and sustain the participation of women in a field that remains heavily male-dominated.

## Keywords

digital science platforms; diversity; e-infrastructure; precarity; work extension; work intensification

## 1. Introduction

e-Science, referred to as “e-infrastructure” in the UK, “cyberinfrastructure” in the USA (Yu et al., 2021), and occasionally “e-research” (Fielding, 2007), is commonly defined as the use and development of grid middleware technologies to support distributed, multidisciplinary scientific collaborations, together with advanced computational tools, methods, and applications. Initiatives such as the Earth System Grid Federation (ESGF), which supports climate change research through open data (Chunpir et al., 2018), and LifeWatch ERIC, the European e-Science Infrastructure for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research (Muri et al., 2023), exemplify how scientific communities increasingly organize around large-scale computational systems to process, manage, and maintain complex datasets. E-Science has thus been a central driver of the digitalization and datafication of research, contributing to the rise of “data-driven” sciences (Chard et al., 2017).

Initially focused on middleware grid development, state-sponsored e-Science programs have expanded to include science gateways that facilitate domain-specific access to computational resources (Neto & Chiarini, 2022). Contemporary e-Science architectures combine high-performance networks, data infrastructures, grid, cloud, and high performance computing (HPC) systems, authentication services, and domain-specific interfaces (Mustafee et al., 2019), enabling large-scale, distributed scientific collaboration.

Neto and Chiarini (2022) situate this evolution within the broader platformization of scientific research, understood as the fragmentation and digital reconfiguration of traditional academic infrastructures across the research lifecycle. Scientific digital platforms are conceptualized as digital governing systems that leverage network effects across one or more phases of research, with e-Science platforms constituting the middleware layer of this platform ecosystem and science gateways enabling domain-specific platforms built upon it (Neto & Chiarini, 2022). This framing reflects a growing recognition that digital platforms and infrastructures are increasingly intertwined within contemporary research environments (Perrotta, 2021; Piromalli, 2019; Plantin et al., 2018).

While platform studies in higher education have largely focused on educational platforms such as Coursera (Van Dijck et al., 2018), learning management systems (Grimaldi & Ball, 2019, 2021; Perrotta, 2021), research information management systems (Piromalli, 2019), and distance-learning platforms (Jütte et al., 2022), far less attention has been paid to the platformization of scientific research itself. Existing research has documented algorithmic management and monitoring in teaching and learning (Kerssens & De Haan, 2022; Williamson, 2019), often situating these developments within broader shifts toward managerial governance and academic precarity (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022; Selwyn, 2016; Thompson, 2016). However, the implications of platformization for research labor remain relatively underexplored.

This gap has become increasingly consequential as recent studies of digitalized scientific labor document the proliferation of unrecognized, mundane (Ribeiro et al., 2023), or tedious (Bruns & Lingo, 2024) tasks, including biocuration (Davies, 2025; Davies & Holmer, 2024) and digitization work in herbarium labor (Enright & Smith, 2025). These findings point to a digitalization paradox (Ribeiro et al., 2023), whereby efficiencies associated with digital technologies are accompanied by increased fragmentation, repetition, diversification, and extension of work, dynamics that resonate with the discussion of work extension and intensification in the platform labor literature (Richardson, 2018, 2020).

This article seeks to address this gap through extensive qualitative material from an interinstitutional e-Science platform in Sweden. In examining the platformization of research labor in e-Science, it also attends to the gendered repercussions of these transformations. While recent research has addressed horizontal gender segregation in e-Science (Karakas & Griffin, 2024) and the multi-faceted dynamics underlying the persistence of gender inequality in the field (Karakas, 2024), the gendered and intersectional dimensions of digital research labor in e-Science platforms remain largely understudied. Taken together, this focus allows the article to connect the platformization of research in e-Science to the everyday organization of research work and inequalities within e-Science infrastructures.

Bringing together scholarship on the digitalization of scientific labor and research on platform work, this article examines e-Science as a digital science platform through a qualitative case study of an e-Science initiative in Sweden. Swedish e-Science collaborations were initiated in 2010 as state-funded strategic research areas, resulting in national, interinstitutional digital science platforms that support large-scale, interdisciplinary research across distributed computational infrastructures. Drawing on a year-long qualitative study of one such platform (hereafter referred to as eSci, a pseudonym), the analysis examines everyday scientific work with particular attention to its gendered dimensions.

Labor practices in e-Science display features commonly associated with platform work, including task fragmentation, work extension and intensification (Richardson, 2018), increased flexibility (Lehdonvirta, 2018), and greater autonomy over time and place of work (Morales & Stecher, 2023; Ruiner & Klumpp, 2023), contributing to the individualization of the scientific workforce. While the large-scale and interdisciplinary nature of e-Science collaborations is often celebrated for enabling new forms of knowledge production, these same features generate labor dynamics whose gendered implications remain insufficiently examined. Accordingly, the article addresses two research questions:

1. What are the main features of platformed scientific labor in e-Science?
2. What gendered implications do these features entail?

The article analyzes how platform-mediated research reshapes scientific labor and gender equality in this computationally intensive and male-dominated field (Zacharias et al., 2020).

The following section situates e-Science within scholarship on the platformization of knowledge production, followed by a methodology section outlining the qualitative case study design and analytical approach. The findings section identifies four interrelated forms of work extension and intensification in platformed e-Science labor and examines their gendered implications for tenured and contingent researchers. The discussion and conclusion situate these findings within feminist labor studies and research on precarity in higher education, reflect on limitations, and outline directions for future research.

## 2. E-Science and the Platformization of Knowledge Production

Existing research on platformization in HR has largely concentrated on educational processes, with scientific research itself receiving far less analytical attention. Studies have examined educational platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Williamson, 2019), learning management systems (Grimaldi & Ball, 2021; Perrotta, 2021), open data practices in educational technologies (Raffaghelli & Manca, 2019), learning analytics (Perrotta, 2021;

Yang et al., 2019), and distance-learning infrastructures (Jütte et al., 2022), often emphasizing algorithmic management through dashboards and monitoring technologies (Kerssens & De Haan, 2022; Williamson, 2019). While this scholarship convincingly situates platformization within broader shifts toward managerial governance in higher education and research (HER; Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022; Selwyn, 2016), its focus on education leaves open questions about how platformization reorganizes scientific labor, particularly in data-intensive and infrastructural research settings such as e-Science.

As a precursor to data-driven sciences, e-Science plays a central role in the platformization of scientific labor and adjacent sectors such as health. E-infrastructures and science gateways are themselves conceptualized as subtypes of digital scientific platforms within the broader ecology of platformized research (Neto & Chiarini, 2022). Over time, e-Science has come to encompass (a) infrastructures enabling networked research, (b) science gateways providing domain-specific access to shared middleware systems, and (c) distributed research practices conducted on these infrastructures. Despite the conceptual elasticity of the term, once established and standardized, e-infrastructures function as platformized middleware layers for specific research clusters, such as the life or material sciences, upon which more specialized and sector-specific platforms are increasingly built.

The growing convergence of infrastructures and platforms has attracted sustained scholarly attention (Perrotta, 2021; Piromalli, 2019; Plantin et al., 2018; Plantin & Punathambekar, 2018). Van Dijck et al. (2018) distinguish infrastructural platforms from sectoral ones, defining the former as “online gatekeepers through which data flows are managed, processed, stored and channeled...upon which many other platforms and apps can be built” (p. 13). In scientific research, e-infrastructures perform a comparable gatekeeping function, and recent efforts in data-driven sciences explicitly seek to develop research infrastructure services aligned with platform-based operational models (Demchenko et al., 2021).

Beyond grid middleware for distributed research, e-Science researchers actively contribute to the further platformization of HER and other sectors, such as health, through further development of—at times sectoral—digital platforms. Examples include the COVID Symptom Study (Kennedy et al., 2022), which generated diagnostic predictions based on user-reported data, and CellexIVR (Leggeth et al., 2021), a virtual reality platform for exploring complex datasets.

Most central to this article, however, labor undertaken within ICT-intensive e-Science environments displays several features characteristic of platform work: task unbundling (Macias et al., 2023), work extension and intensification (Richardson, 2018), increased flexibility (Felix, 2020), and greater autonomy over the timing and location of work (Macias et al., 2023). These dynamics unfold alongside growing individualization, often articulated through processes of subjectified labour and self-responsibilization (Sigl, 2016), weakening the collective sense of labor.

While this resemblance may appear counterintuitive given the elevated status of academic research as opposed to the lower-status forms of platform work associated with gig economy, the latter remaining the dominant empirical focus of platform labor studies (Dorschel, 2022), it becomes intelligible when situated within the broader transformation of higher education toward new managerialism and projectified academic labor (Carvalho et al., 2022), which has intensified precarity, and gendered and racialized inequalities (Ivancheva & Garvey, 2022). In this context, e-Science reproduces work practices strikingly similar to

platform labor, particularly for contingent researchers. Accordingly, the article focuses on three interrelated features (work extension and intensification, autonomy over time and place, and increasing individualization) to examine changes in knowledge production associated with e-Science.

Feminist labor studies on digital work conceptualize work extension and intensification as central effects of platformization (Richardson, 2018, 2020). Extending work includes multi-locational labor beyond the traditional workplace, co-creation, and outsourcing, accompanied by intensified efforts of self-organization, coordination, and self-monitoring (Richardson, 2018, 2020). These dynamics exemplify platformized spaces of coordination that extend beyond single organizations (Richardson, 2020), a process mirrored in networked interinstitutional e-Science platforms. Recent studies of digitalized scientific labor further document the proliferation of repetitive, time-consuming, and often unrecognized tasks accompanying digitalization in scientific research (Bruns & Lingo, 2024; Davies, 2025; Davies & Holmer, 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2023). The sections that follow examine how such dynamics materialize in e-Science, identifying specific forms of work extension and intensification and analyzing their intersectional gendered repercussions.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine platform-mediated scientific labor and its gendered implications in an e-Science initiative in Sweden. The empirical focus is on eSci, an e-Science platform established in 2010 by three Swedish universities in response to the Swedish Government's Research Policy Bill, which designated e-Science as a strategic research area.

eSci is formally affiliated with the Faculty of Science and Technology at University A, which serves as the coordinating institution. University B contributes complementary disciplinary strengths, particularly in digital humanities and cognitive sciences, while University C has a smaller involvement, with researchers primarily focused on the development of computational methods, tools, and applications. Researchers are affiliated with the platform either through projects funded by eSci or through principal investigators or departments whose research teams are recognized as part of the platform's organizational structure.

As a nationally funded, interinstitutional platform that integrates advanced computational infrastructures with collaborative research, eSci constitutes a particularly suitable case for examining how platformization reorganizes scientific labor. Since its establishment, eSci has funded scientific research projects situated at the intersection of computational tool development and their application across multiple research domains, including environmental sciences, life sciences, medicine, and cognitive sciences. Platform-mediated work within eSci is enabled through e-infrastructures provided by NAISS (the National Academic Infrastructure for Supercomputing in Sweden), HPC2N (High Performance Computing Center North), and computational science and scientific computing centers affiliated with the participating universities. Researchers affiliated with eSci are involved both in developing and using computational methods, tools, and applications, as well as in managing and analyzing large datasets. These activities are embedded in transdisciplinary research projects spanning material science, environmental sciences, life sciences, cognitive sciences, and medicine, and form the empirical basis for examining how digital infrastructures shape everyday work practices and access to resources.

The study draws on multiple qualitative data sources in order to capture both the formal organization of the platform and researchers' situated experiences of working within it. The empirical material consists of:

1. Publicly available online information, including informants' publication records, institutional affiliations, professional biographies, and materials published on the official eSci website.
2. Observations conducted during project presentations and seminars organized by eSci.
3. Documentation from calls for applications and annual reports published by eSci.
4. A total of 45 semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with researchers affiliated with eSci, conducted by the author between March and May 2022.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes on average and addressed participants' educational trajectories, pathways into eSci, understandings of e-Science, experiences of collaboration, everyday work practices, and perceptions of challenges and opportunities related to gender equality. In addition, the author participated in eSci activities during the Autumn 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters as a participant observer, gaining insight into everyday coordination practices and platform-mediated labor as they unfolded in real time. This participation included online seminars and project presentations organized by the platform, as well as the in-person Data-driven Life Sciences Conference hosted by University A.

The interview sample comprised 18 women and 27 men, including PhD students, contingent junior faculty (primarily doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers), and tenured senior faculty. Among the interviewees, 28 were tenured faculty members (11 women and 17 men), while 17 were contingent faculty members (7 women and 10 men). This distribution reflects the stratified and gendered employment structure characteristic of computationally intensive research environments and enables an analysis of how platform-mediated work practices are experienced differently across career stages and contractual positions.

Data obtained from online sources, calls for applications, and annual reports were analyzed using content analysis to identify research clusters, membership structure, level of involvement of each university, and projects undertaken by each university. Interview transcripts and fieldnotes were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was employed to identify patterns relevant to the study's research questions concerning changing work practices in e-Science and their gendered implications in male-dominated, ICT-intensive research contexts.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive coding strategies. Initially, the data were coded deductively using themes related to gender awareness and collaboration dynamics within the platform, including recruitment practices, work-life balance, changes in work practices associated with e-Science, strategies for engaging in collaborations, challenges of collaborative work, and interdisciplinary research practices. In a second, inductive phase, additional themes emerging from the data, such as work extension and intensification, self-responsibilization, individualized forms of positive action, and preference for industry over academia, were identified and iteratively refined. These themes were subsequently situated in dialogue with theoretical frameworks on platformed and digital scientific research, digital labor, and gendered inequalities in HER, enabling an assessment of how platform-mediated arrangements may reproduce or reconfigure existing forms of inequality.

In accordance with the ethical principles of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (*Etikprövningsmyndigheten*), which approved the study (No. 2022-00276-01), all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms and their institutional affiliations anonymized. Participants received written information about the project and provided informed consent for the use of their pseudonymized data in this and related publications.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Extension and Intensification of Scientific Research Work

The data analysis revealed that changes in knowledge production work with the advent of e-Science were mostly realized in terms of work extension and intensification within the eSci platform. More specifically, I identified four types of work extension, each accompanied by varying levels of work intensification: (a) multi and co-locational extension, (b) (inter)disciplinary extension, (c) translational and interactional extension of work, and (d) the extension of work involving project-based recruitment of contingent staff.

#### 4.1.1. Multi and Co-Locational Work Extension

The first type of work extension observed in the eSci platform was a multi- and co-locational extension. In this context, the term “co-locational work extension” is used to signify the extension of the workplace made possible by telework, while “multi-locational extension” signifies the form of interinstitutional work facilitated by national e-infrastructures. e-Scientists affiliated with eSci conducted their work both online and at their physical offices. Some of them were also responsible for fostering interinstitutional connections among the three universities involved in the eSci platform. This conceptualization slightly differs from that of Richardson (2018), who does not use the term “co-locational work extension” and defines multi-locational work extension as “the work that takes place beyond the workplace” (p. 247). The interinstitutional nature of the e-Science work in the platform required me to distinguish between the two in this context.

This type of co-locational work extension typically entails an intensification of work due to the additional work required to arrange home space as an office and manage domestic and/or caregiving responsibilities alongside academic work (Richardson, 2018). Female researchers in eSci held mixed views on co-locational work extension, as is noted in the literature (Richardson, 2018). Some believed it adversely affected their work–life balance, while others found it advantageous. Lara (tenured senior researcher) expressed her concerns in this manner: “Regarding work–life balance, many things are terrible, because we can now easily work wherever we want, at any time, and stay connected all the time.” She also highlighted that this situation posed a greater challenge for women who still had a larger share of domestic responsibilities. In contrast, another female researcher found co-locational extension as a significant convenience: “Now I can feed my horses during lunch time without rushing back home” (Kristin, tenured senior researcher). One other female researcher, on the other hand, compared traditional lab work to e-Science work and acknowledged that the latter indeed involved work intensification:

It's fine when the lab is closed, and you cannot be there, for example, during holidays. But your computer is always there....If the computation doesn't work, you end up sitting there until midnight, and we still do that at home....If you're at home, you may be better able to attend to your cats, dogs, and kids. However, it distracts you from work....So, nobody expects you to reduce your workload

because of that, really. If anything, people expect you to increase your workload. (Olga, tenured senior researcher)

#### 4.1.2. Interdisciplinary Work Extension

The second type of work extension involved an (inter)disciplinary work extension. As previously mentioned, e-Science entails collaborative interdisciplinary work at the intersection of various scientific disciplines and computational methods, tools, and applications. Within eSci, this had distinct implications for developers of computational methods, tools, and applications, as well as users in specific application areas.

Developers of the “epistemic IT” (Vann & Bowker, 2006), ICTs designed for use by scientists, predominantly hailed from male-dominated IT, computational science, physics, and theoretical chemistry departments. They generally believed that domain-specific knowledge, while beneficial, was not indispensable. These developers saw themselves as “supporting sciences” (Lara, tenured senior researcher) “with advances in computer science, and distributed computing, high performance computing, numerical methods, etc.” (Arun, male, tenured senior researcher), “to help accelerate science” (Mikael, male, tenured senior researcher) or “benefit other disciplines” (Stefan, male, tenured senior researcher). This was often accompanied by a work extension in the form of technical support. Lara shared a challenge they encountered when they had to split certain positions into support and research, a problem partially resolved by creating full-time positions for each, such as the appointment of a digital humanities expert within the humanities department. This work extension into other disciplinary domains within application areas also raised concerns, particularly among junior faculty, that a strong focus on computational methods might be perceived as technical rather than scientific work, while being too closely aligned with application areas could distance researchers from scientific computing.

On the other hand, researchers in application areas experienced work extension and intensification primarily in the form of an ongoing need for self-training during non-working hours and seeking online advice. For them, interdisciplinarity often involved working in parallel with developers of computational methods, tools, or applications, i.e., by providing large genomic data sets or assisting in training AI for diagnosing tumor tissues. It also entailed using computational tools, methods, or operating systems like Unix for parallel programming. While the need for computational self-training was a shared experience among all interviewed researchers, whether developers or users, the challenges it posed were more pronounced for the latter. “In life sciences, many times, a lot of people who haven’t been trained in hardcore computational methods are still doing things a bit ad hoc, that you’re a self-learner,” a scientist remarked (Sofia, female, tenured senior researcher). She also noted that the need for self-training had different implications for men and women:

I would guess that many of them search for new [computational] methods, often outside working hours. And despite the fact that here in Sweden we have quite even parental leave and everything, it could still be more difficult for women in their mid-career.

Furthermore, collaborative work for all the interviewed researchers implied a form of work intensification that I call “translational and interactional work.”

#### 4.1.3. Translational and Interactional Work Extension

All the researchers acknowledged the challenge of communication inherent in interdisciplinary collaboration. They unanimously stated that researchers from different disciplines did not share a common language and had distinct research questions and objectives within the same project. For instance, Barbara (female, PhD candidate) mentioned that the concept of “dynamics” meant “being time-dependent or involving a series of events” in fluid dynamics, while it referred to “the force or the load of air” in structural dynamics. Birgitta (female, tenured senior researcher), on the other hand, pointed out that “modelling” entailed assigning rules to specific entities to guide their actions, whereas in biology, it meant describing observed phenomena.

This divergence in terminology and approach sometimes led to conflicts between clinical and technical, or scientific and engineering solutions. As indicated in science and technology studies (STS), interdisciplinarity in e-Science demands an additional investment of labor (Vann & Bowker, 2006). In line with research in organizational ecology, which underscores the individual cost of collaborative work (Boix Mansilla et al., 2016), the researchers unanimously attested that translating different disciplinary terminologies and aligning research questions and objectives were exceedingly time-consuming. Oscar informed the author that they had to hire two consultants to facilitate team administration and undertake this alignment work. Developers, in particular, felt that this additional work was neither gratifying nor adequately compensated.

Ingrid (female, senior researcher) articulated the lack of reward for computational tool developers, saying:

And, of course, the incentive for the person who has the [computational] tool is not that great from a research perspective....And I think that the reward for the person spending all that time discussing to understand what part of my toolbox can be used here is not so great.

Sara (female, tenured senior researcher) echoed this sentiment, remarking: “When you work with people from highly applied disciplines, you must have time in learning their language. And this is not financed.” Thomas (male, tenured senior researcher) concurred:

You know, it’s very easy to say that you’re going to work together with someone else [from another discipline]. And you think that there will be a synergy effect and so on. But the fact is that it’s very hard. It takes a lot of resources and money. And we don’t have that to a sufficient extent.

#### 4.1.4. Extension of Work Towards Contingent Labor Force

The third form of work extension in eSci involved recruiting a contingent labor force, primarily comprising, but not limited to, PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers, to undertake research-related tasks. In fact, a significant portion of eSci funding was allocated to the temporary hiring of such personnel. As previously stated, some projects also utilized temporarily contracted consultants to facilitate the time-consuming collaborative work alignment, thereby creating yet another “third space” (Whitchurch, 2024), which is recorded to mobilize exclusionary mechanisms within HER (Whitchurch, 2025). Stefan (postdoctoral researcher) also highlighted the emergence of a new job role within academic e-Science projects, that of research software engineer. He remarked:

Often, you have a situation where postdocs and researchers dedicate a substantial part of their work to developing software to support different bits of the research. And from that has emerged a little bit of a professional role.

It is observed in these examples that the contingent employment of a qualified research labor force is sustained under different job titles.

Both the project-based nature of academic work in e-Science and the increasing reliance on more and more complex platformed infrastructures for research have contributed to the expansion of the contingent labor force under various job titles. Within this context, diverse responses have emerged in relation to work extension and intensification among the tenured and contingent academic labor force. In the following section, I will delineate these two distinct responses and examine their implications for promoting gender equality in e-Science.

## ***4.2. Responses to Extension and Intensification of Work and Its Gendered Repercussions***

### **4.2.1. Responses of Tenured Faculty**

Tenured researchers in eSci exhibited strong resistance to (inter)disciplinary, as well as translational and interactional work extensions. They were observed employing three intertwined strategies in response to this type of work extension and intensification within the platform work context. The first involved staying in established networks, where they had developed a common language with researchers from other disciplines over time. Most researchers reported that they sought collaborators within their pre-existing academic networks. Ingrid (tenured senior researcher), for instance, expressed a preference for working with researchers she already knew, citing the difficulty of establishing effective communication with new collaborators, by saying “it is actually quite difficult to come to the point where we can talk to each other.” Daniel (male, tenured senior researcher) added: “I see many colleagues around me who have their tight-knit group of colleagues they met during their PhD years and have stuck with them throughout careers.” While some developers went as far as avoiding collaboration due to the additional time and effort it demanded, most researchers favored working with familiar collaborators over time.

The second strategy involved maintaining disciplinary boundaries, with researchers from different disciplines working in parallel. Daniel also noted: “In eSci, the impression is that the level of ambition is not about bringing the disciplines into e-Science...but rather facilitating the use of e-Science across disciplines, but still within their disciplinary silos.” An analysis of co-authorship practices in University B, the institution in eSci with the highest disciplinary diversity, based on data from the university’s official website, revealed that only 10 out of 113 researchers had their top three collaborators from a different department or center (Karakas & Griffin, 2024).

The third strategy involved promoting interdisciplinarity by recruiting PhD candidates or postdoctoral researchers with a diverse disciplinary background. However, this approach placed much of the burden of interdisciplinary and translational work extension on contingent faculty members, contributing to increased levels of self-responsibility among them (see Section 4.2.2).

The aforementioned findings underscore the existence of constraints within eSci that hinder the promotion of collaboration among new researchers. It has previously been noted in STS that “the formal infrastructure built to facilitate and structure collaboration within large-scale interdisciplinary research projects can be in tension with the ways researchers collaborate” (Aicardi & Manfoud, 2024, p. 403). In this context, it is observed that the substantial costs associated with (inter)disciplinary, multi-locational, and interactional/translational work extensions and intensifications in eSci curtailed the potential of e-Science collaborations to foster collaborations among new researchers.

This had two notable implications for advancing gender equality within eSci. Karakaş and Griffin (2024) and Karakaş (2024) have previously reported that e-Science researchers see potential in e-Science collaborations to attract increasing numbers of women from more gender-equal sciences, such as life sciences, medicine, and environmental sciences, to the IT-intensive fields of research, by engaging in collaborative interdisciplinary e-Science projects at the intersection of computational technology development and application areas. However, researchers’ preference to continue working in established collaborations and uphold disciplinary boundaries to resist work extension and intensification hinders the realization of this potential. Indeed, Karakaş and Griffin (2024) also record minimal mobility of researchers from biological sciences and medicine, which exhibit higher gender parity, to the male-dominated IT fields of research. Furthermore, enacting interdisciplinarity primarily through the recruitment of contingent labor force with backgrounds in other scientific disciplines placed an additional burden on the latter, resulting in increased self-responsibilization (see Section 4.2.2).

Additionally, tenured faculty members mostly adopted what we might term an individualized positive action to enhance gender diversity in eSci recruitment processes. The research unveiled that female researchers were frequently recruited for e-Science projects through the active outreach of supervisors or senior researchers who specifically contacted and encouraged women to apply for PhD or post-doc positions. As Lucia (female, tenured senior researcher) expressed: “Before I talk to you, I just called a woman I knew, a woman who might want to apply for a PhD position, so I just actually actively called her.” Lara (tenured senior researcher) mentioned that they personally identified female candidates and encouraged them to apply for available positions. This approach further reinforced existing networks within the contingent labor force as well. Although deemed “quite effective” by Lara, candidates who were not within the network of the senior faculty members actively involved in the recruitment process are likely to go unnoticed, thereby perpetuating established networks and impeding the potential to collaborate with new partners.

## 4.2.2. Responses of the Contingent Faculty

### 4.2.2.1. Self-Responsibilization

As previously mentioned, female contingent labor force recruited for e-Science projects outside their trained disciplines displayed a heightened sense of self-responsibility, driven to overperform in various fields encompassed by their e-Science projects. Oriane (female, PhD candidate) shared her perspective on this matter regarding her contributions to her research group: “I believe there has been a significant fear of not meeting expectations.”

Barbara, a PhD candidate with an engineering background, found herself facing challenges when she became involved in an e-Science project that intersected technology development and evolutionary biology as part of her doctoral studies. She highlighted the issues arising from the biology department's limited capacity to effectively undertake interdisciplinary projects. She noted:

But me being on the fringe, I know that it's going to cause an issue because at every meeting we have on my progress, there's new information and new directives and new things that are applied....The issue is mine because I need to learn where I am right now.

In an era where scientific disciplines are increasingly reliant on a shared e-infrastructure while university organizational structures are sometimes ill-prepared to accommodate cross-disciplinary e-Science projects, the additional burden of operating at the intersection of technology and domain-specific knowledge under grant-based, and thus precarious conditions, places an additional strain on a contingent labor force. Particularly junior female researchers internalize these structural challenges and interpret them in personalized and individualized terms, feeling compelled to (over)perform to compensate for the demands of cross-disciplinarity.

#### 4.2.2.2. The Logic of Choice

The findings also underscored a distinct response to the abovementioned work extensions and intensifications within the contingent labor force: All the interviewed PhD candidates and junior researchers, especially women, expressed a preference for working in industry due to the lack of work-life balance in the platformized academic research environment.

Other researchers confirmed that computationally competent PhDs from a variety of disciplines would rather pursue careers in industry. They believed that in the future, this could pose "a very big problem" (Thomas, male, tenured senior researcher) in terms of finding suitable candidates for recruitment into academic e-Science projects. There was a widespread recognition that female data scientists of the future, in particular, were highly sought after in industry, granting them certain advantages. However, especially the project-oriented nature of platformized academic e-Science disproportionately impacted women negatively. Both senior and junior researchers perceived that researchers had "more choice" in industry in terms of maintaining a work-life balance. Elena (female, PhD candidate) remarked:

Working from home is always going to be a part [of working in academic e-Science]. The thing [is] that you can always do more. And I also think that there's a lot of companies where you are expected to work a lot more than normal hours, and from home as well. But maybe in industry, you have an opportunity to choose, or at least you can hopefully identify the companies that are a certain way and choose the one that you're interested in.

While tenured senior faculty shared the view that there were more options and a better work-life balance in industry, it was consistently observed that, rather than addressing the structural issue stemming from the burden of work extension and intensification in the platformized academe, choosing to opt out of academia to work in industry was viewed as the solution. However, it remains uncertain whether these female researchers would necessarily encounter the welcoming environment in the technology or IT industry that they anticipated, given existing research on gendered barriers to women's career advancement in the

technology sector (Ahuja, 2017; Orser et al., 2011), as well as studies on women's entrepreneurship in technology (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2018). Organizational inequality regimes maintain gender inequality in the IT sector (Kirton & Robertson, 2018), as well as the presence of a glass ceiling in high-tech firms (Fernandez & Campero, 2017). Furthermore, women in Sweden's highly gendered IT sector, steeped in "invisible gendered systems," must cultivate individual-level career resilience to progress (Tokbaeva & Achtenhagen, 2021). Thus, the rhetoric of choice may be at odds with the reality of gendered organizations, whether in academia or industry.

## 5. Discussion

This study contributes to scholarship on platform labour by extending its analytical focus to platformized scientific research in HER. Feminist platform studies have shown that platform-mediated work often undermines gender equality by intensifying labor, individualizing responsibility, and redistributing risk toward already vulnerable workers (Gerber, 2022; Morell, 2022; Schneider, 2022). By examining e-Science as a digital science platform (Neto & Chiarini, 2022), this article demonstrates that similar dynamics shape scientific knowledge production, a domain that has only recently been analyzed in relation to platform labor and academic precarity (Carvalho et al., 2022; Hall, 2016; Stewart et al., 2024).

The findings align with feminist organization studies showing that networked and project-based organizational forms frequently reproduce inequalities rather than mitigating them (Gill, 2002; Hebson & Grugulis, 2004). E-Science reorganizes scientific labor through multiple, overlapping forms of work extension and intensification: multi- and co-locational work; interdisciplinary extension; translational and interactional labor; and the project-based displacement of these demands onto a contingent workforce. Together, these dynamics expand the temporal, spatial, and epistemic boundaries of scientific work, intensifying labor through constant connectivity, blurred work-life boundaries, ongoing self-training, and sustained coordination across disciplinary and institutional divides. Although flexibility is sometimes experienced as enabling, these burdens are unevenly distributed and frequently gendered, reflecting persistent asymmetries in caregiving responsibilities and institutional support.

Interdisciplinarity emerges less as a neutral collaborative ideal than as a key site of unrecognized labor. Developers of computational tools undertake epistemic service and support work, while researchers in application areas face continuous demands for computational competence, often beyond formal working hours, pressures especially pronounced for junior and mid-career women. Translational and interactional labor, involving the alignment of epistemic languages, research questions, and evaluative criteria, is widely acknowledged as essential yet remains weakly institutionalized, underfunded, and poorly rewarded, becoming a major source of work intensification. These demands are systematically displaced onto contingent researchers: PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers, consultants, and emerging "third space" roles (Whitchurch, 2024), such as research software engineers, producing sharp stratifications between tenured and contingent faculty. While tenured researchers can buffer themselves through established networks, disciplinary boundaries, and selective delegation, contingent researchers experience heightened self-responsibilization, insecurity, and pressure to overperform. These differentiated responses have clear gendered consequences, as strategies that stabilize senior researchers' workloads tend to reproduce existing hierarchies, while contingent women in particular internalize structural constraints and increasingly frame exit to industry as a rational response to unsustainable academic conditions.

Situating these findings within the literature on digitalized scientific labor further illuminates the “digitalization paradox” identified by Ribeiro et al. (2023): While digital infrastructures promise efficiency and collaboration, they generate expanding layers of unrecognized and mundane work (Bruns & Lingo, 2024; Davies, 2025; Davies & Holmer, 2024). In e-Science, this includes coordination across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, epistemic translation, infrastructural maintenance, and computational support, labor central to platform functionality yet weakly recognized within academic evaluation systems, reinforcing hierarchical and gendered divisions of labor.

The analysis also advances research on precarity in the academy, described as the “gig economy” of HR (Stewart et al., 2024), by showing how platformization intensifies stratifications between tenured and contingent academic labor. While the gendered implications of contingent employment under new managerial governance are well documented (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019), this article demonstrates how precarization is reconfigured through the platformization of scientific research. The project-based organization of e-Science, combined with reliance on complex e-infrastructures, indeed shifts expanding forms of mundane or tedious digital labor (Bruns & Lingo, 2024; Davies & Holmer, 2024; Ribeiro et al., 2023) onto contingent workers operating under multiple job titles.

Finally, while some platform scholars conceptualize platforms as potential commons capable of fostering cooperative and more equitable work arrangements (Garrido-Skurkowicz & Steglich, 2022; Poderi, 2019), the findings from eSci suggest that such potentials remain largely unrealized. Rather than enabling collective responses to work extension and intensification, platform-mediated arrangements reinforce individualized coping strategies. The absence of shared mechanisms for distributing interdisciplinary and translational labor equitably limits the capacity of e-Science platforms to function as commons and undermines their inclusive potential.

## 6. Conclusion

This article examined the organization of platformed scientific labor in e-Science and its gendered implications within HER. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a Swedish e-Science platform, the analysis identified multiple, overlapping forms of work extension and intensification that are structurally embedded in platform-mediated research. These dynamics intersect with employment status to produce differentiated experiences for tenured and contingent researchers, positioning precarity as a central intersectional mechanism through which gender inequality is reproduced in e-Science.

The findings challenge celebratory accounts of the digitalization of scientific research as seamlessly enabling. While e-Science enables large-scale, interdisciplinary collaboration through shared infrastructures, the extended digital work therein simultaneously intensifies workloads, individualizes responsibility, and shifts the costs of coordination and flexibility onto contingent researchers. In this context, gender equality initiatives that rely on individualized interventions or assumptions about the openness of platforms remain insufficient to counteract structurally embedded inequalities.

The study also highlights important directions for future research. By focusing on Sweden, a context shaped by the Nordic gender equality paradox in IT and computing, understood as the apparent contradiction between widely celebrated gender-egalitarian frameworks and persistent gender segregation in the ICT

sector (Corneliusson, 2021), the analysis demonstrates that platformized scientific labor can generate gendered inequalities that cannot be explained solely by national equality regimes. This underscores the need for comparative research across HR systems to assess how different policy and institutional frameworks mediate the gendered effects of platformized scientific labor. Finally, while gender is central to this analysis, the findings also point to emerging intersectional dimensions, particularly the increasing racialization of the contingent academic workforce in e-Science. Further research is needed to examine how race, nationality, and migration status intersect with gender and precarity in platformed scientific research environments.

### Acknowledgments

At the time of writing, I am no longer affiliated with the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, but this article is based on research conducted at the Centre during my postdoctoral studies (2021–2023). I would like to thank the Centre for providing the intellectual environment that made this work possible. I am grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Gabrielle Griffin, for her guidance throughout the research process.

### Funding

This research was supported by eSENCE, a Swedish national strategic research program in e-Science, as part of its initiative to improve gender mainstreaming efforts within this e-Science collaboration platform. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Uppsala University and Cogitatio Press.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. While eSENCE provided the funding and served as the site of analysis, the funder had no role in the study design, data collection and analysis, interpretation of results, or the writing of the manuscript.

### Data Availability

The interview transcripts generated during the study are available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical considerations and the protection of participant confidentiality.

### LLMs Disclosure

No large language model (LLM) was used during any part of the research process, including the design of the study, data collection, analysis, or interpretation.

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# Higher Education Champions and Reciprocal Community Partnership

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**Submitted:** 22 October 2025 **Accepted:** 5 January 2026 **Published:** 12 February 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

Academics globally have been called to investigate and contribute to addressing growing structural inequality, social exclusion, and disconnection. In recent decades, critically engaged research with a social justice orientation has emerged, aiming to bridge scholarly inquiry with community accountability. Within this context, two interconnected areas have gained prominence in academia: diversifying curricula and forming meaningful partnerships with disadvantaged communities to co-create knowledge and transform unequal structures in universities and society. We argue that such partnerships require a critique of and commitment to a “multidirectional flow of knowledge,” one that recognizes the complex, multifaceted nature of knowledge that moves in different directions. Using Meraka Village as an example of a university-community partnership in Bloemfontein, South Africa, we demonstrate the value of co-creative partnerships. This partnership prioritizes mutual learning, equal collaboration, and equitable sharing of benefits. We highlight how co-learning—based on integrating indigenous and academic knowledges—has enabled the innovation and transformation necessary for reimagining community structures. Through this, we argue for amplifying the role of higher education champions as agents of change and for applying a power-sensitive lens when engaging with disadvantaged communities in transformative work.

## Keywords

co-learning; decolonial methodologies; higher education engagement; indigenous knowledge; reciprocal partnerships; social justice

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly encouraged to contribute to reducing socioeconomic inequalities and promoting inclusive participation (Bui et al., 2024; Verma et al., 2025). While universities are often described as agents of social mobility, they may also perpetuate exclusion through resource scarcity, digital divides, and epistemic marginalization (Regmi, 2023; Wang & Huang, 2025). Despite digital technologies' potential to expand access, disparities in connectivity and digital literacy, particularly in low-income contexts, continue to limit participation (Czerniewicz, 2018). Globally, inclusiveness is viewed as not only a moral imperative but a developmental necessity, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals recognize equitable higher education as both a human right and a pathway to social development (UNESCO, 2020; Vallet & Montjouridès, 2015).

De Haan (2000) argues that exclusions extend beyond material deprivations such as lack of resources and are deeply linked to race, gender, language, and mobility. International research demonstrates persistent inequities: In the US, women remain underrepresented in STEM fields (Talikadze, 2020), and in Europe, international students face challenges integrating into host institutions (Aksay Aksezer et al., 2023). Universities are also increasingly pressured to address local and community-based inequalities while enabling epistemic plurality through curriculum decolonization (Regmi, 2023). These discussions underscore the need to move beyond narrow meritocratic models toward context-sensitive, justice-oriented approaches. This means intertwining decolonization with curriculum change as a necessity for attaining epistemic justice.

In South Africa, global pressures intersect with a legacy of apartheid and colonialism that has entrenched race-, gender-, and class-based inequalities. Reforms such as affirmative action and expanded funding have improved access (Cele & Adewumi, 2024), yet exclusion persists at symbolic, structural, and cultural levels. Current challenges include gender disparities in science and technology (J. Joseph, 2021), barriers for students with disabilities (Ntombela, 2022), and limited access for rural students (Matsepe et al., 2020). Efforts to combat epistemic exclusion—through mentoring, creative pedagogy, and digital inclusion—have been unevenly applied (Batisai et al., 2022).

Community engagement has increasingly been positioned as a mechanism for equity and reciprocity. International literature highlights both its transformative potential and the risk of extractive approaches (Castañeda & Krupczynski, 2021; Taylor, 2024). In South Africa, engagement is viewed as central to human development and the cultivation of professionals committed to the common good (Mtawa, 2019). Scholars further argue that meaningful partnerships should recognize communities as repositories of knowledge (Bam-Hutchison, 2024; Chandramohan & Bhagwan, 2022).

Against this backdrop, this article draws on a qualitative case study conducted at Meraka Village in Bloemfontein, South Africa, a site that functions as both a community and a learning space. Meraka Village is a cultural village where community members live and participate in building the village organically. The founders are Anita Venter and Mme Sebatso Mofama. Anita, a lecturer at the University of the Free State (UFS) who has become a community member, brings in students, researchers, and volunteers to help build the village and to produce scientific knowledge; hence, she was also a participant in the study. Mme Sebatso, owner of a small property, lives in the village and is joined by family, friends, neighbors, university students, and researchers who come to learn about indigenous building methodologies as part of either their research or their service-learning modules or as an extension of communal learning and cultural

preservation. The academics who promote community engagement are often called “champions” due to their role in ensuring that communities become partners in knowledge production and in finding alternative ways of conducting research, making it more engaged and participatory (Ntsele, 2024).

Building at Meraka often involves higher education champions, students, and community members, who are often coordinating the building workshops and teaching both students and researchers the skills. Thus, participants come to know the value of co-creation through practicing building in a manner that values epistemic plurality and reciprocal partnerships, as they all learn from each other during the building process. Through the Meraka Village partnership, this article examines how collaborative exercises contribute to mutual learning, integrating indigenous and academic knowledge, and building inclusive futures.

## 2. Higher Education and Social Justice Engagement

Recent decades have seen a growing demand for higher education to address its role in advancing social justice and developing mutual relationships with communities. Critically engaged research has emerged in answer to this call. In contrast to instrumental or one-directional conceptions of engagement, critically engaged approaches emphasize inclusivity, reflexivity, and co-production of knowledge with communities (Touboulie et al., 2020; Van de Ven, 2007). They move past merely solving problems to questioning power, confronting systems of unequal treatment, and theorizing about what is possible (Kajner, 2010; Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). Research, for example, has shown how reflexive practices allow universities to work through socio-technical complexity without losing partnerships based on dialogue and accountability (Hult et al., 2021). In addition, there is a wider trend globally to address engagement from a justice-oriented angle. One manifestation of this is the call for curriculum diversification, away from the current Eurocentric dominance. Scholars insist that introducing equity in the curriculum must be done with a keen sense of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Ajani, 2024; Mapuya, 2023). Within such framing, curriculum emerges as the disputed domain in which choices regarding what is considered knowledge are directly related to justice possibilities. As Freire (1970, p. 18) notes:

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man [sic] nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.

In this respect, education transcends being places of learning to being places where students are positioned to be agents of justice and not passive knowledge recipients. University-community partnerships make these commitments operational, but they are usually fraught with tensions. Such partnerships have been criticized for their risk of tokenism, extractivism, and disproportionate power relations (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021; Strier, 2014). Often, these alliances put university interests ahead of community voices: Himmelman (2001, p. 38) argues that “collaborative betterment coalitions are not aimed at redistributing the power relations and delivering community ownership, nor at making a community more of the decisions and actors.”

These critiques highlight the importance of reflexivity and attention to power imbalances when considering such partnerships. Both are necessary components for intentional reciprocity, mutual respect, and epistemic plurality when partnerships are meant to contest, but not reproduce, structural hierarchies. These debates

have a specific urgency in South Africa because of the long-term consequences of apartheid and colonial dispossession. Scholars emphasize that higher education is a problematic place, where real change is possible only through decolonizing curricula, increasing access, and enshrining justice in institutional activities (Celis, 2021; Zulu, 2021). By promoting inclusive leadership, transformative pedagogy, and community-based research, higher education institutions reinforce mutual collaboration while fulfilling their claim to being major agents of social justice and communal liberation.

### 3. Rethinking Knowledge Flows

Historically, the movement of knowledge between communities and universities has been starkly asymmetrical. Universities have tended to position themselves as the major creators of knowledge, while communities have been relegated to being passive consumers. This model tends to prioritize academic agendas rather than the needs and priorities set by the communities themselves, as examples from South Africa and Canada show (Ibáñez-Carrasco & Riaño-Alcalá, 2011; Motala & Vally, 2022; Ntsele, 2024; Strier & Shechter, 2016). This approach is often referred to as extractive and results in disadvantaged communities' mistrust (L. T. Smith, 2021). Even in vocational training and international partnerships, universities often fulfill the role of knowledge dispensers, pushing knowledge out without appreciating or internalizing the knowledge that communities possess (Hatos & Szombathelyi, 2024; R. Smith & Hairstans, 2017). As Motala and Vally (2022, p. 5) observe:

The imperatives of academic validation militate against the objectives and practices of knowledge co-construction due to the financial and reputational imperatives associated with accredited publication useful for ranking, career advancement, ratings, academic prestige and other purposes. These imperatives have a limiting influence on the intellectual work of universities and the possibilities for knowledge co-construction and engagement more generally.

Postcolonial and decolonial scholars provide critical commentaries on these fixed hierarchies. Postcolonial studies challenge the way Western epistemologies have been made dominant by colonial histories and discourses and address the continuing impact of these historic power relations on their modern academic and social institutions (Bhambra, 2014; D. Joseph & Jose, 2025). Decolonial thought goes even further, highlighting the coloniality of power, which points to the continued hierarchies of Eurocentric knowledge and calls on epistemic pluralism and the recuperation of non-Western ways of knowing (De Sousa Santos, 2021; Zembylas, 2025). In that regard, Anzi (2021, p. 221) claims that, instead, “decoloniality is a constant attempt to delink from modernity, while indigenous epistemologies and those of other cultures pave the path to surpass its presuppositions.”

Indigenous scholar L. T. Smith (2021, p. 8) claims there is a need for “‘researching back,’ in the same tradition of ‘writing back’ or ‘talking back.’” This means asking about who owns, benefits from, and designed the research, and what its frame is. Together, these criticisms illustrate that knowledge hierarchies are not only intellectual abstractions but highly racialized and political forms of power that keep the Western authority in place at the cost of plural epistemologies (Kessé, 2023).

These critical bodies of literature have resulted in an increase of multidirectional and reciprocal models of knowledge exchange that encourage collaboration, co-learning, and joint responsibility. The use of strategies

such as rural regeneration projects (Åberg et al., 2024) and community-based participatory research illustrates the role that trust, co-design, and relational accountability play in creating real reciprocity (Collins et al., 2018; Oetzel et al., 2022). Similarly, systemic models such as Collective Impact (Ennis & Tofa, 2020; Parkinson et al., 2022), which presupposes equity, shared goals, and structured collaboration to avoid repeating extractive patterns, place universities as conveners and facilitators and insist that equity and co-design are central to preventing the use of extractive patterns (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016; Ntsele, 2024).

All these criticisms and frameworks assist in increasing awareness of the risks of extractive streams of knowledge and in understanding the transformative potential of mutual interaction. To reimagine knowledge flows is to embrace the practices of co-creation, give precedence to marginalized epistemologies, and enter partnerships that are truly reciprocal and mutually transformative.

#### 4. Community–Academia Partnerships in Context

Community–Academia mapping of community-based partnerships in Bloemfontein must be contextualized within the historical and social context of South Africa. In apartheid, universities were places of privilege and exclusion: They were mostly unrelated to local communities and supported structural inequalities (Hornby & Maistry, 2022). The surrounding communities were framed as passive consumers of knowledge, as opposed to creators, and universities focused more on academic prestige than on social responsibility. This engendered the perception of the ivory tower, where knowledge moved from the university to the community with minimal acknowledgement of local knowledge or agency.

Policies after 1994, the year marking South Africa’s transition to democracy and the formal end of apartheid, aimed at disputing this legacy. Engagement with communities became a third mission for universities, alongside teaching and research, and universities were required to foster inclusion and nation-building through socially responsive scholarship (Hornby & Maistry, 2022; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24). The White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 specifically stimulated universities to capitalize on local knowledge as a development initiative (Department of Education, 1997). Engaged scholarship was formally institutionalized at the UFS in 2017, specifically encouraging the co-creative generation of knowledge that recognizes various knowledge sites, such as community, academic, and hybrid spaces (Ntsele, 2024). Similar programs were adopted in other South African universities: Rhodes University started focusing on reciprocity and ethical collaboration in 2003 (Hornby & Maistry, 2022), and the University of KwaZulu-Natal introduced the Tiba project in 2018 to help build trust and local knowledge in health initiatives (Mutero & Chimbari, 2021).

Higher education champions are vital to these programs. Champions are academic leaders who play an active role in facilitating engagement, early inclusion, and mutual learning between university and community participants. They are brokers of relations, enhancers of reciprocity, and they establish the grounds for co-creative flows of knowledge that honor the community’s agency and expertise (Guillen & Zeichner, 2018; Karasik, 2020). Without champions, partnerships may be perpetually instrumental: When engagement is presented as a pedagogical instrument to students, communities may become passive consumers of knowledge instead of co-creators (Ansari & Phillips, 2001; Silbert, 2019). Instrumental engagement in this context describes those activities that primarily aim to fulfill institutional or academic goals rather than benefiting or empowering communities in a real way.

Despite these policy frameworks, inequalities continue to exist. Hierarchical forms of governance, irregular institutional commitment, and funding constraints usually impede authentic collaboration. There are cases of communities being left out when no formal agreements are made or they are ambiguous, and such examples show how partnerships can break down when consultation is given superficially or at a later stage (Silbert, 2019). However, UFS and other universities have demonstrated that transformative learning takes place when students, academics, and community members practice in a sustained and reflective way. Service-learning students at UFS, for example, tend to join partnerships with a knowledge-giving role in mind only to realize that learning is a two-way process: Community members often have ample knowledge that informs the project results and contributes to students' knowledge. Similarly, the University of the Western Cape's projects reinvent social responsibility through joint health and education projects focusing on local knowledge (Bidandi et al., 2022).

In practice, successful collaboration entails partnerships with local organizations such as schools, churches, and civic groups, with universities providing technical skills while local actors are sources of legitimacy, cultural awareness, and moral authority (Nanthambwe, 2024). Such partnerships are illustrative examples of the ethical frameworks in which community perspectives and agency are acknowledged and partnerships are co-creative as opposed to hierarchical efforts. Such practices recognize the history of inequality and develop capacity and trust.

These principles are reflected in the Meraka Village partnership. At Meraka, native knowledge and scholarly knowledge are intentionally merged to make a co-learning space, illustrating how reciprocity can be realized in both process and product. Indigenous building workshops, collaborative reflections, and multidisciplinary participation are some of the activities that illustrate the possibilities of engaged scholarship to shift hierarchical assumptions, prioritize community agency, and foster mutual change. These processes are mediated by champions on both sides, community and university, with the knowledge flowing in all directions and the partnership being equitable, participatory, and responsive to local realities (Croese & Duminy, 2023; Mutero & Govender, 2020; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24).

To conclude, community–academia partnerships in Bloemfontein are an example of the post-apartheid desire for reciprocity and co-creation. They are influenced by a legacy of inequalities yet enhanced by innovative methods and leadership that encourage trust, reciprocal respect, and local wisdom. As a case study, Meraka Village shows how these principles can be implemented on the ground, identifying both the challenges and the transformative opportunities of engaged scholarship in South Africa.

## 5. Methodology

We employed a qualitative case study design to investigate community–academia partnerships in Meraka Village, Bloemfontein, South Africa, between 2019 and 2025 as part of the first author's PhD research. This enabled a thorough investigation into the nature of complex social processes, such as co-learning, knowledge exchange, and power dynamics, within a real-life setting (Yin, 2018). We had to constantly reflect on our own positionality as engaged researchers affiliated with universities in South Africa and the Netherlands, considering both universities' great interest in transforming structures in higher education through co-creative research.

Meraka Village is a community and a learning and cultural venue. What began as a project between two friends grew to include individual community members, students, and researchers who joined in to help build a cultural village that is now a venue for workshops, eco-building projects, and cultural activities. It currently functions by combining indigenous knowledge and academic scholarship to provide a platform for mutual learning and transformative interaction.

The 10 participants were (a) community members who were volunteers at the time of the study and were actively engaged in village activities, (b) founders, family members, or friends of the founders, (c) researchers interested in learning more about indigenous building methodologies and students who were attending and participating in the building workshops, and (d) higher education champions—university staff. Participants provided insight into the partnership's processes, results, and problems.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Using participant observation helped the first author to not only observe but participate in community-building practices where building, learning, or facilitating was organized in a fluid and organic manner. In this process, community members would come and go, learn and exchange skills, and were treated as co-producers of knowledge; they were therefore treated as partners rather than passive recipients. Additionally, discussions, interactions, and collaborative practices were captured through observation. All interviews were tape-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by extensive field notes.

The study was approved by the UFS Ethics Committee. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and that participation was voluntary. Some participants chose to use a pseudonym, while others wanted to see themselves in the study. Ubuntu-inspired principles, therefore, guided the research, focusing on relational accountability, mutual respect, and shared benefit. We believe that multistakeholder engagement should allow voices from all partners. This promotes both humility and relationship-building because, when all voices are heard, knowledge hierarchy is broken.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was used to analyze data, and reflexivity was central to the analysis. Member-checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing enhanced trustworthiness. We held sessions to discuss the study's preliminary results with the participants, which gave them the space to engage and discuss their perspectives with us. This approach enabled the subtle interpretation of how higher education champions and community members mutually construct knowledge, negotiate power, and build transformative alliances.

## 6. Case Study: Meraka Village

Meraka Village, a cultural village situated in Roodewal, adjacent to Bloemfontein, South Africa, was founded to promote and maintain various indigenous knowledges and practices. Mme Sebatso (a founder) lives there with her family, while other community members come and go. This makes Meraka a multipurpose community: People come to volunteer, to gain academic credits, or to do research, learn, and advocate for indigenous building techniques; academics come as part of service learning, while others come to learn skills, rebuild confidence and trust, or feel the belonging of being part of an inspiring community.

It is a community in which university students, academics, and residents can engage, learn, and get to know each other. Workshops, cultural activities, and sustainable building projects take place in the village, focusing

on co-creation, reciprocity, and integration of indigenous and academic knowledge systems. It was Mme Sebatso's dream to establish a place that defied the segregation she continued to perceive in the post-1994 environment. When asked why Meraka, she described consistent patterns of separation and longing toward reconciliation and shared belonging: "Meraka means coming together of the long-awaited rainbow nation." The dream became reality when she met Anita, who had posed the question: "Can we begin with relationships and not outputs?" As Anita described: "The emphasis is to create a community first, and the community will create the shelter." Like in the Laweyan Batik Village in Indonesia, where universities played the role of in-between actors between community leaders, NGOs, and the local government (Harsanto & Permana, 2021), collaboration in Meraka was supported by university relationships (in this case with the UFS), which were later formalized in a memorandum of understanding.

## 7. Co-Learning and Indigenous Knowledge

Co-learning in Meraka is a dynamic and reciprocal process that links indigenous and academic knowledge through shared participation, creativity, and Ubuntu ethics—a philosophy emphasizing relationality, interdependence, and the moral responsibility to care for and support others in a community (Chuwa, 2014, pp. 33–88). As Anita explained: "Practicing Ubuntu at Meraka entails harnessing the cultural, ecological, economic, ethical, political, social, spiritual, scientific, and technological knowledge through engaged scholarship." This holistic perspective disrupts hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge and extends to pluriversality, which acknowledges that there are multiple directions of knowledge flow and that knowledge is also created through lived experience (Van Karnenbeek et al., 2022).

The pedagogy of Meraka is based on learning and shared responsibility. One champion described it this way: "There are no bystanders at Meraka. Everyone has an offering and the beauty of it is knowing that you have people that have your back" (Participant 6). This feeling reflects the Ubuntu principle of interdependence, which considers learning as a social and moral practice (Letseka, 2012). Participants and students, through eco-building activities, learn and labor together using natural materials—mud, straw, and bottles—in constructing homes and symbolically rebuilding the feeling of collective humanity. Indeed, as the same champion went on to say: "Meraka is not simply a construction site, but a place of teamwork where people come together to heal wounds of the past."

These interactive experiences dissolve teacher–learner boundaries, as Freire (1970) envisioned in his view of education as a praxis in which reflection and action become the stimuli of change. This change in agency was described by a community member: "We didn't see the point of living in a shack anymore when we could use our own hands to build our own home" (Participant 5). Similarly, one champion noted: "I am not actually going into the community to teach like I am the teacher in my classroom" (Participant 10). Through such reciprocal learning, Meraka can reformulate knowledge-making as a form of co-creation based on respect, equality, and indigenous wisdom.

### 7.1. Transformation and Innovation

At Meraka, transformation and innovation were born out of the intentional merging of indigenous knowledge, scholarly partnership, and experimentation. The eco-building project was more than just a construction project—it also served as a social, personal, and environmental change agent (Collins et al.,

2018; Sandmann, 2008). Participant 3 viewed their newfound agency as follows: “I built my first mud-brick wall on my own; it felt like I could create something meaningful for my family.” This shows how learning and hands-on experience helped empower community members, turning them into active participants rather than passive ones. Using locally available materials and novel building methods, Meraka participants reinvented traditional building methods, tackling the problems of sustainability and resource shortages. Participant 4 described it by saying they “experimented with mixing cow dung, ash, and local clay to make bricks that would last through the seasons,” making it clear that indigenous practices were combined with experimentation.

Innovation at Meraka also occurred at psychological and cultural levels. Community members said they felt more confident and encouraged in their creativity and had a resurgence of cultural pride. Participant 5 mentioned they “never thought I could present my ideas in front of others, but now I lead the workshops with confidence,” showing personal change through co-learning. Participant 6 reflected on generational effects: “This work shows our children that building with our hands and knowledge is powerful; it teaches respect for our traditions and new ways to live sustainably.” Thus, change was not limited to physical buildings but also covered moral and societal renewal.

Notably, innovation at Meraka was team-based and cyclical and was maintained by collective experimentation and relational responsibility. As Anita remarked: “Everyone brought something unique—skills, ideas, and stories—and together we created something none of us could have imagined alone.” Meraka Village is one example of how co-learning can bring about concrete innovations and social, cultural, and personal change through the convergence of indigenous knowledge, creativity, and academic insight.

## 7.2. Power Dynamics

Power dynamics at Meraka were under constant negotiation, at both relational and structural levels, which explains why knowledge co-creation cannot be discussed outside of social and economic realities. On a relational level, participants stressed that successful cooperation relied on mutual respect and equal responsibility. As Participant 3 noted: “Decisions work better when everyone is listened to; no one should feel they are the sole authority.” Trust in relationships was created daily, and the emotional connections created could promote long-lasting interactions, demonstrating the need for using patience, dialogue, and alert leadership to resolve conflicts. This agrees with the literature, indicating that partnerships based on equity ought to have relational accountability and acknowledgment of community agency (Ntsele, 2024; Oetzel et al., 2022).

Both structural and resource-based inequalities also influenced power negotiations. Participants reported inequality in access to resources and funds, with some community members being more disadvantaged despite possessing equal knowledge and requirements. Participant 5 noted: “We often have the knowledge and the will, but getting the materials is another challenge; this creates tension if not addressed openly.” The university’s role added additional power dimensions, especially regarding budget transparency and administration, highlighting the necessity of making financial and operational decisions together. When institutional authority is not scrutinized, partnerships are prone to recreating hierarchical frameworks instead of bringing about fair co-learning (Motala & Vally, 2022; Strier, 2014).

The main mechanisms of power balance were cultural recognition and epistemic plurality. Leadership alternated, and both indigenous and academic knowledge were considered equally valuable in collaborative activities. As Mme Sebatso explained: “I had to acknowledge the expertise of community members; without their guidance, the project could not move forward.” These examples show that power may be shared by applying purposeful communication, collective decision-making, and respect, as well as by supporting the multidirectional streams of knowledge that transformative community-academic partnerships require (Baquet, 2012; Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009).

### **7.3. Successes and Challenges**

The Meraka partnership is a great example of how co-learning may create both tangible results and radical societal change. Among the achievements was the creation of practical eco-building projects, which made participants feel more confident and gave them a sense of agency. As Participant 3 explained: “When we completed the stove, I felt proud to show it to my neighbors; I realized I could do more than I thought.” These successes boosted community pride and Ubuntu-based cooperation, proving the ability of co-learning to make social unity and responsibility more powerful (Freire, 1970; Letseka, 2012). Along with gaining technical expertise, participants described new, transformative personal growth: “Working here has taught me patience and persistence. I now teach others, and I see myself differently” (Participant 6). This reflects the pedagogical and empowering aspects of the partnership.

Meraka was also a place of social and emotional healing. One community member explained: “I was struggling, but being part of the activities gave me energy and purpose” (Participant 7). Such experiences are indicative of the process of merging indigenous activity with academic support, which forms the environments in which knowledge and well-being are fostered in parallel (Ntsele, 2024; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24). Moreover, multidisciplinary collaboration enabled the identification of different competencies, thereby strengthening the multidirectional nature of knowledge transfer observed in reciprocal partnerships (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016).

Nevertheless, issues arose, especially regarding sustainability, resource constraints, and socioeconomic stressors. As Participant 5 said: “Some projects are exciting at first, but we don’t have a long-term plan, so the momentum fades.” Engagement was also complicated by financial limits and inadequate institutional support, as Participant 8 explained: “Sometimes I volunteer time or transport, but it’s risky when the university doesn’t officially support weekend work.” Regular attendance was also limited due to poverty and incompatible livelihoods, demonstrating some of the structural obstacles that inform community-academic partnerships (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2015; Motala & Vally, 2022).

Despite such problems, the partnership was maintained by the ethos of resilience and reflective learning at Meraka. As a staff member noted: “Here, mistakes are part of learning; failure is not shameful but a step toward innovation” (Participant 9). This experimental and adaptive culture highlights the transformative possibilities of co-learning conditions in which agency, knowledge, and community well-being are mutually reinforced despite structural and logistical constraints (Collins et al., 2018; Oetzel et al., 2022).

## 8. The Role of Higher Education Champions

The partnerships we saw in Bloemfontein and Meraka Village were held together not only by structures but by individuals. These “higher education champions,” as we call them, were the academics who chose to do more than what their formal employment demanded. Three related themes emerged in their narratives: preserving trust and commitment, closing the gap between knowledge and reciprocity, and promoting change and visibility.

### 8.1. *Maintaining Trust and Commitment*

The key to maintaining trust and dedication within the Meraka partnership was the regular involvement and relational leadership of community and higher education champions like co-founders Mme Sebatso and Anita Venter, and other academic staff. The development of trust was supported by their regular presence, attentiveness to participants’ needs, and readiness to address any practical and relational gap, which is consistent with research findings highlighting the significance of establishing meaningful and long-lasting relationships during community-university partnerships (Collins et al., 2018; Oetzel et al., 2022). One champion said they “often went to teach where the children stayed because their parents said my place was far...I always made sure they learned how to build,” demonstrating how champions were an active agent of accessible co-learning (Participant 2).

Champions made reflection and dialogue a part of everyday activities, establishing a space of mutual respect and responsibility. Discussions at the end of the day and joint problem-solving fostered openness, and over time, historical and epistemic differences were overcome. Mme Sebatso mentioned that “it took time to trust Anita...using the very building practices I had learned to think of as backwards.” This quote shows the importance of persistence and culturally sensitive engagement in bringing about trust and confirming indigenous knowledge systems (De Sousa Santos, 2021; L. T. Smith, 2021).

Commitment was further strengthened through providing tangible support and necessary facilities and resources, including food and transport, and through rotational leadership. Participant 3 recalled a champion saying that “today she will give Velile (a change agent who volunteers at Meraka), tomorrow it’s me...she would say, ‘I’m empowering you girls, so that when you get to the township, you are able to start your own training.’” Participant 5 said: “The way Mme, Anita, and Heidi treated us was really good....They cared for us, made sure we had food and transport.” These actions demonstrate how the higher education champions established a robust trust and active relationship over the years so that the co-learning process at Meraka was not exclusive, solely participatory, or top-down.

### 8.2. *Bridging Knowledge and Reciprocity*

Higher education champions also played a significant role in establishing a system of mutual knowledge-sharing in which academic knowledge, local knowledge, and community experience were equally accepted. By maintaining a sustained engagement, champions created a space in which learning became multidirectional and co-creative and helped both students and community members be active knowledge producers. As Participant 4 explained: “They always encouraged us to try things ourselves, and even when we made mistakes, they guided us patiently. It was learning together, not just them teaching us.” This style

cultivated curiosity, experimentation, and learning between generations, which form the basis of co-creation (Collins et al., 2018).

Meraka's daily practices also incorporated reciprocity in physical activities. Training sessions were designed in a way that enabled community members to impart practical skills to the students and to learn academic concepts in exchange. Participant 3 noted: "I could show the students how we do certain things, and then they would share ideas from university. It became a real exchange." These interactions were mediated through champions who aligned university resources with local requirements to foster participants in expressing their views on project planning and design. This is an example of how to meet the moral call for relational accountability, where knowledge-sharing is sensitive to contextual realities, including resource limitations and cultural activities (Motala & Vally, 2022; Oetzel et al., 2022).

Reciprocity was also strengthened by incorporating Ubuntu principles. Champions developed mutual respect and trust by creating solidarity, compassion, and shared responsibility (Mtawa, 2019). As Anita explained: "Being part of this partnership meant learning from the community, not just teaching; it was about walking together and building together." These are some of the practices that demonstrate how higher education champions can transcend knowledge boundaries and enhance co-learning, ethical activity, and shared ownership of transformative knowledge production.

### **8.3. Promoting Transformation and Visibility**

Meraka's higher education champions were key catalysts of transformation because they amplified the co-created knowledge's visibility and undermined the traditional hierarchies that consider academic knowledge as superior to local and indigenous knowledges (Ntsele, 2024; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016). Through deliberate identification of indigenous building methods in conjunction with scholarly advice, champions enabled a redefinition of the local practices, which led to pride and legitimacy for local members. Participant 7 remarked: "When we see the houses built from local materials, I realize our ways are not backward—they are teaching tools for everyone." This intentional incorporation of indigenous knowledge and university-led knowledge strengthened epistemic plurality, legitimizing various types of knowledge and demonstrating that both academic and local knowledge have equal power and can play a useful role in resolving problems and being innovative (De Sousa Santos, 2021; Zembylas, 2025).

Champions also associated local initiatives with concrete societal outcomes and thus reflected the potential transformative power of community knowledge. They described how they also focused on other needed projects like building the community clinical play area so the neighborhood children and kids from the orphanage where Mme Sebatato occasionally volunteers could enjoy play therapy. This shows how cooperation might boost dignity, well-being, and operational service availability. As Participant 8, who became involved in the medical project, said: "The new clinical play area is more than bricks and tires—it shows that we can build spaces that care for people and reflect our culture." By enhancing infrastructure, champions promoted advocacy and institutional participation, providing participants with the ability to use local expertise to impact policy: "By documenting and showcasing our eco-building work, we can influence local councils and universities to support indigenous knowledge projects" (Participant 9).

Another significant result was personal growth and leadership development. Community participants became confident, especially in intergenerational teaching and mentorship: “I never thought I could teach younger people to build, but now I see myself guiding them” (Participant 10). By connecting community experience with scholarship and larger institutional spaces, champions ensured sustainability, amplified marginalized voices, and connected local innovativeness to institutional change, making higher education actors good exemplars of visible, equitable, and transformative knowledge production (Croese & Duminy, 2023; Preece, 2017, pp. 1–24).

## 9. Toward Equitable and Transformative Partnerships

A major paradox that became visible in this research was that of partnerships seeking to be reciprocal yet being situated within academic settings with policy, funding, and institutional logics that do not question the privilege of universities. Without reflection on this privileged position, people’s good intentions will not result in change. This problem is not exclusive to South Africa. Global discussions remind us that the idea of reciprocity is not merely about being kind or showing goodwill but about structural investment and reflection and the promise to co-create knowledge and produce results that benefit communities no less than students or scholars (Mayo, 2020). In this article, we argue that reciprocity needs craftsmanship at individual and local levels, but mainly at institutional levels. It requires co-designing, continuous negotiation, and reflection on power relations. This is then about a distinction between incidental mutual benefit, or thin reciprocity, and what academics refer to as constructive or strong reciprocity: a long-term, intentional practice in which risks and returns are distributed and outcomes are jointly constructed (Cooper & Orrell, 2016; Mohebali, 2017). In thin reciprocity, alliances move toward extractive research or student-centered productions, whereas in strong reciprocity, communities frame the questions and co-produce the answers.

The literature warns that reciprocity should be linked to communities’ self-determination and democratic voices; otherwise, academia will merely reassert its hierarchy by a new name (Murtadha, 2016; Opel & Sackey, 2019). In Meraka, reciprocity was most effective when participants slowed down, identified power disparities clearly, and determined the direction according to local priorities. That necessitated humility on the academic side and a willingness to learn, sometimes literally, the languages and logics of the community (Shiller, 2017). Meraka showed the value of equitable partnerships but also the importance of enabling conditions for such partnerships. These conditions include resources, leadership, and structures that do not view communities as a mere placement site but as co-governors of the partnership (de los Reyes et al., 2023; Reardon, 2006). This requires boards, research, shared spaces, and multimodal learning courses that develop long-term interdependence (Grant, 2022). Most importantly, it requires clear roles and expectations and frequent communication to ensure the necessary accountability exists (Cooper & Orrell, 2016).

In sum, partnerships need to be more than superficial forms of collaboration, or thin reciprocity, to be transformative. Transformative partnerships require a necessary capacity, infrastructure, and trust in communities and a thick reciprocity acknowledging community needs, conditions, and knowledges (Quan, 2023). For academics, the test of justice is straightforward: Do communities become stronger, more self-determined, and better resourced by partnering with academia? If yes, then academia is headed toward equity. If not, then it risks recreating the injustices we are trying to eliminate.

## 10. Conclusion

Although a growing body of literature focuses on critically engaged scholarship, not much has been done on the importance of disadvantaged communities' epistemic knowledge in community-engaged partnerships with universities. We argue for the conditions necessary to enable such partnerships and for the importance of decolonial methodologies in questioning academia's normalized hierarchical approach toward communities. The case of Meraka Village reflects the processes of creating equitable, reciprocal, and transformative partnerships with communities as championed by higher education. These partnerships disrupt hierarchical knowledge systems, encouraging multifaceted learning and respect for the knowledge of locals, and are founded on recognizing indigenous and scholarly knowledge and embracing a multidirectional approach to learning and teaching. Successful collaborations entail sustained, deliberate reciprocity, ethical leadership, and structural support to get beyond superficial interactions and ensure that communities co-decide priorities and share the actual benefits of collaboration.

Epistemic plurality is thus a key mechanism for generating transformative outcomes, and various modes of knowing—indigenous, academic, and hybrid—enhance innovation, social cohesion, and justice. Trust, mutual respect, active involvement, and acknowledging the epistemic value of community knowledges are maintained through Ubuntu-inspired practices as necessary conditions for reflective collaboration and relational accountability. As inequities exist in structures and resources, Meraka shows that higher education can play a role in promoting social justice by forming alliances that amplify marginalized knowledges, redistribute power, and promote an inclusive, sustainable, and context-sensitive co-creation of knowledge.

### Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Cogitatio Press.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The qualitative data used in this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations. The data are securely stored and accessible through encrypted backups and cloud-based services managed by the first author.

### LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used solely for language editing and clarity by the first author. All conceptualization, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the authors' own, and the authors take full responsibility for the content.

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# Moving Towards Inclusive History Education? Reflections on Practices, Constraints, and Possibilities

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**Submitted:** 27 October 2025 **Accepted:** 18 February 2026 **Published:** 30 March 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

This article reflects on a collaborative project at a Dutch university that examined inclusivity in bachelor-level history education amid a growing body of scholarship on the persistence of Eurocentrism and androcentrism in the field. History education involves sensitive and contested topics such as colonialism, migration, and structural inequalities. In this context and in line with our own experiences, some students and staff expressed concerns about representation, accessibility, and classroom dynamics. In response, this project combined curriculum analysis, student-centred focus groups, and a staff questionnaire, to gain insight into current teaching content and practices, focusing specifically on the representation of the Global South, gender diversity, and inclusive pedagogical practices. Findings echo wider disciplinary patterns, including Euro-American bias and perspectives, and gender imbalances in assigned scholarship. While many staff expressed a commitment to inclusive teaching, the findings suggest that such efforts remain uneven and are shaped by structural constraints. Situating these findings within institutional, disciplinary, and national contexts shows that inclusive history education requires attention to the societal embedding of the programme, the peculiarities of the history profession, as well as educational dynamics. While this project was intended to make our programme more inclusive, it also functioned as a mirror to our own teaching practices, revealing the need for shared understandings and aims, pedagogical support, and coordinated leadership. By foregrounding the challenges encountered during this process, this article contributes to debates on inclusive pedagogy, epistemic justice, and institutional change in higher education, thereby offering insights for educators and policymakers.

## Keywords

androcentrism; curriculum; Eurocentrism; higher education; history; inclusive education; pedagogy

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, global movements such as Black Lives Matter contributed to renewed attention to structural inequalities across a range of societal domains, including higher education. Universities, which increasingly bring together students and staff with diverse social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, have become key sites for debates about representation, accessibility, and belonging. A growing body of research suggests that inclusive learning environments are vital to bolstering critical thinking and academic performance (Gurin et al., 2002). Despite increased focus on inclusion in higher education, how it takes shape in practice varies across disciplines, institutions, and national contexts.

In the Netherlands, a formal distinction is made between universities of applied sciences and research universities. Particularly with regard to the latter, the student population is seen as insufficiently reflective of Dutch society at large. Approximately 28.6% of the Dutch population has a migration background, defined as being born abroad or having one or both parents born outside of the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2026). In the major cities, including the one where this research was conducted, this share exceeds more than half of its inhabitants (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2026). While the number of students with a migration background has increased since 2020, their representation at research universities remains disproportionately low (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025a). At the same time, the composition of teaching staff remains largely homogeneous, which contributes to students from minoritised backgrounds feeling less seen and understood, negatively affecting their sense of belonging and academic success (De Jong et al., 2026). Gender representation has shifted more positively. Since the academic year of 2006/2007, women have outnumbered men, accounting for 53.9% of enrolment in university education in the year 2023 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025b). The proportion of women in academic positions has increased from 40% in 2018 to 44% in 2023. However, women remain underrepresented in positions of power, accounting only for 29% of full professors in 2023 (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2025b). Hence, inequality regarding gender, ethnicity, and migration background tends to persist.

Within the field of history, these patterns resonate with broader critiques of Eurocentrism and androcentrism in higher education. Various scholars have argued that androcentric and Euro-American perspectives continue to function as implicit reference points in teaching and historical scholarship, shaping what is considered foundational knowledge and marginalising alternative historiographical traditions (Devriendt, 2020; Goddeeris et al., 2022). In the Dutch context, this is especially salient given the centrality of colonial histories to its national past and the ways these continue to shape ongoing inequalities.

Across universities globally, students have played an important role in highlighting these dynamics. Student-led initiatives, such as the 2015 SOAS Student Union report, noted that teaching often seemed directed at educating “outsiders” about Asia and Africa, thereby reinforcing structural racism and the “othering” of the non-Western world (Kerkvliet, 2019). Similarly, the “Why Is My Curriculum White?” campaign in the UK has drawn attention to the persistent absence of non-Western and non-male scholarship across disciplines (Housee, 2022; Peters, 2015). In parallel, some students in our programme raised questions about a perceived Eurocentric orientation of the curriculum, both in course surveys and informal discussions.

Despite a growing body of theoretical scholarship and student-led critiques of Eurocentrism in history education (Bhambra, 2014; Peters, 2015), studies on how inclusivity is understood, enacted, and experienced in history programmes remain scarce. It was against this backdrop that we, three scholars from various backgrounds, together with another colleague, initiated *Towards Inclusive History Education*, a collaborative project conducted under the Hoger Onderwijs Kwaliteitsafspraken (HOKA) in 2023. Rather than aiming to offer a definitive model of inclusive history teaching, the project sought to gain insights into existing teaching content, practices, and experiences. In conversation with the management team of the department, the project focused on representation related to the Global South and gender diversity, while remaining attentive to other dimensions of in- and exclusion.

Through a combination of curriculum review, student focus groups, and a staff questionnaire, the project examined how inclusivity was understood and practised. The findings revealed patterns that align with wider disciplinary debates, including the persistence of Western-centric and androcentric biases, and marked variation in how staff approached inclusion. Student discussions also highlighted concerns beyond curricular content, underscoring the importance of a constructive learning environment. These insights were consolidated in a report circulated within the department and wider faculty in 2024, informing ongoing curricular discussion and strengthening commitments to inclusivity.

Reflecting on the project's process and outcomes, this article considers the opportunities and limitations of collaborative initiatives aimed at developing inclusive forms of education. It understands inclusion as an ongoing process, shaped by differing perspectives, levels of commitment, disciplinary traditions, institutional structures, and educational dynamics. In doing so, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on diversity, institutional change, and epistemic justice in higher education.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Background

This project centralised the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and decolonisation, which, as Day et al. (2022) note, “address distinct power structures, but they overlap and intersect—and they converge in ways that make it possible to identify individuals and groups who are more or less advantaged within them” (p. 3). In our project, diversity and inclusion were treated as interrelated yet distinct concepts that guide our approach to teaching and curriculum development. Diversity refers to the representation of different identities, experiences, and perspectives across student body, staff, and curriculum, including dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, and socio-economic background (Ahmed, 2012; Gurin et al., 2002). Inclusion, in turn, emphasises learning environments that actively value difference and enable all students to participate meaningfully in a pluralistic educational experience (Ambrose et al., 2010).

In the context of Dutch history education, we anticipated that framing the project around inclusion and diversity would be more accessible and less politically charged than decolonisation. While decolonisation as a term has gained prominence in anti-racist initiatives, it has also become an “empty” and “trendy” marketing tool (Vince, 2019). Foregrounding inclusion allowed engagement with concepts more familiar to staff and students, while acknowledging the persistence of structural hierarchies related to ongoing inequalities beyond race and ethnicity. These debates around conceptual framing underscore how such choices are influenced by institutional, disciplinary, and political dynamics.

This negotiation should be situated within the historical and epistemic context of the discipline. Dutch universities, like many Western institutions, have positioned themselves as custodians of Western knowledge, drawing on Enlightenment ideals of rationality, freedom, truth, and equality (Day et al., 2022). These concepts are neither neutral nor universal but emerged from historical contexts shaped by colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy (Bhambra, 2014). Historical scholarship has often constructed narratives of Western progress, ranking regions and people along hierarchies of “civilization” (Chakrabarty, 2007). Even where such hierarchies are less explicit, historical narratives are often framed as neutral rather than Eurocentric. This is evident in terminology long used in Dutch historiography and education, such as naming the 17th century “Golden Age,” a period marked by wealth built on enslavement and colonial exploitation, or the term “Police Actions” for Dutch military campaigns in Indonesia aimed at violently re-establishing colonial rule (Hanna et al., 2020; Jansen Hendriks, 2012).

Similarly, studies on Dutch history teaching in high schools find that the transatlantic slave trade is frequently presented as a past episode with limited connection to contemporary inequalities. Interviews with teachers and classroom observations point to a tendency to maintain historical distance, obscuring slavery’s ongoing afterlives in contemporary systems of power and racism (Grever et al., 2012; Klein, 2017). This pattern resonates with what Gloria Wekker famously described as “white innocence”: a self-image of Dutch egalitarianism, meritocracy, and tolerance which subsequently results in the denial and normalisation of everyday racialised exclusions, microaggressions, as well as institutional forms of racism (Essed, 1991; Wekker, 2016). As Vasta (2014) observes, academic debate in the Netherlands risks reinforcing denial, as attempts to name institutional racism are often met with defensiveness or masked by appeals to neutrality. Consequently, Dutch universities may fail to recognise their role in reproducing mechanisms of exclusion.

The historiographical canon is shaped by similar assumptions. In particular, the discipline has long been influenced by a positivist ideal of “scientific objectivity,” rooted in Leopold von Ranke’s call to present the past “as it actually happened” (Braw, 2007). As history was long understood to be a neutral accumulation of facts, the identity of the researcher was considered irrelevant to the outcome (Evans, 2018; Iggers, 2012). As Dalia Gebrial notes, positivist knowledge appears to “reveal facts...that are worth revealing, in a process removed from power” (Gebrial, 2018, p. 24). The legacies of such framings reinforce the authority of supposedly “neutral” Western scholarship, while marginalising and delegitimising alternative epistemologies (Santos, 2016). In this context, diversifying authors or content is often valued for representativeness, but not necessarily as transformative of historical knowledge itself.

These underlying assumptions influence not only what is taught but also how teachers and students engage with content, thereby actively shaping participation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Ambrose et al., 2010). Classrooms that overlook how knowledge is produced and whose knowledge is privileged may risk reproducing exclusionary dynamics. Inclusive pedagogical approaches, on the other hand, treat differences in students’ identity, experience, and perspective as assets (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Gurin et al., 2002). Researchers in education and pedagogy like Ambrose et al. (2010) describe the most effective learning environments as “explicitly centralizing climates,” which deliberately incorporate marginalised perspectives into course content and discussions. Munoz (2020) similarly argues that a critical curriculum review reveals unconscious biases and challenges Western-centric frameworks. Moreover, students are better able to connect with the material when it reflects their own diverse experiences and identities (Olsen, 2021; Stephens et al., 2015).

Overall, the discipline of history has been relatively slow to engage with debates on inclusion and diversity, and research on inclusive pedagogies and curriculum diversification remains limited (Godsell, 2021). Formal initiatives to address representation, content, and teaching practices are scarce, leaving persistent inequalities largely unexamined. This background provided an important rationale for our project.

### 3. Methodology

In recent years, various Dutch universities have invested in strategies and research, often through dedicated budgets and initiatives, aimed at mapping student diversity, identifying structural inequalities, and creating forums for discussion (“How do you make education truly inclusive?,” 2020; “The TU Delft Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Grant,” 2025; University of Amsterdam, 2024). Yet, research suggests that experiences of inclusion are often ambivalent. Students describe their educational environment as broadly adequate or supportive, but when invited to reflect further, they identify moments where teaching practices, examples, or course materials rely on stereotypes, offensive language, or lack diversity (Baaren, 2021). While this may be unintentional, they nonetheless shape how students experience participation, respect, and belonging within the classroom. Inclusion, therefore, extends beyond representation in the curriculum to the everyday interactions between teachers and students. Selective engagement with social issues or limited inclusion of diverse voices can make students feel unsafe or disconnected.

This project explored if and how these principles are embedded and experienced in the bachelor’s curriculum in years 2 and 3, building on a similar, smaller-scale project conducted previously for year 1. The program offers two language tracks, Dutch and English, with many staff members, including ourselves, teaching across multiple courses and both tracks.

We adopted a multi-method approach, consisting of focus groups, an analysis of course materials, and a staff questionnaire. This design enabled the integration of structural and experiential perspectives on inclusivity in university-level history education. In total, two rounds of focus groups were organised with students and recent alumni, involving 11 participants in October 2023 and 11 in May 2024. Focus groups were chosen because of their interactive nature (Gibbs, 2021): The group dynamics were considered as important as individual contributions, and we sought to leave room for students to steer the conversation towards concerns and perspectives not necessarily anticipated by the researchers. To ensure a familiar and comfortable setting, the sessions were held in university classrooms, with beverages and snacks provided to create an informal atmosphere. Students also received a gift voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and contributions.

The curriculum review covered 11 core courses taught in the second and third year of the programme. We assessed each course across two key criteria: (a) the range of perspectives represented, with particular attention to the Global South; (b) gender diversity in both assigned authors and thematic content. These criteria were further examined on four levels: assigned literature and other sources; topics and case studies; assignments and assessments; course information and communication. During the initial round of focus groups, students also raised concerns about accessibility with regard to course material and assessment, particularly for neurodivergent students. Although time and scope limitations prevented us from fully integrating neurodivergence as a separate analytical focus, we made a conscious effort to consider accessibility in teaching formats and the types of learning materials provided. While we recognise the

limitations of such a review (course materials do not fully reflect classroom dynamics, and author demographics cannot be equated with vocalising particular perspectives), the approach still provided us an important lens for reflecting on dominant patterns within our curriculum.

In April 2024, a questionnaire was distributed to all teaching staff to capture perspectives and practices related to inclusive education. It contained closed and open-ended questions on definitions, teaching practices, and perceived obstacles. Twenty staff members with varied teaching roles and levels of seniority responded. Responses were analysed thematically to identify shared concerns and divergent perspectives, as well as structural factors shaping inclusive teaching practice.

The three components of the study, student focus groups, curriculum review, and the staff questionnaire, were analysed in an iterative and triangulated manner. Rather than following a linear research design, the project developed through successive stages of reflection and adjustment. Insights from the initial focus groups informed the curriculum analysis and survey design, while findings from the course analysis and questionnaire were subsequently presented in the second round of focus groups for validation and refinement. Our design allowed for the inclusion of lived experiences of both students and staff as well as structural analysis.

Throughout the project, the perspectives and experiences of the research team also formed an important contextual layer. The initial project team comprised scholars with different training trajectories, cultural backgrounds, gendered experiences, levels of seniority, and employment security. These differences shaped how institutional inclusion, authority, and belonging were experienced, including variations in perceived job security, recognition, and the ability to speak or intervene within academic hierarchies. The boundaries and constraints we encountered in our professional roles informed inevitably why and how we conducted this project. At the same time, we recognise that we are also embedded in, and shaped by, the institutional cultures we seek to analyse.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. A Critical Curriculum Review

Our review of 11 courses in the second- and third-year offered insights into how inclusivity took shape within the formal curriculum as taught in 2023. While several courses demonstrated deliberate efforts to broaden perspectives and diversify readings, Western-centric and androcentric orientations continued to shape course design and materials to varying degrees.

Across the courses reviewed, authors from the Global South accounted for an average of 15% of the assigned readings, with only one positioned as a central theorist. Notably, all were trained and/or employed in Euro-American institutions. This underscores how Euro-American scholarship continues to function as a primary reference point, even in courses that engage with global or transnational themes. Thematic emphases similarly leaned heavily towards European and North American case studies, whereas cases beyond the West were often introduced as comparison or addition. In one course focusing on international relations and business, for example, Western economies were framed as drivers of global change, while other regions appeared primarily in relational or derivative terms as the periphery. This aligns with what

Quijano (2024) has described as the “coloniality of knowledge,” wherein Europe defines itself as the locus of progress precisely through differentiation from an imagined “other.”

Similar tendencies were found in theoretically oriented courses. In a course dedicated to social-scientific approaches to history, core concepts such as the nation-state and capitalist economy were seen as vital to the foundation of modern society, whereas colonialism and empire remained largely absent. Likewise, students noted in the focus groups that a course on modern history located modernity primarily in Europe and its industrial revolution. As Bhambra (2014) argues, dominant social theories often frame modernity as endogenous to the West, obscuring the influence of colonial encounters or significant developments elsewhere. Making these entanglements explicit would move courses beyond diversity as an “addition” and instead situate European history within a global context.

This observation is relevant given the department’s move toward an internationally oriented and multifaceted approach to modern history, with terms such as *international* and *global* featuring prominently in many course titles across the curriculum. Although such framing signals an openness to multiple perspectives, it should also encourage us to move beyond the reliance on Euro-American case studies as implicit reference points, alongside categorical distinctions such as “non-Western,” as this may inadvertently reproduce the very binaries that these critical approaches seek to unsettle (Go, 2024).

Gender representation showed similar imbalances. On average, only 26% of assigned authors across the curriculum were women. Although women have historically been underrepresented in academia, this does not justify their marginalisation. Including their work is crucial to redress exclusion and provides diverse role models (Leathwood & Read, 2008). Moreover, while some courses, particularly in cultural and social history, incorporated gender and sexuality as explicit themes or concepts, others treated these perspectives as supplementary rather than integral to historical analysis. Queer scholarship and histories remained mostly absent. This androcentric pattern risks reinforcing the notion that the “default” historian, both in authorship and subject matter, remains male, a dynamic which has a long history of critique in feminist historiography and narrows historical inquiry at large (Scott, 1986). It is worth noting that course communication consistently employed gender-inclusive language, reflecting broader institutional efforts to foster inclusivity, including a language guide. Nonetheless, these findings highlight a gap between discursive shifts and deeper structural transformation in curricular content and epistemic orientation.

Taken together, the curriculum review suggests that efforts to diversify literature and sources are present but unevenly distributed across courses. These patterns reflect the disciplinary tradition, in which the dominance of white, male scholarship as the standard or basis may narrow the horizons of historical research and knowledge, whereas non-Western or non-male perspectives are positioned as exceptions to the norm (Arday & Mirza, 2018). Our findings underscore that diversifying reading lists alone is insufficient. One possible avenue for addressing this lies in approaching histories beyond Europe not only as objects of study, but also as sources of theory, method, and critique (Brewis & Hannan, 2023). Engaging with alternative epistemologies can expand how historical questions are formulated and how evidence and narratives are constructed. Moreover, recent scholarship suggests that encouraging students to reflect on their own institution’s history can be particularly fruitful when working with archival research and special collections, as it situates primary sources within the power structures that produced and preserve them (Brewis & Hannan, 2023). A fundamental challenge for history education lies in fostering pedagogical

approaches that encourage reflection on the epistemic hierarchies embedded within the discipline. However, more importantly, the next sections will demonstrate the need for staff to be attentive to group dynamics in this process, particularly when navigating these questions as part of an ongoing, collective learning process.

#### **4.2. Student Experiences of Classroom Inclusivity**

To complement the curriculum review, two cycles of focus groups with students were conducted. The first cycle in October 2023 involved 11 BA history students across three sessions, while the second cycle in May 2024 included a mix of returning participants and new students, enabling reflection on draft recommendations. Involving students in discussions about curriculum design builds on calls for student-centred approaches in decolonial and inclusive pedagogy (Arshad et al., 2021). It should be noted that participation in these focus groups was voluntary, which may mean that some students had a prior interest in questions of educational development or diversity and inclusion. Their reflections are not necessarily representative of the entire student body but nonetheless offer important insights into student experiences.

Across the sessions, students frequently emphasised that diversifying curriculum content does not automatically translate into inclusive learning environments; rather, classroom dynamics and pedagogical facilitation play a crucial role in shaping how students encounter and engage with historical knowledge. While first-year courses were experienced as structured around Eurocentric periodisations with limited conceptual engagement, later courses introduced broader themes and perspectives, albeit inconsistently.

Students noted a disconnect between critical classroom discussions and the epistemic foundations of assigned readings. Eurocentrism was frequently named as a concept, yet students felt that critiques were introduced without sufficient explanation or application. As one student described: “It’s often the word Eurocentrism...but how much is actually done with it...it’s more the term that is given, and then you go back to Europe.” This points to symbolic inclusion, where critical concepts are introduced without being meaningfully integrated into historical analysis. At the same time, participants recognised the complexity of this challenge, acknowledging that “it’s difficult to do something from Europe in non-Orientalist terms.” Such responses echo existing literature, which underlines how Eurocentric epistemic frameworks persist even within curricula that seek to critique them (Ono-George, 2019).

Students further explained that experiences of inclusion varied across courses, coordinators, tutorial teachers, and teaching formats. They described a sense of discontinuity, something some of them named the “whiplash effect”: going from one course in which diversity and inclusion were carefully addressed to the next course, in which these topics received limited attention or were even dismissed. This variation created uncertainty about what to expect from the programme, as commitments to inclusion seemed to depend on individual instructors rather than shared pedagogical principles. Students also noted differences within courses, particularly between more “rigid” lecture formats and informal tutorials: “It’s very like, this is the content that’s prepared...While in the [tutorial] groups, it tended to be a bit more discussion, [like] actually having a conversation.”

The opposing teaching practices between course coordinators and tutorial instructors was a recurring topic. Students observed that tutorials were often “very dependent on your tutor,” and that tutorial teachers were generally perceived as more approachable in everyday classroom interaction. Some noted that tutorial

instructors occasionally expressed frustration about limited diversity in course frameworks. These observations point to broader structural dynamics within higher education, where early-career and temporary staff deliver much teaching but have limited influence over course content (Begum & Saini, 2019). As a result, engagement with inclusion remained uneven, reinforcing students' sense that departmental hierarchies were reproduced pedagogically. As one student put it, this approach risks sustaining hegemonic perspectives: "Teachers can't really design their own courses...you can only do that if you're a full professor...why is this hierarchy reflected?"

During the focus groups, it became clear that students did not experience classroom safety in uniform ways. One participant noted: "For me, I've always felt safe, but maybe the person with those exceptional beliefs doesn't always feel comfortable sharing, and it's a shame because it's often very funny or an interesting perspective, even though you'll completely disagree." Another student acknowledged that they sometimes limited what they wanted to share, though it was not common ("maybe twice a year"). Some students recalled specific moments in which sensitive topics were not guided effectively, particularly when biased or discriminatory remarks went unchallenged. One participant described an incident involving "an explicitly incredibly racist statement" that the instructor "didn't really...react to." Others stressed that the responsibility for a safe environment becomes especially important when discussions touch on lived identities, and that this was not always considered by teachers, stating an example in which homosexuality was discussed as if there were no gay people present in the classroom. Some of the issues raised point to the unequal emotional burden carried by minoritised students. Some described what has been termed as "codeswitching", where working-class people, women, or people of colour quickly adapt to fit into dominant academic norms (Begum & Saini, 2019).

Some students expressed interest in engaging more deeply with histories beyond Europe but cited a lack of foundational knowledge on those regions. They also advocated for methodological diversification, including oral histories, visual sources, and creative assignments. Importantly, students broadened the meaning of inclusion beyond race or gender alone. One participant reflected: "When I think of diversity...it's not only non-Western or female...there are also different social backgrounds...my parents didn't go to universities...I had no idea about how life at university was." Moreover, they welcomed the idea of more collaborative pedagogies to foster reflexivity for both students and instructors, while broadening theoretical and methodological diversity (Arshad et al., 2021). Their experiences underscore the need for intersectional approaches to teaching that attend simultaneously to their lived realities, which encompass significant differences in race, gender, class, and other axes of marginalisation (Mergner et al., 2026).

Building on this, a few voiced disappointment that neither the curriculum nor staff reflected the multicultural and working-class population of the city where the university was located, noting the importance of visible diversity and representation for engagement and role-modelling (Ahmed, 2012). Overall, however, experiences tended to be positive in relation to the conversations taking place around inclusivity. One student described the classroom environment as generally supportive and applauded the fact that diversity was even considered:

I think overall I had a really positive experience with my classroom, classmates....I saw nothing but a supportive environment. I wish [inclusivity] was more explicit rather than just implied, because I think at least this department can take pride in it.

Overall, the focus groups suggest that students did not experience the programme as uniformly exclusionary, but rather as marked by inconsistencies in how inclusion was enacted across courses, instructors, and discussion spaces. Their reflections underline that inclusive history education is not only a matter of representation, but also of pedagogy, institutional teaching structures, and the everyday conditions under which classroom dialogue becomes possible.

### 4.3. Staff Perspectives and Current Teaching Practices

After the first focus groups, it became clear that students perceived considerable variation in how inclusivity was practised and understood. While the original focus of the project was solely on students' perspectives, this finding prompted us to add a staff questionnaire to explore how our colleagues understand and "do inclusivity" in the classroom. This redesign of the original project also helped strengthen staff involvement and, by extension, the likelihood of meaningful and sustainable change. About half of the people teaching in the programme completed the questionnaire. This response indicates a degree of engagement with the topic but may also reflect existing divisions within the department: Those who chose to participate are likely already invested in issues of inclusion and diversity, while others may be less engaged or consider such initiatives as less relevant to their work.

Because of the aforementioned students' input, we first sought to understand how colleagues made sense of inclusion in the context of history education. Two main themes emerged: inclusion as *content* and inclusion as *delivery*. Most respondents equated inclusion with exposing students to diverse voices and perspectives. They mentioned including women, minorities, or scholars from the Global South. For inclusion as delivery, fostering a respectful and safe classroom environment was emphasised. Some combined both aspects, but inclusion was rarely imagined beyond the level of individual teaching practices or courses. Overall, staff definitions echoed what Ahmed (2012) describes as the institutional framing of inclusion through diversity: the presence of multiple identities, experiences, and perspectives. Concepts such as coloniality, racism, patriarchy, or whiteness were rarely used, with respondents using general or more neutral terms like "different backgrounds" or "global connections." This suggests a pragmatic and depoliticised understanding of inclusion rather than structural critique of knowledge or society.

This approach was also reflected in course design. Respondents described efforts to broaden reading lists, incorporate case studies from a wider range of regions, or diversify examples used in teaching. These efforts demonstrate awareness and commitment to increased representation. However, as Ono-George (2019) notes, diversifying content alone does not create an equitable or safe classroom environment, particularly when such efforts take the form of adding to existing materials rather than questioning what history is and how it is taught. A few respondents described more experimental approaches, such as teaching the canon "backwards" (introducing the dominant Western perspective at the end of a course), diversifying assessment formats, or integrating student suggestions into course content and readings.

Tutorial teachers, who were usually not involved in course design, noted particular challenges in enacting inclusive education within existing course structures. As one respondent commented, "I always try to add a critical note to readings or topics that are particularly problematic." Such efforts are important and indicate attempts to renegotiate course content at the level of delivery. However, they also highlight limits in agency when underlying materials remain unchanged. As described earlier, students noticed this disconnect

between assigned materials, lectures, and classroom discussions. Moreover, they expected more engagement with alternative frameworks or methodologies. These responses highlight a tension in responsibility, as tutorial teachers often engage in critical mediation while formal authority over course design rests elsewhere.

Some staff members reported feeling ill-equipped to teach so-called “diverse” modules. One colleague, for example, mentioned feeling uncertain about including LGBTQI+ topics in their course, not because they did not see their value, but because they felt insufficiently knowledgeable or feared “doing it wrong.” Many also noted how they lacked dedicated time to fully revise their courses, reflecting commonly cited structural and institutional constraints in studies on higher education (Housee, 2022).

These findings raise questions about how responsibility for inclusive teaching is distributed. When responsibility lies primarily with tutorial teachers rather than course coordinators, existing inequalities in expertise and labour may be reproduced, as those already engaged with inclusion often carry disproportionate emotional and intellectual work (Zurné & Oudenhuijsen, 2024). At the same time, they indicate that senior staff may also require support to develop knowledge and confidence around unfamiliar topics, underscoring the need for an institutional approach that recognises inclusion as a collective responsibility.

In relation to delivery, staff reported drawing attention to marginalised perspectives, encouraging open dialogue, and explicitly addressing bias. A few mentioned incorporating concrete accessibility measures such as content warnings, gender-neutral or inclusive language, and using dyslexia-friendly slides. Others highlighted the importance of being non-judgmental and allowing students to explore topics at their own pace. These examples suggest that, although inclusion is largely understood at the level of *content*, some teachers also “do inclusion” through attentiveness to classroom atmosphere and student wellbeing. Respondents generally described an inclusive classroom as one in which students feel safe, respected, and encouraged to participate. Yet many also expressed uncertainties about how to foster such spaces, particularly when addressing emotionally charged or politically sensitive topics.

A minority of responses expressed scepticism towards diversity and inclusion initiatives, raising concerns that such efforts might “exclude” certain people or perspectives, involve teachers “pushing their values” onto students, or fall outside what they considered the task of educating “good historians.” Some colleagues expressed that they felt others dismissed their attempts to implement more inclusive teaching practices. These views and examples illustrate how inclusion initiatives can unsettle historians’ expectations of neutrality and objectivity in both the discipline and its teaching, revealing internalised epistemological hierarchies.

In the final part of the survey, colleagues were asked to reflect on areas for improvement and on the resources and support required for more inclusive history education. Most respondents demonstrated a willingness to develop in this area, while also highlighting institutional and cultural barriers as constraints. Some emphasised the department’s responsibility to facilitate change by, for example, “making us aware of our own biases.” Time was described as the most critical resource for designing inclusive courses, engaging with unfamiliar literature, and critically reflecting on teaching practices. Several respondents argued that inclusive teaching should be recognised within workload models and development hours, underscoring an understanding of inclusion as labour that must be institutionally enabled rather than voluntarily encouraged.

These discussions highlighted a recurring theme of limited conceptual clarity around inclusion and related terms such as diversity or decolonisation. Staff expressed a need for greater consensus on the implications of these concepts for teaching and course design. They called for workshops on inclusive teaching and bias awareness, as well as more opportunities for knowledge exchange on course design. Many acknowledged that inclusion should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed achievement or tick-box exercise. Beyond workload concerns, staff identified a need for broader institutional and cultural transformation. Embedding inclusion through leadership, coordinated discussion, and professional development is essential for moving beyond isolated initiatives towards a more sustainable approach.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This project explored inclusivity in a Dutch bachelor's history programme, examining curriculum content and classroom experiences from the perspectives of students and staff. The findings demonstrate that while generally staff expressed commitment to inclusive teaching, broader structural and epistemic hierarchies continue to shape what and how we teach. Eurocentric and androcentric biases remain, and students reported experiencing uneven pedagogical approaches towards inclusion. Some described a “whiplash effect” as they moved between courses where inclusion was thoughtfully addressed and others where it received little to no attention. Most staff, in turn, expressed goodwill but also uncertainty, limited time, and the absence of institutional guidance. These patterns indicate that responsibility for inclusivity rests on personal initiative rather than collective strategy, complicating structural change.

Based on the findings, we argue that a lack of shared departmental or institutional frameworks amplifies inequalities within staff hierarchies. Junior and temporary lecturers often invested the most in inclusive practices, carrying disproportionate weight without the authority or resources to enforce sustainable change. This responsibility should lie with course coordinators, who in turn often cite institutional constraints, such as a lack of time. Indeed, precarious employment, hierarchical relations, and a performance-driven academic culture often discourage time-consuming innovations and self-critique (Holmwood, 2011). Fostering inclusive history education thus requires leadership, professional development, and structural recognition, rather than relying on ad hoc goodwill. Coordinated efforts, such as annual meetings between course coordinators to review assigned readings for balance, and more frequent co-teaching opportunities, can enhance attentiveness to inclusive teaching as well as encourage curricular coherence.

These findings must be understood within the broader disciplinary and institutional context. History as an academic field in the Netherlands remains relatively homogeneous, often associated with white, Dutch, and male students and staff (Nijland, 2022). This reinforces a perception that “diversity” is external to the discipline rather than integral to its subject matter and methods. Consequently, initiatives toward inclusion are sometimes seen as politically charged or irrelevant to the supposedly “neutral” study of history and historical “facts.” In the past few years, we have encountered comments by both students and staff that reflect scepticism towards calls aiming to make higher education more inclusive. Such resistance echoes wider debates in the Netherlands, where diversity and decolonisation continue to be contested (Gurkan & Kurt, 2023). This mirrors wider patterns of “institutional whiteness” (Ahmed, 2012), in which conformity and silence are rewarded, while critical engagement can be perceived as disruptive. This context played a role in our own decision to foreground “inclusion” over “decolonisation.” Our choice was pragmatic: “Inclusion” provided a shared entry point for dialogue while still allowing us to question whose perspectives are centred

and whose knowledge is valued. Moreover, it became clear in focus groups with students that for them, decolonisation as sole focus point would be too narrow, as they also highlighted other barriers they encountered, such as accessibility of course material and assessment, specifically related to neurodivergences. Nevertheless, we remain aware of the tensions associated with such terminologies. The findings further reiterate this conceptual ambiguity within higher education. Diversity and inclusion are frequently reduced to questions of demographic representation rather than understood as challenges to epistemic and pedagogical hierarchies (Ono-George, 2019). Among both staff and students, interpretations varied: Some framed inclusion primarily in terms of accessibility or supportive classroom climates, while others linked it to deeper questions of power and disciplinary canon. Without shared definitions, initiatives risk becoming fragmented or remaining surface-level gestures. Moreover, academics are rarely trained in pedagogical theory, leaving many unsure how to address exclusionary classroom dynamics or respond to students' lived experiences of marginalisation.

To move forward, inclusion in history education must be approached as both a structural and epistemic transformation. It requires rethinking what counts as historical knowledge by creating classroom environments where multiple epistemologies are recognised and engaged. This approach does not simply add excluded voices but re-inscribes diverse traditions into the very fabric of historical inquiry (Bhabha, 2012). It also demands long-term institutional commitment, such as coordinated staff development, protected time for curricular improvement, and recognition of the emotional and intellectual labour involved. A sustainable transformation requires redistributing this weight and embedding it within institutional structures rather than relying upon individual commitment. Inclusion must become a collective responsibility: supported by management, reflected in yearly evaluations, and sustained through community-building across hierarchies.

In the Dutch context, however, nationwide budget cuts raise concerns about the future funding of higher education and research, as well as institutional commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Boutayeb, 2025). English-taught programmes are disproportionately affected, framed as efforts to “rebalance” internationalisation, thereby threatening the future of international education in the Netherlands as well as diversity among staff and students. While a new government is being formed at the time of writing, its plans for research and higher education remain uncertain. The effects of these budget cuts are expected to be long-lasting, impacting thereby the conditions under which inclusive education can develop.

In sum, this article illustrated possibilities and limitations of a collaborative project aimed at fostering inclusive history education at a Dutch university. The process opened important conversations among students and staff, made exclusionary patterns visible, and contributed to ongoing reflections within the programme. Since the circulation of the project report in 2024, inclusion has become a more explicit topic in departmental and faculty-level discussions about curriculum renewal, student wellbeing, and educational policy. In the last two years, some colleagues have made explicit efforts to challenge Western-centric perspectives in their courses. Moreover, in the reframing of our bachelor's curriculum year 1, inclusion has been taken more seriously.

At the same time, lasting transformation depends on departmental consensus, leadership, and institutional commitment. Only under such conditions can history education move beyond fragmented initiatives toward more reflexive disciplinary practices. These findings therefore speak to wider debates on epistemic justice and the politics of knowledge production. Ultimately, fostering inclusive history education requires

continued attention not only to representation in content, but also to the deeper institutional and epistemological frameworks at its core: what counts as knowledge, who is allowed to speak, and more importantly, who is heard.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Sandra Manickam for her valuable contributions to this project, as well as her feedback during the writing stages of this article. We further thank our university for providing institutional support, as well as the students and staff who participated in this project. Finally, we would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Y.a.H.

### Funding

This project was funded by the Hoger Onderwijs Kwaliteitsafspraken (HOKA), government funding allocated to universities to improve educational quality in the Netherlands. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Erasmus University Rotterdam and Cogitatio Press.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### LLMs Disclosure

Grammarly and OpenAI were used to improve grammar and spelling.

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

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**Submitted:** 29 October 2025 **Accepted:** 5 February 2026 **Published:** 12 March 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

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

## Keywords

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

## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Policy Frameworks and Inequalities in Spanish Higher Education

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Theoretical Approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 4. Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. Results

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **5.2. Students’ Identified Needs: From Participatory Workshops to Institutional Demands**

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

### **5.2.1. Neurodivergence, Accessibility, and Learning Design**

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

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

### **5.2.2. Gender Dynamics in Classroom Participation**

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

### **5.2.3. Religion, Migration, and Visibility**

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

#### 5.2.4. Socioeconomic Status and Geography

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

#### 5.2.5. Representation and Eurocentrism

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

#### 5.2.6. Digital Divides and Online Participation

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

#### 5.2.7. Learning Environments and Infrastructures

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

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

### 5.2.8. Assessment Practices

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

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

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

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

### 5.3.1. Neurodivergence and Mental Health

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

### 5.3.2. Religious Diversity and Islamophobia

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

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

### 5.3.3. Socio-Economic Inequalities and Work–Study Balance

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

### 5.3.4. Accessibility and Disability

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

### 5.3.5. Communication and Institutional Culture

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

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

## 6. Discussion

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

### **6.1. Continuity Model**

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

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

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

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

### **6.2. Expert-Based Model**

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

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

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

### **6.3. Transformative Model**

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

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

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

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

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

## 7. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Acknowledgments**

We thank the InterHEd project partners, the interviewees, and the workshop participants for their engagement and valuable input. This study has been carried out within the framework of the Interuniversity Doctoral

Programme in Gender Studies: Cultures, Societies and Policies (Programa de Doctorat Interuniversitari en Estudis de Gènere: Cultures, Societats i Polítiques).

### Funding

Part of this research has received funding from the European Union's Erasmus+ programme under grant number 2023-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000160620—InterHEd. This work was supported by the Joan Oró Predoctoral Fellowship Program of the Department of Research and Universities of the Government of Catalonia, co-funded by the European Social Fund Plus, under grants reference 2023 FI-1 00676 and 2025 FI-1 00563.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

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

### LLMs Disclosure

The authors used ChatGPT4 and DeepL to assist with language editing of the manuscript. All outputs from the tool were reviewed and edited by the authors, who remain fully responsible for the content, interpretation, and originality of the work.

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# Impact Agenda and Practices of Inclusion and Reward for Early Career Researchers in the Social Sciences and Humanities

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 25 February 2026 **Published:** 14 April 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

This article explores some effects of the “impact agenda” on early academic careers and knowledge production. The impact agenda is the incentivisation of socio-economic impact in university-based research through research funding and evaluation mechanisms, producing, it has been theorised, new modalities of scholarly distinction (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019). The latter risk aligning with traditionally individualistic forms of academic performativity (Chubb & Derrick, 2020), thus perpetuating existing inequality regimes (Davies et al., 2020) through posing additional obstacles to success for traditionally marginalised groups in academic hierarchies. Within the UK context, where the impact agenda is strongly institutionalised, we examine the delivery of highly rated impact by early career researchers and its effect on their work and careers. Specifically, we interrogate the potential for the (e)valuation of impact to democratise knowledge production and access to, and progression in, academic careers. Our article reports on the documentary discourse analysis of the highest-rated “impact case studies” in the UK’s recent research evaluation exercise and interviews with some of their early career researcher (co)authors. The findings of this exploratory work suggest that while the impact agenda has started to incentivise and reward knowledge co-production and a broader set of research skills, motivations, and pathways, there is a risk that this tendency co-exists with, rather than challenges, established forms of “scholarly distinction” embodied in publishing productivity and funding capture, potentially leading to skill and talent loss.

## Keywords

academic careers; early career researchers; impact agenda; research culture; research evaluation; social sciences and humanities

## 1. Introduction

This article charts some effects of the “impact agenda”—research policies that incentivise socio-economic impacts from university-based research—on academic work and careers. Across national higher education (HE) systems, non-academic impact is being introduced as a criterion in research evaluation (Golhasany & Harvey, 2022), academic career development (Ochsner & Bulaitis, 2023), and project-based funding, e.g., in the EU’s flagship Horizon funding programmes (Gunn & Mintrom, 2016). The impact agenda has been critiqued (Hammersley, 2014; Martin, 2011) as another wave of HE transformation following massification, marketisation, and the application of neoliberal, new public management, and knowledge economy logics to its teaching and research efforts (Enders et al., 2015; Musselin, 2007; Trow, 1970). Through these transformations, critics argue, knowledge has increasingly been framed as a commodity whose value can (and should be) measured.

Turning the lens away from the broader debates on the value of universities (e.g., Collini, 2012) and towards the reception of the impact agenda among individual academics, extant research has demonstrated a range of intellectual and emotional responses to the new criterion influencing the evaluation and funding of academic research, from enthusiastic, through pragmatic, to cynical and resentful (Chubb et al., 2017; Chubb & Reed, 2018; Chubb et al., 2017; Puttman & Thomsen, 2025). Some academics, these studies show, accept the impact agenda as the confirmation of their work and identity (e.g., as application-oriented and close to practitioners and policymakers), while others see impact as another facet of audit culture that is problematically implemented, and potentially threatening to the core of the academic endeavour.

As impact evaluation finds its way into new contexts (Wróblewska, 2021, 2025), some authors have pointed out its potential to support more democratic, embedded, locally relevant knowledge production (Li et al., 2024). This cautiously optimistic view is complicated by others fearing that the impact agenda further supports the workings of the “prestige economy” in academia (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019; Watermeyer & Rowe, 2022) that continues to produce ever-new modalities of scholarly distinction. Such distinction, however, is available only to those who deliver a certain form of impact, e.g., as reflected in high-value public and industry sector partnerships, policy influence, and commercial success, thus perpetuating existing “inequality regimes” in academia (Davies et al., 2020). If this is the case, the access to and the reward for the delivery of “valuable” forms of social impact remains the preserve of the already powerful, tied to elite networks, financial resources, and institutionally granted research time and support.

Meanwhile, those on the lower rungs of academic hierarchies, such as the “marginalised and precarious community of early career researchers” (ECRs; Watermeyer & Rowe, 2022), while encouraged to pursue impact both as a career progression requirement, and in the broader context of the demands for justification of public spending on university research, will face limited opportunities and uncertain rewards. Emerging research on ECRs’ grappling with the impact agenda (Fenby-Hulse et al., 2019; Wróblewska et al., 2024) has demonstrated personal and professional commitment to delivering social change through one’s research, but in a climate of uncertainty regarding its value, lack of appropriate training, and increasing pressures and time scarcity in performing the more traditional aspects of the academic roles.

In this context, we wish to open the space for an exploration of the backgrounds and consequences of ECRs’ delivering significant—and institutionally valuable—social impact. Our article follows an earlier analysis

(Djerasimovic & Barke, 2024) of highly-rated impact in social sciences and humanities (SSH) in the last round of the UK's research evaluation under the national research evaluation framework (REF), on the basis of which core research funding to universities and departments is distributed. This analysis identified a number of cases of highest-rated impact having been (co)authored by ECRs, prompting us to understand the context of these still-rare accounts of “impact success” for ECRs. To begin to explore this issue, we combine in this article a new documentary analysis of “impact case studies”—those (co)authored by ECRs—with interview findings with a sample of their (co)authors. This article is the first attempt to explore the role of SSH ECRs in the delivery of “outstanding” social impact, and the associated benefits—or otherwise—to ECRs' work and careers.

We provide a brief overview of the rise of the impact agenda internationally, subsequently focusing on the UK, where the impact agenda is most strongly institutionalised as a governance regime (Wróblewska, 2021). We then proceed to situate our project in the scholarship on the effects of the impact agenda on academic work and careers, with particular attention to its potential to produce and exacerbate inequalities even as it holds the capacity to deliver positive social change. Subsequently, we present and discuss emerging insights around access to, forms of, and rewards for “outstanding” impact authorship for SSH ECRs, before concluding with further potential avenues for research.

## 2. The Impact Agenda and Its Effects on Academic Careers

Alongside enduring discussions of universities' “public mission” (Kerr, 1963/1995), research policies explicitly driven by demand for innovation and “useful” knowledge to address the complex problems of late modernity (Berger & Duguet, 1982) have led to the rise of inter- and trans-disciplinary work, with research becoming increasingly responsive, problem-driven, and applied—geared towards production of so-called “mode 2” knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). Meanwhile, the question of socio-economic relevance of academic knowledge and accountability for public spending on university research, particularly that which is not immediately perceived to be applicable, not least in humanities and many social sciences, has continually been raised, prompting a concerted effort from within the sector to justify its public value or critique the very concept (Collini, 2012; Nussbaum, 2010). Nevertheless, the impact agenda—or the requirement for universities to demonstrate the non-academic impact of their research—has been steadily seeping into national and international research evaluation and funding systems in recent years (Golhasany & Harvey, 2022; Gunn & Mintrom, 2016; Li et al., 2024; Wróblewska, 2025).

In the UK, where this article is situated, the importance of socio-economic relevance of academic research has in the last decade been channelled into the national research policy which systematically includes research impact—“an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia” (UKRI, 2025)—in decisions regarding university research quality and funding. In addition to being an explicit criterion in the award of project-based funding since 2009, in 2014, impact featured for the first time in the periodically implemented REF that assesses and rewards, via a performance-based funding mechanism, research capacity and quality of UK universities. Universities demonstrate their research capacity and quality by submitting for peer assessment their staff's scholarly outputs (at least one output per research-active member of staff) and impact case studies (approximately one per seven members of staff). In 2014, impact accounted for 20 percent of the universities' overall grade, this rising to 25 percent in 2021, making it an important factor in the allocation of

potentially quite substantive research funding to institutions over a six- or seven-year period. While the purpose of the REF is to assess institutions, rather than individuals, “REF-ability” of research outputs (and impact) has become a standard, if implicit, currency in academic recruitment and progression (Torrance, 2019; UCU, 2013).

Simultaneously, critical scholarship has responded to this evolution in research evaluation by attending to its underlying assumptions and implications for knowledge short-termism, utilitarianism, and co-option by external forces (state, industry; see Dallyn et al., 2015; Hammersley, 2014; Martin, 2011; Watermeyer, 2015) and the conceptual and methodological deliberation of research value and purpose (Oancea, 2013, 2023). Moving from the macro to micro view of the impact agenda, and charting its effects on academic work and careers, more specifically relevant to our study, research by Chubb, Watermeyer, and colleagues in the UK and Australia has revealed instances of profound conflict and inconsistency in mid-career and senior academics’ enactment of what the authors termed the moral economy of the impact agenda (see Chubb et al., 2017; Chubb & Reed, 2018; Chubb & Watermeyer, 2017; Watermeyer, 2015), ranging from an ethical and epistemic confirmation of their public citizenship, to fear, doubt, or even anger, at the negation of professional identity, perceived as another layer of accountability that assumed the absence of any public role to begin with (see also Bačević, 2017; Golhasany & Harvey, 2022). In Germany, even without a strongly institutionalised impact agenda, Püttman and Thomsen’s (2025) survey of over 4,000 German professors found an important place for non-academic engagement in their academic identity, demonstrating that this research policy development might indeed be tapping into existing ethical and professional motivations to conduct research.

Thus, despite the impact agenda’s potential for institutional gaming, epistemic and practical short-termism, and instrumentalism, it is clear that it also has the potential to support and reward individual academics’ commitment to research that is explicitly oriented towards social justice and an exercise of public citizenship. However, as it increasingly takes hold in the everyday running of universities, we are also seeing a rise in a new line of critical scholarship, one that addresses the negative effects of the impact agenda on the cultures and practices of equity in academic careers. These include what Watermeyer and colleagues refer to as the new modality of scholarly distinction (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019), often reserved for a particular kind of impact, e.g., that which results in policy change, spin-outs, or commercial benefits, and which perhaps more easily follows the linear assumptions about impact that have been strongly contested over the last decade, especially in SSH (Oancea, 2023). Chubb and Derrick’s (2020) work on the gendered nature of impact has similarly pointed to a hierarchy of social impacts, with such “hard” impacts considered of higher status and value than the “softer” and “woolly” benefits—social, cultural, not easily subject to measurement, and often delivered through more local, collaborative, critical, co-produced (with impact “beneficiaries”), or artistic research.

Indeed, among academics with long-term interests in participatory and publicly-oriented research who might have been expected to benefit from greater attention given to “impactful” research activities, authors (O’Connell, 2019; Watermeyer, 2015) found an opportunity to confirm one’s academic identity, however not one “aligned with orthodox notions of academic excellence or success” (Watermeyer, 2016. p. 342), with a lack of institutional commitment or scholarly acknowledgement leaving their efforts uncentivised and unrewarded. Davies et al. (2020), examining women’s participation as impact leaders in the REF across a single discipline, found a starkly imbalanced picture vis-à-vis their male colleagues, arguing that the current form of impact evaluation strongly supports existing gender inequality regimes. This tendency, they suggest,

perpetuates the status quo by favouring individualistic celebrations of impact where all those who participate in the team effort, including research “users” (Bandola-Gill & Smith, 2021), are rendered invisible, all the worse if they are in the position of professional precarity (see also Bayley et al., 2021).

If this is the case, it is important to explore if the impact agenda really has any promise for altering research cultures, not only in terms of research democratisation beyond academia, but in terms of inclusivity and reward for staff beyond “research leaders,” recognising also the invisible labour entailed in the delivery of impact and often performed by teams of lower-ranking academics and research support professionals (Bayley et al., 2021; Watermeyer, 2015, 2016). With impact increasingly entering national research evaluation and academic progression frameworks (Ochsner & Bulaitis, 2023), we were particularly keen to understand how the contested nature of impact as a space of opportunity or a space of inequality plays out for ECRs, on whose engagement with the impact agenda there is to date limited insight.

ECRs surveyed in still rare studies (Fenby-Hulse, 2019; Wróblewska et al., 2024) on the subject tend to show positive interest in impact for a variety of reasons pertaining to careers, research quality, ethics, and sense of duty, but report limited impact activity owing to lack of time and resources in face of employment precarity, insufficient knowledge and skills, or costs to careers, and even individual wellbeing, where it involves work that demands high levels of personal emotional entanglement. We build on these important insights in this article and attend to some of the insufficiently understood questions regarding value and cost, to ECRs’ work and careers, of delivering social impact that was assessed to be of outstanding significance.

### 3. Analysing Outstanding Impact and Its Authors: Study Design

#### 3.1. Background to the Present Study

In 2024, we performed a manual, line-by-line content analysis in NVivo of the 148 highest-rated, and thus, financially and reputationally—certainly for institutions—most valuable impact case studies submitted to REF2021 by SSH disciplines from across the UK (approximately 150,000 words; Djerasimovic & Barke, 2024). The analysis was guided by exploring impact as a new—additional—“positional good” (Hirsch, 1977, as cited in Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019) with the potential to either equalise the research playing field through increasing the esteem traditionally afforded to engaged, co-produced, and applied work, and the (teams of) individuals delivering it, or entrench existing inequalities. We were thus particularly interested in the authorship and leadership of this highly valued impact.

The five-page impact case study template submitted for evaluation provides information about its authors, underpinning research and publications, and the details and evidence of impact. The publicly available database of case studies (<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact>) has been widely studied, informing both theory and practice across the UK and internationally on what impact looks like, who delivers it, and how to evidence it (e.g., Knight & Mitchell, 2023; Kousha et al., 2021; Reichard et al., 2020). Our study (Djerasimovic & Barke, 2024) examined, among other issues, the proportion of this “world-leading” impactful research that was led by women, ethnically minoritised staff (global majority), and ECRs—those holding, traditionally, less power in research-intensive HE environments. Coding for gender (with attention to pronouns), ethnicity (via Ethnea and Google search), and career stage (supplied in the document), we then attended to the presentation of authorship and narration of impact.

Through a high-level discourse analysis, we identified dominant subject positions and examined how impact was narrated—from being delivered by “star” academics, to collaboratively developed by teams of (named) researchers at different stages of their careers. We also looked at whether impact was described as happening in a linear way or if research and impact were described as co-produced and iterative. The outcome of this analysis (see Table 1 for code distribution) indicated that a significant proportion of high-value impact was delivered by women (as case study leads and co-leads, across all SSH disciplines) and, in what was also surprising given extant literature, a non-negligible number of ECRs—lecturers, research fellows, and associates—as (co)authors. The picture that emerged with respect to ethnicity confirmed current trends for ethnically minoritised (global majority) staff representation at all career levels, especially higher ones, in UK universities.

**Table 1.** Authorship of impact across 148 SSH 4\* case studies.

Category	References
<b>Gender</b>	<b>381</b>
Male	180
Female	201
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>384</b>
White	351
Mixed	2
Indigenous	1
Black	6
Asian	15
Arab	9
<b>Career stage</b>	<b>381</b>
Professor	185
Prof services	3
Mid-career	112
Hybrid role	13
ECR	68
Research fellow or associate	44
Lecturer	24
<b>Nature of research</b>	<b>148</b>
Practice-based	19
Multiple projects	21
Individual	30
Collaborative	118
<b>Nature of impact pathways</b>	<b>148</b>
Linear	106
Iterative	59
Coproduced	128

These findings potentially significantly challenge much of the existing research on access to (high value) impact for those on lower rungs of academic hierarchies. Additionally, only a very small proportion of all highly rated impacts was described as having been achieved by (star) individuals or in a linear way. This seemed to imply that the delivery of this positional good was a collaborative effort, including ECRs as well as non-academic partners, and that the new form of scholarly distinction might be available to those without long records of publications and grant income. If this were the case, we speculated, the impact agenda may have contributed to creating opportunities for rewarding diverse kinds of research effort and contribution. Prompted by these questions, we were eager to explore the background to these “stories of success.”

### 3.2. Present Study: Questions and Design

Our original documentary analysis thus created a framework for further investigation, driven by the following questions:

- What was the role of SSH ECRs in the production of high-value social impact in the last round of the REF?
- What was the nature of the high-value research-with-impact that they (co)delivered?
- How was their delivery of high-value impact achieved and rewarded?

Our methodology included further in-depth manual content and discourse analysis of a new sub-sample of case studies (32 across different disciplines, approximately 40,000 words) that were co-authored by ECRs. These case studies were analysed as the prevalent exemplar of social impact evaluation in academia, with potential to replicate or challenge existing practices of crediting and rewarding a variety of research contributions (see <https://www.coara.org> and <https://hidden-ref.org>). We coded the text for types of impact (following REF classification into social, cultural, health, policy, commercial, legal, environmental, and educational) and size of teams. We then examined syntax, subject positions, and subject alliances, observing the SKAD method of discourse analysis (Keller, 2011) to elucidate the discursive construction of authorship and leadership, with added focus on ECR positioning and the nature of underpinning research.

Documentary analysis was combined with 12 semi-structured interviews with some of the ECR authors, included to explore the direct perspectives and lived experience of ECRs themselves and to provide contextual detail to documentary evidence, supporting any interpretative and indicative—rather than conclusive—observations (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). While a relatively limited number, these perspectives, derived from a highly specific sample, have significant informational power (Malterud et al., 2016) and instructive value in illuminating a little-observed phenomenon and informing further research. Our original documentary analysis yielded the names of 68 ECRs named as (co)authors of the highest-rated SSH case studies. Subsequent filtering via a Google search identified 46 individuals with a working email address, who were all invited to interview in several waves, starting with women and global majority academics, then expanding to include all (former) ECRs, in spring 2025. Twelve individuals were interviewed in April–October 2025. Among them were seven women, five men, all but one of white European ethnic origin, and all but one UK-based. Two of them had since left academia, and among the nine remaining in UK HE, all but two were employed at institutions typically associated with research power and prestige.

Interviews took place online and were on average one hour long. We used a semi-structured interview guide but took a narrative approach to interviewing, inviting participants to begin with their entry into academia

broadly, and then focusing on their involvement in the project(s) that resulted in the case study, the nature of the projects and their contribution, their training and preparation for impactful research, and any support and challenges involved in the conduct of this work. Finally, we asked about their career trajectory post-involvement in the production of high-value impact.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were anonymised and approved by participants. Purposeful qualitative thematic analysis was then applied to transcripts, with both researchers, first independently, and then together, coding the individual accounts for the narration of (a) pathways into academia and aims and values guiding one's research career, (b) participation in high-value impact, the nature of conducted research-with-impact, and surrounding support and challenges, and (c) career pathway post-involvement in high-value impact. Findings, loosely mapped onto our research questions, are presented below, drawing on both documentary and interview data, and their intertextuality. The reporting codes for interview data reflect gender (m/f), broad disciplinary provenance (humanities or social sciences), and whether interviewees progressed in academia (p-a), left academia (ex-a), or are still an ECR, several years after the REF2021 results were published.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Team Effort and a Variety of ECRs' Roles in the Production of High-Value Social Impact*

Our documentary analysis indicated that high-value impact involving ECRs was likely to be delivered by large teams of researchers, almost two-thirds of which were led by female members of staff, a higher proportion than that yielded by the larger case study sample. Teams of three to five, and over five researchers were most common, followed by teams of two (including a senior academic and an ECR), in order of descending prevalence. Only three case studies were solely authored by ECRs, two of whom we subsequently interviewed. Within the larger teams, there were differing practices in terms of constructing central authorship/leadership of the project(s) and the ECRs' role in them.

The most common type of authorship/leadership construction eschewed decision around individuals' positioning by placing organisations—departments, research centres and units, occasionally the entire university—in the position of authorship, with any named and nameless groups of individuals merely its executors or facilitators—driving home the significance of work, rather than the role of individuals. This was replicated in the referencing of underpinning publications that all foregrounded the work rather than the authors. The next most common category included positioning the key senior researcher (almost always a professor) as the key author and leader of research, with nameless teams associatively attached to them. Occasionally (presumably distinguished) national and international collaborators were individually named, while the rest of the team, inclusive of ECRs, remained referred only in the collective, despite appearing as (co)authors in several underpinning publications.

Lastly, least commonly, and irrespective of the gender of the most senior researcher in the team, we identified instances of apparent equality and inclusiveness in the construction of authorship and leadership, with all the involved researchers named, including also all international collaborators. In most of these cases, the practices of inclusivity materialised also through consistent use of syntactic coordination, creating an impression of a team of equals, often with the focus on individuals' disciplinary expertise, rather than seniority, positions, and titles.

One aspect of apparent inclusivity and recognition for diverse contributions was evident in ECRs' being named as case study co-authors, but without having (co)authored any of the underpinning publications. In some of those cases, it was possible to trace ECRs' contribution to the impact section of the case study, where they were named in the delivery and evaluation of activities stemming from original research. Elsewhere, it was not always possible to infer the ECRs' distinct contribution, but insight from some interviews hints that it would have indeed likely been a contribution to the impact pathways rather than the underpinning research, e.g., some of these ECRs might have been involved in "loads of stakeholder engagement" (f/ss/ex-a) or occupying a "specific role that I guess I project managed [team of over ten people, including academics and experts/practitioners]" (f/ss/ex-a).

Other, ethically ambiguous discursive practices included instances of ECRs' being named in underlying research publications as co-authors and even lead authors and grant owners, with no, or only brief associative mention of them made in the narrative of research-with-impact. This was not problematic where the style of the narrative erased individual authorship, but was potentially emblematic of research attribution issues in academia, where the senior researcher was repeatedly positioned in the case study as research author/leader.

Interviews proved illuminating here. In some cases, being named as a coauthor but without being included in the narrative was the effect of working within a large, impact-oriented research unit or centre:

I wasn't terribly involved in the actual writing of it [the case study]. I commented on stuff and I had bits and pieces, but it was mostly our director, [name redacted], the main driver of it. [My] kind of involvement was more via the research...like developing the outputs and all that stuff. (m/ss/p-a)

Some interviewees welcomed the (co)authorship, but without any prior involvement or even awareness of the case study being developed: "I mean, I did do quite a lot of work, so it was nice to have that kind of credited. But yeah....I was only told about it afterwards" (f/ss/p-a).

In another case, an ECR who had also, by the time the case study was written, left an institution where he had spent many years co-delivering highly impactful research without reward in terms of career progression, was not even aware that his work was subsequently included in it, reflecting a not uncommon experience amongst interviewees related to the precarious nature of early career academia. One interviewee discussed having worked through a long period of uncertainty and potential redundancy while the case study was being completed; another described how they had left before REF results were announced:

I was gone...[to where] there was an opening of [a] permanent position. So I was 39 years old, and maybe age had nothing to do with it, but I felt the increasing pressure of...applying for more grant money, project money....And I felt maybe it's not sustainable. I mean, the work that we did couldn't fully fund my position. (m/hum/p-a)

Such experiences raise questions about the agency in authorship and the meaningful engagement of ECRs in the process of constructing and writing case studies. Importantly, they raise questions of institutional provision of sustainability of work and careers that produce high-value impact, which we discuss below, in illustrating both the demanding nature of this work, and the cost-opportunity in terms of ECRs' careers.

#### 4.2. *The Nature of High-Value Research-With-Impact (Co)Delivered by ECRs*

The discursive analysis of the documentary subsample revealed a clear trend regarding the nature of impact and impactful research delivery. Firstly, three-quarters of case studies described societal and cultural impacts, with only a handful of instances of “harder” types of impact: political, legal, economic, etc. This was mostly repeated in our interview sample, with the majority of interviewees participating in the delivery of cultural and societal, and some health and policy impacts. Research-with-impact was further predominantly collaborative, including multiple institutions and sometimes non-academic partners. This is replicated in the larger sample (see Table 1), in which only a small minority of case studies were underpinned by research by an individual. Impactful research was also invariably multi-method, large-scale, and/or longitudinal, often involving systematic reviews and large population surveys, but also inclusive of qualitative, practice- and art-based methodology, sometimes with an explicit orientation to empowerment, emancipation, and social justice.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees’ accounts—including the sole authors among them, who nevertheless achieved impact through close collaboration with non-academic partners—underlined the value, or rather necessity, of team working, collaboration, and close stakeholder engagement in achieving high-value impact:

[T]hese engagement events basically help you work out the “so what” of your research, like, why does any of this matter?...So you’ve got a finding, but in some ways you don’t even know whether that’s news to anybody who’s working in that area. (f/hum/p-a)

But I think it [research centre] was atypical in that it was much more like...working for a research organisation rather than academia, much more set up to engage stakeholders and to serve the needs of stakeholders. (f/ss/x-a)

We got funding for an impact acceleration project with colleagues...[it] doesn’t allow you to do new research, it was more of a refinement, but obviously there was lot of to and fro with the colleagues, and it was through that work and the ongoing engagement that the evidence was produced, some of which was used [in national policy]. (m/ss/p-a)

Many noted the need for slow research and allowing a process to unfold, especially in a collaborative or participatory approach:

Forcing impact, I think is the worst thing you can do. It has to be a process of discovery for both you and whoever you’re working with, and sometimes it won’t lead to anything big, or it will be small. (m/ss/p-a)

The slow process of discovery involved also a genuine interest in non-academic experts and expertise, and close engagement with research participants. Speaking of how her collaboration with non-academic partners began, leading to a single-authored case study, one interviewee reflected:

In terms of the impact case study, where the collaboration began, it wasn’t on that topic, but it was a sense in which I was very much interested in them as individuals and professionals. So, not coming in

as, like, I want to take something from you, but just more, I'm really interested in what you do and why that works. (f/ss/p-a)

Conversely, there were others whose existing collaborations and practice-led research had to be supplemented by more traditional academic work, and a conventional PhD late in career: "So that [archival] work...sits alongside my practice-led research and they inform each other in many ways. But those two are quite distinct strands" (f/hum/p-a).

It appears then, and this is further elucidated in the next, possibly most significant section of our findings, that such deep engagement, collaboration, and possibly working outside of the traditional academic channels of research conduct and reward, comes at a distinct cost in terms of workload:

If you want to have impactful research...that is outward facing, it's clearly a case that you have to accept higher workloads than before, than other colleagues....You're engaging with stakeholders...on a regular basis, which comes with its own challenges and has vastly different timeframes compared to your standard academic life. (m/ss/p-a)

Definitely, it took a lot of work, and again I think from talking to other people that are impact driven...it's an enormous amount of work and often isn't in workload models or isn't credited in that way....So time is so critical, which is why I think a lot of early career researchers don't struggle to do impact for work, but they struggle to sustain the ability to keep that going. (f/ss/p-a)

#### **4.3. Access to, and Reward for, High-Value Impact for ECRs in HASS**

Interviewees often framed their route into impactful research as accidental. For some, usually those for whom academia was a second career, becoming involved in research was seen as a vehicle for change. For others, whether intrinsically motivated by impactful research, or originally seeking a pathway into academic work, access to impact often involved senior academics recognising the potential impact of their research and suggesting how it might link to other projects or be of use to non-academic communities. It also involved finding the funding and institutional roles to support ECRs to stay involved in projects, engagement, and writing:

The PI opened up that opportunity for me to stay involved....[N]one of it was a free-for-all, right, I put in the work, but the fact that I was given the opportunity to do so was entirely in her hands. So that was, that was very, very generous. (f/hum/p-a)

There was variance in the degree of agency with which our interviewees pursued this work once the facilitating conditions of working with a well-connected PI materialised. Some highlighted the inclusive and empowering nature of these professional relationships, and the opportunity to exercise agency through professional expertise and personal values:

I was just involved in a lot of work....And I had lots of experience from the sector because of the jobs I had done previously, I had a good network, I had a really good understanding of practice, my input and expertise was valuable to the team and to the projects as well. (f/ss/x-a)

Others similarly discussed a purposeful approach to engagement and impact as it met their career objectives, or was a way to marry interest in fundamental research with the sense of social purpose:

I became aware of opportunities to do research in a very policy and practice relevant way in using my economics background, which I hadn't been using for a while until then, and it was kind of like everything coming together quite well in terms of my interest, and a feeling that that's an appropriate way to continue my career. (f/ss/p-a)

I remember thinking through those five years, this is the ideal job in many ways. This is like the dream job because I get to do what I like. I get to do the research, but I also get to make it useful and see the value...and with the people, that kind of community of sharing and building knowledge, we really felt it. (m/hum/p-a)

For a smaller number of our interviewees, impact was expressed as the main driver of their work and career, even if academia's priorities occasionally interfered with pursuing that dedication:

To just be able to look back on your career and say, there's children alive...and those families that have never been through what they didn't need to go through. And I remember just thinking, I really want to be involved in something that has that because I must admit at the time we applied for this work, I was getting a little disillusioned with academia and its impact, and we did always have to write an impact report and sometimes I'd feel you were scratching around for what to put, even if you thought your research was useful. (f/ss/x-a)

While confirmatory of ECRs' agency in pursuit of meaningful and socially impactful research, recognition and reward for this resource-intensive, and occasionally very high-stakes work were uneven across our sample. Interviewees described how the work of building and maintaining relationships, attending events, and creating space for impact was mostly only understood by those engaged in the work, and did not have universal value, for the institution or the sector:

It's valued in the sense that, you know, colleagues are very supportive about when you're doing it, particularly those who've done projects themselves because they know how much work it is....And it's a lot of work. (f/ss/p-a)

Going back to the kind of my initial contact with all this, I guess I was lucky that I landed in the Centre because it became more of a cultural thing here....But it's probably not as widespread everywhere....Because...if you're an early career researcher, you're probably only thinking about outputs, your papers and your grants....Impact is definitely not top of the list. (m/ss/p-a)

Some interviewees' orientation to applied work, coupled with suboptimal employment conditions, led their decision to pursue their research outside of academia:

I have absolutely no regrets about leaving academia, and I have zero doubt that I am having 100% more impact than I would have had in academia as well. (f/ss/x-a)

Asked if being a (co)author of a highly-rated case study helped their reputation or career, there were no dominant themes in the responses, with some feeling the recognition or authorship had helped them in promotion cases or to find work both inside and outside of academia:

Ultimately, you know, it's nice to have that recognition and it's something that I've pointed to, you know, at work in my current job saying, you know, I'm included as an author. And this is the sort of thing that can be useful. (f/ss/p-a)

However, while most interviewees progressed in their careers since (excluding two who left academia, and one who is still an ECR), there was an inconsistent picture regarding the valuing of impact, even that resulting in top-ranked case studies, across institutions. Although some interviewees have used their experience to their benefit in promotion applications, others have noted that even with some institutional attention given to their impactful research, traditional research outputs such as articles and monographs, on which, unlike impact, all research-active academics in the UK are assessed, were much more significant. For the one interviewee remaining in the same role that they occupied when the case study was produced, even retention was characterised as positive in the uncertain financial climate for universities: "You know that, as a research team, if we keep delivering impact studies, we keep our jobs, that's essentially it" (m/hum/ECR).

For others, however, mere survival in the institution left them feeling exploited and undervalued, with one interviewee describing being denied promotion and remaining on precarious contracts despite co-authoring high-value impact:

I said now that the university gets additional monies as a result of my four-star case study, can you tell me what that counts as for my worth?...As the researcher doing the work and generating that impact, I saw nothing. (m/ss/p-a)

Beyond direct effect on career progression, some interviewees highlighted more intangible benefits:

I think it's all soft power if that makes sense. I don't think it's anything official or saying that oh, because you did this, you get extra money or anything like that, but we at least feel we got a good standing within the faculty and the faculty likes us and they support us whenever we need something. (m/ss/p-a)

Finally, across the board, a theme of compromise was very prominent, whether in terms of increased workloads or reduced chances to progress in one's career:

It's also a case of, you know, personally accepting that there will be an increased workload associated with this, but at the same time, I also think that this helps your career progression as well. (m/ss/p-a)

I think it's a choice you have to make in terms of your career trajectory, do you become the impact person or do you become the publication person. You know, I'm sure there's probably some people out there that can do both, but you know, I have a three-year-old and a six-year-old. I don't want to be that person. (m/hum/ECR)

## 5. Discussion

We opened our exploration with a question regarding the degree to which the impact agenda in HE creates spaces for inclusion and equity in production and reward of research, as opposed to incentivising another form of knowledge commodification that delivers “positional goods” (Hirsch, 1977, as cited in Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019) and professional distinctions to the already powerful in academia—as the Matthew Effect spills into this aspect of academic work as well. Our exploratory work, while based on a limited sample—albeit of a highly specific and under-examined population—suggests cautious optimism. Our documentary and interview data indicate an equal participation of women as leaders of high-value impact, strong advocacy for highly collaborative—within and beyond academia—work that delivers impact, and no apparent penalty for conducting engaged, qualitative research, and delivering “softer” impacts. Almost all interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of slow, long-term engagement and partnership-building with non-academic stakeholders, and some of them with varied experience and non-traditional academic paths, also highlighted the value of professional expertise from other sectors. Neither the documentary nor the interview data suggested the prevalence of individualist, instrumental, or even exploitative approaches to research impact, whereby findings from fundamental research are transported into non-academic contexts in linear and non-consultative ways.

Regarding the potential for the recognition of diverse research contributions and careers created through involvement in impactful work, there is some indication that the impact agenda can enable ECRs to carve a (specialised) space for themselves in university, with all the workload challenges it entails, and to secure an alignment between personal ethics and professional interest. This possibility and the ways in which it materialises deserve further exploration, in order to investigate the potential for ECRs’ agency and choice in the face of ever-increasing career precarity. Despite the expressions of gratitude for the generosity of more established research (and impact) leaders in enabling socially impactful and professionally rewarding work, or even the effect of “luck” in their journeys, the majority of our interviewees managed to pursue meaningful research careers. Occasionally, this progress was enabled by institutional or sector mobility, but it did involve intentionality and the recognition of the value of one’s own work.

That said, the interviewees’ experiences suggest that the potential for the delivery of high-value impact to replace traditional outputs and measures of academic excellence is uncertain, as many negotiated resource-intensive impact work while performing against standard metrics for academic progression. This raises a question of how fair it is to encourage a wide variety of contributions to the impact agenda in SSH academia if it is expected to be an additional—extremely costly in terms of resources and personal involvement—task with, at best, uneven institutional recognition. Our interviewees invariably recognised impact as an essential part of the research cycle, rather than something that happens after a research project is completed, however there was also a clear expectation by many of their institutions—for all but one of our interviewees who had successfully negotiated including an impact case study instead of a monograph in support of her promotion—for this resource-intensive work to happen on top of existing and traditional requirements of an academic role, and often in conditions of role precariousness. Such expectations resulted, for many, in constant negotiation sustained by the ability and willingness to compromise by accepting additional workloads, suspending or at least adjusting hopes of promotion, or leaving the post, or academia, altogether in a bid to find a more rewarding and empowering way of pursuing social change through one’s research.

I think there's so much potential for other career paths. I think the days of being a forever academic are probably over for everybody...and I think impact offers the potential to see what's beyond academia and what your skill set might be....So I think it's a lovely way of opening people up to worlds beyond. (f/ss/p-a)

While this quote signals empowerment for individual academics as they pursue their research and career goals, it also opens a line of inquiry that merits further attention, not least in terms of the effects of loss of research talent and diversity. Future studies should tie into calls for a better understanding of ECRs' leaving academia more generally (Skakni et al., 2025) and investigate how the "impactful research" funding and reward practices might be driving the change agents out of HE, unless they have sufficient power, stability, and resources to capitalise on their work and dedication.

## 6. Conclusion

This article drew on documentary analysis of the highest-rated impact case studies in SSH disciplines in the UK research evaluation, and semi-structured interviews with a number of their ECR (co)authors, to explore some effects of the impact agenda on inclusion practices in UK HE. It queried the extent to which the impact agenda was facilitating valuation of different kinds of research contribution, and esteem arising from exercising new modalities of scholarly distinction (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019), namely "social impactfulness." While scholarship suggests that the latter still tends to align with traditionally individualistic forms of academic performativity (Chubb & Derrick, 2020) thus perpetuating existing inequality regimes in the sector (Bayley et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2020; Watermeyer, 2015, 2016), our analysis has indicated an apparent closing of the gender gap in the leadership of high-value impact, at least in SSH, and has pointed to some welcome inclusive practices in crediting wide contribution to, and collaboration in its delivery.

Our exploratory work further indicates that some ECRs' participation in impactful research, whether originally sought or facilitated by senior researchers, enabled them to pursue socially relevant and personally meaningful research, providing a way into, and/or securing their place in, academia. While such accounts create a possibility for this highly precarious group to exercise some agency in choosing their research journeys, there is, nevertheless, a risk, as suggested by our data, for these experiences to subsume the value of diverse research skills, motivations, and pathways, to the more established forms of "scholarly distinction" embodied in publishing productivity and funding capture. Further work is needed to inquire into the practices of impactful-research resourcing and reward, to better scrutinise the potential for the impact agenda to equalise the academic field, and deliver opportunities for meaningful, sustainable, agentic pursuit of social impact via academic research for ECRs.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the participants for their time, trust, and generosity, and the editors and anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive feedback.

## Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Exeter and Cogitatio Press.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data Availability

The data are not publicly available, as they belong to a small, potentially identifiable population.

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# “I Refuse to Answer This Question!”: Teachers’ Diversity Beliefs and Dutch Higher Education Transformation

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 25 February 2026 **Published:** 14 April 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

In an era of increasing diversity in higher education, understanding teachers’ positions and diversity beliefs is crucial. Teachers are often seen as primary actors and change agents in diversity policies within higher education institutions. However, there is a lack of an overview regarding these beliefs in European contexts. Transitions for diversity and inclusion in higher education are often slow due to the invisible normalization of institutional norms, which often stem from teachers’ diversity beliefs. Therefore, this article investigates the diversity beliefs of higher education teachers at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences through ethnographic research. Using interviews, informal conversations, and participatory observation, I analyze these beliefs within a framework of conservative, liberal, and critical diversity perspectives. I present an overview of these perspectives, showing the prominence of a liberal view. Notwithstanding its prominence, interactions during diversity and inclusion events reveal that teachers challenge this dominant perspective, highlighting aspects that often remain unseen. These findings show that diversity perspectives of teachers are not static, but instead represent dynamic, contextual, and relational positions for connection, navigation, and negotiation. This provides insights into the potential for transformation by teachers in contexts resistant to diversity and inclusion. The article contributes to current debates on teachers’ diversity beliefs and their relation to transformation.

## Keywords

diversity and inclusion; higher education; resistance and transformation; teachers’ diversity beliefs

## 1. Introduction

In an age marked by increasing diversity in higher education (Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023), understanding how teachers position, negotiate, and navigate their beliefs around diversity in higher education is crucial. In the Netherlands, diversity in ethnicity, prior education, socioeconomic background, and gender is rising in higher education (Central Bureau for Statistics, 2024). At the same time, educational inequality and underachievement of minority students are growing (Onderwijsraad, 2017), revealing processes of marginalization and exclusion (Wekker et al., 2016).

As a response, higher education institutions developed strategies and policies to counter structural inequality, enhance diversity and inclusion, and transform the education environment (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020; Danovitz, 2015; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023; Icaza & Vazquez, 2018). This was also the case for Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS), one of the Netherlands' largest higher education institutions for professional higher education (*hogere beroepsopleiding*, or *hbo*, see Luijckx & De Heus, 2008). RUAS is located in Rotterdam, a city commonly characterized as superdiverse (cf. Vertovec, 2007), and a pioneer for national and local diversity policies (Dekker & van Breugel, 2019, p. 107).

In the diversity policy of RUAS, teachers were presented as the main change agents (RUAS, 2016). Teachers, i.e., academic staff involved in teaching, are frequently seen as the primary actors for translating policy into practice (Brown et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). On account of the decisive position of teachers in educational settings (Hattie & Yates, 2014) and their expected ownership of policy implementations (Snoek et al., 2019), an analysis of the ideas, opinions, and practices of educators is therefore paramount to understand educational transformations, as envisioned in diversity and inclusion policies (Griffioen et al., 2017). In policies, diversity is often conceptualized in an all-encompassing sense. Yet, in the Netherlands, in practice, racial and ethnic diversity are highlighted as an implicit contrast to the dominant norm (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2016). It is therefore interesting to know how teachers in higher education understand diversity.

Previous work on teachers' beliefs *in general* has elaborately analyzed teachers in the European context (cf. Liu et al., 2021). However, research on teachers' *diversity* beliefs has been carried out mainly in Anglo-Saxon contexts (Castagno, 2019; hooks, 1994; Sian, 2019). Additionally, research in the Netherlands on educational diversity, inclusion, and inequality has mainly focused on students in minority positions (see Crul et al., 2013; Paille, 2013; Rezai, 2017) or on diversity officers and diversity policy discourses (Bonjour et al., 2020; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023). Therefore, to contribute to existing debates (Agirdag et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2024), in this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with teachers from RUAS to investigate: How can we understand diversity beliefs of Dutch higher education teachers in relation to transformation for diversity and inclusion?

Research into teachers' diversity beliefs is also relevant, as transformations in higher education for diversity and inclusion are often slow, due to persisting attachments of academic staff and management to traditional and taken-for-granted norms and values (Dee et al., 2023; Lane, 2007), such as hierarchical structures and meritocratic thinking that perpetuate systemic and structural inequalities. It is within these contexts that teachers maintain their diversity beliefs. Hence, to understand resistance to change, as well as potential for transformation, I argue that it is imperative to analyze teachers' diversity beliefs in these contexts. Thus, in addition to providing an overview of teachers' diversity beliefs in Dutch higher education, I also investigate teachers' interactions, exchanges, and negotiations on these beliefs.

For this investigation, I propose using the work of feminist and queer thinker Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2012). Her work fits in anthropological understandings of culture as an underlying, omnipresent (macro) structure, expressed in relational, dynamic, and contextual (micro) interactions (Kottak, 2011). Ahmed (2012) shows how enduring resistance to, and potential transformation of, diversity and inclusion in higher education institutions are connected to processes of institutionalization. According to Ahmed, institutionalization happens when routinized habits are perceived as natural and “recede from view” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 21). She observes how this process is supported by expressions such as “how we do things around here,” where the “how” does not need any further explanation (Ahmed, 2012, p. 25). In the same vein, resistance can be understood as a process that highlights taken-for-granted norms and brings them to the fore. Ahmed sees how power operates through uncontested categories, and it is these fixed categories that she advises “we *should* trouble” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 182). As I will show, through beliefs and practices around diversity and inclusion, teachers can both trouble and preserve these categories, and thus both reproduce institutional habits and call them into question.

### 1.1. Methods

Ethnographic research, with its prolonged contact, attention to personal narratives, and “thick” descriptions, can provide unique insights into essential, and often implicit, seemingly self-evident actions and considerations of teachers, for example, about diversity work and “how we do things around here” (Ahmed, 2012; see also O’Reilly, 2012). From October 2020 to July 2022, I investigated the experiences of teachers involved in diversity and inclusion initiatives at RUAS. Participation in over 60 RUAS events, more than 50 teacher meetings, 63 interviews with teachers and staff, and countless informal conversations on diversity and inclusion highlighted recurring themes and organizational dynamics. To better understand their ideas and thoughts on diversity and inclusion, I followed around 10 teachers more closely, e.g., for their original initiatives or unique positions. This article is based on insights shared by these key informants and participatory observations at RUAS events.

Following ethical standards for anthropologists, I repeatedly clarified my role as a researcher to ensure informed consent, beforehand where possible, at the start, and during meetings (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). I made notes of meetings and informal conversations, which I digitized as soon as possible, and provided pseudonyms for confidentiality (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). I audio-recorded and transcribed interviews with the help of a student assistant, and I analyzed the transcriptions and field notes with a qualitative, interpretative approach (cf. DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002), based on the teachers’ diversity beliefs framework (see next paragraph and Table 1).

My position as a 40-year-old white woman and a teacher-researcher amongst teachers at RUAS naturally impacted my research. My familiarity with Dutch higher education enhanced access and relations of trust (*rapport*). Yet, the proximity potentially risked making assumptions or taking aspects for granted (cf. Alvesson, 2003). Moreover, especially whiteness, an often invisible yet predominant influence linked to class, religion, sexuality, and gender, affected my perceptions of the field and that of others about me (cf. Castagno, 2019). To limit these risks, I asked for feedback from research participants, including careful conversations on my interpretations and positionality. Together with personal reflection and insights from literature, this deepened *rapport* and increased my understanding (cf. Alvesson, 2003).

**Table 1.** Analysis themes.

Conservative diversity perspective	Equality (“we are all equal”); colorblindness; meritocratic values (“work hard”); diversity avoidance.
Liberal diversity perspective	Diversity recognition; diversity celebration; disadvantages/achievement gaps acknowledged; differentiation or compensation need.
Critical diversity perspective	Structural, systemic, institutional factors (racism, discrimination); social/educational inequity; power differences; marginalization.

To understand teachers’ diversity beliefs and their relation to the transformation of higher education by teachers, in this article, I analyze teachers’ diversity beliefs as expressed in the dynamic and relational context of RUAS. I have divided the remainder of this article into three parts. First, I outline the conceptual framework, commonly used in Anglo-Saxon contexts, to define the diversity beliefs of teachers. Then, to provide an overview of teachers’ diversity beliefs at RUAS, I apply this framework to higher education teachers’ experiences and expressions of diversity and inclusion at RUAS. Finally, I present a typical exchange between teachers on diversity and inclusion to analyze how teachers position, negotiate, and navigate different diversity beliefs within a context of resistance and potential transformation. The interactions of teachers show what otherwise remains invisible, providing insights into potential higher education transformation by teachers as change agents.

## 2. A Framework of Teachers’ Diversity Beliefs

With regard to teachers’ beliefs on diversity, educational scholars distinguish three perspectives: a conservative, a liberal, and a critical perspective (Gorski, 2006; King & Ladson-Billings, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995). I will explain these perspectives in more detail before illustrating how they are reflected in teachers’ experiences and expressions.

First, a conservative perspective on diversity assumes that students should be treated equally with “equal attention, resources, and choices” (Hosseini et al., 2021). Teachers adopting this perspective often embrace a colorblind approach in their aim to avoid discrimination. From a meritocratic viewpoint, students’ positions are understood on a level playing field, and in this perspective, marginalized groups are expected to assimilate into the dominant culture (Gorski, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Yet, students often start higher education with different (unequal) positions, due to, among other factors, their socioeconomic status or background. In addition, abundant research has demonstrated unequal treatment of students by teachers based on their gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other factors that influence teachers’ biases to assumed “strong” or “weak” students (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Moreover, studies have shown that by not acknowledging difference, a conservative perspective leaves no room for actual and experienced discrimination (Gorski, 2006; Hosseini et al., 2021).

Second, a liberal perspective, in contrast, does address differences and aims for equity instead of equality. This perspective is based on a human relations approach that recognizes, accepts, and celebrates cultural diversity and plurality (Gorski, 2006). In this perspective, teachers often feel responsible for compensating students for possible disadvantages, i.e., through language or study skills training adjusted to specific knowledge gaps. Additionally, from a liberal point of view, diversity is generally cherished by valuing

students' talents and connecting them to social "funds of knowledges," e.g., multilingualism, intercultural skills, and knowledge from other parts of the world (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

However, a liberal framework holds the risk of a deficit approach (cf. Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Here, disadvantage is understood primarily as an individual trait and translated into a form of lack. In this view, students from marginalized groups are held responsible for the inequality they experience, without any recognition of the social processes that cause marginalization. As a result, equity is reduced to offering opportunities to "keep up" with the dominant group, without questioning structural barriers to equality or the fabric of the educational system itself (Gorski, 2006; Hosseini et al., 2021; King & Ladson-Billings, 1991).

Finally, a critical perspective challenges liberal and conservative perspectives and explicitly addresses the influence of unequal divisions of power, control, and access on marginalization and inequality in society and education (Hosseini et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Rather than expecting marginalized students to adapt and "catch up," a critical perspective questions the principle values and norms of societal and educational structures and systems. From a critical point of view, diversity is understood not as individual difference but as structural inequality. From a critical perspective, challenging these taken-for-granted norms and values is indispensable to breaking the chain of inequality and rectifying injustices.

In the following section, I use this conceptual framework to analyze higher education teachers' perspectives and beliefs regarding diversity. I start with the conservative perspective, which does not account for diversity. This is followed by the critical perspective, which relates diversity to structural power differences. The conservative and critical perspectives on diversity I observed only among a small number of teachers. I will end the next section with a two-fold description of the liberal perspective, recognized in the majority of my research participants, where diversity was mainly understood as an individual characteristic. There, I will first show how expressions of teachers can be connected to the liberal perspective, and then I will describe how a liberal perspective can lead to a deficit approach to diversity.

### 3. Teachers' Diversity Perspectives in RUAS

#### 3.1. Conservative Perspectives on Diversity

Among the teachers I followed during my study, I recognized a small number who viewed diversity from a conservative perspective. One of them is Trudy, a 60-year-old white woman, who participated in various diversity-related initiatives in her educational program. Regarding diversity and inclusion, she indicates feeling uncertain about its meaning and presence in her education:

Well, you know....I actually don't experience diversity at all. Yes, I can see it exists, but I don't see it as a problem. I help everyone to the best of my ability. Everyone is equal to me, and it doesn't matter where you come from or what you do. I try to see every person as an individual. And everyone brings their own baggage [*pakketje*]. But if students themselves don't mention their struggles, or whatever, then I'm not going to poke around. (interview, March 21, 2021)

In Trudy's view, we can identify a conservative perspective of diversity. Regarding diversity, Trudy emphasizes the wish not to discriminate. She indicates she "does not experience diversity," she underlines that "everyone

is equal,” and tries “to see every person as an individual.” She steers clear of categorizing her students’ needs, “struggles, or whatever,” and stresses they need to mention these themselves; otherwise, she will treat them all the same.

However, the colorblindness in Trudy’s words is contradictory because she says she does not experience diversity, but also that she does “see” it. She therefore associates diversity with something you can see, skin color, hairstyle, clothing, i.e., something that stands out as “different.” She also says that everyone is equal, but also that it does not matter “where you come from.” Hypothetically, she could refer to urban and rural differences, but it is more likely that Trudy refers to migration background and her students’ possible connection to countries outside the Netherlands. Someone’s appearance can therefore show that they are “not from here,” that they are “different”—a questionable claim in a superdiverse city like Rotterdam. Trudy’s comments reveal a characteristic contradiction in egalitarian and conservative thinking: between not mentioning diversity for fear of discrimination (everyone is equal) and the need to categorically organize the world (from here, not from here).

Reflections from teacher Dilay, a woman of color of around 30, also contain notes of a conservative perspective on diversity, albeit from a different angle. I ask her about her ideas on diversity, when Dilay mentions that she does not have much to say on the topic:

I live in Rotterdam, where everyone is different. I’m the hipster teacher. Students call me the most fashionable teacher at our institute. I have never experienced discrimination or racism. And no, me being different, it just has never bothered me. By the way, I wanted to ask you something: I have to choose a topic for the master’s program I’m also doing. Do you think online education could be a good topic? (interview, February 14, 2022)

Dilay is a practicing Muslim, and given the examples and studies of racist treatment of Muslim women and women of color in the Netherlands (Essed, 2018; Essed & Hoving, 2014), it seems unlikely that Dilay has not experienced discrimination. Essed (2018) observes how black women in her study transformed racism into an individual experience, which they could keep at bay through control of their interpretations. Similarly, Dilay mentions she is “not bothered by it” and simply smoothly changes the subject at the end of the conversation, decreasing the likelihood of further discussing the topic with me, a white researcher without similar personal experience of racism or discrimination.

Despite differences, teachers such as Trudy and Dilay express views that relate to a conservative perspective, in which diversity is explicitly avoided. However, among my research participants, I noticed that the conservative perspective was less common.

### **3.2. Critical Perspectives on Diversity**

Among teachers at RUAS, I also rarely recognized a critical perspective on diversity. Neyla, a woman of color in her late 30s, was one of the teachers whose views did reflect this perspective. In an informal conversation, Neyla described how many colleagues developed their own initiatives for inclusion. Yet, for Neyla, diversity and inclusion were not about participation and initiatives, but about structural changes in the institute:

I hear colleagues talk about inclusion, but I wonder: inclusion in what? Who should be involved in what? And who are the gatekeepers? I don't mean the people talking, but those making decisions. Management and senior management consist mainly of men, and no people of color. How do they...based on what do they determine the outlines of an inclusive organization? (personal communication, June 17, 2021)

In her descriptions, Neyla starts by questioning underlying power relations and the normative framework of RUAS's inclusivity efforts. Neyla wonders whether inclusion is possible if it essentially means assimilating people into the school's otherwise unchanged system. Neyla's request to look at the "gatekeepers" draws attention to the distribution of power and more structural aspects of inequality. In her response, she makes clear that for her, inclusion does not necessarily relate to initiators of inclusion (teachers), but rather to decisive power (of managers). With her reference to the composition of management, she wonders what the point of inclusion is if it revolves around integration into a system where whiteness and masculinity are still the norm.

By disputing the current educational system's principles, i.e., how prerequisites for an inclusive organization are established and its link to leadership composition, Neyla analyzes inclusion not at the operational level of initiatives, but at the systemic and structural level of the organization, relating the organization's structure to societal power structures. Neyla questions the reproduction of inequalities, and her words reveal what normally remains invisible and abstract. Through her mention of the overrepresentation of masculinity and whiteness among managers, she sheds light on relationships that are taken for granted, such as those at the management level and their influence on definitions of diversity and inclusion within the educational institute.

While Neyla clearly articulated views that fall within a critical perspective, this view was rare among teachers at RUAS. As I will show below, a liberal perspective on diversity was most prominent among teachers in this study.

### 3.3. Liberal Perspectives on Diversity

From a liberal perspective, teachers acknowledge interpersonal differences, including unequal starting points, and recognize, accept, and highlight diversity. I observed this, for example, in Els, a white woman in her 50s. In her work as a teacher, Els bases her approach on trust and difference, emphasizing similarity in differences among students and herself:

We are all different. Sometimes, first-year students reluctantly come to me and "confess" they're dealing with something—like medication for ADHD, depression, or similar issues. I say, "Welcome to the club!" We're all a little odd, there's something with all of us [*we hebben allemaal wel wat*]. (personal communication, December 17, 2020)

Els brings this view into practice in her teaching. On a regular afternoon, Els moves toward her class. She chats amiably with her students about the upcoming Easter weekend, and is about to let them in the classroom, when she jumps up and heads off, only to return a minute later, wearing a headband with large pink ears of an Easter bunny in her hair. "I almost forgot my ears!" she quickly whispers to me, and with a wide gesture and a shake of her pink bunny-eared headband, she turns to her students, proclaiming: "Good morning, everyone! Are you looking forward to the days off?" (personal communication, March 29, 2021).

Els' words match the liberal perspective: She takes into account unequal starting positions and experiences. Everyone "has something," and as a teacher, Els makes room for that. Els tries to actively build in space to be crazy and different, for example, by wearing pink Easter bunny ears as if it were normal. Els takes a personal approach seriously, emphasizing her own individuality and that of her students. Her warm welcome "to the club" creates space for students to be themselves, and the silliness makes space to be "different," just like her.

Likewise, teacher Oscar, a man of color of around 50, wants to celebrate diversity as a multitude:

We really do get students from all backgrounds, you know, we have LGBTQIA+ people...students with different sexual orientations, from different backgrounds, a rainbow of tones, economic backgrounds, family types, from families that are really conservative to very progressive, divorced parents, parents who are together. I myself also have a different [national] background...I have accepted that [this background] is what makes me a unique person. This is what I try to convey to my students as well: What are your strengths? What are your skills? Your qualities that make you unique? I use myself as an example...then [students] also start thinking: "Oh yes, okay. What do I have? What can I do? What makes me unique and sets me apart from the rest?" (interview, March 19, 2021)

Oscar recognizes diversity in myriad ways. He values and makes space for these different types of diversity, and celebrates difference as a characteristic with which people can stand out as unique and special.

The words of Mohan, a male teacher of color in his 50s, also resonate with a liberal perspective on diversity, although his words also indicate a critical perspective. He emphasizes the acknowledgement of differences and inequalities between students. Yet, like Els and Oscar, he also levels out personal distinctions with an individualized idea of diversity:

Don't get me wrong: Treating people equally is pure discrimination. People are not the same. And if we do nothing about inequalities, we privilege mainly white, young men in our society. But you cannot achieve rapprochement without recognizing another human being in the other person. Inside, we are all the same: We all want recognition, appreciation, love. When discrimination occurs, you have to talk about it, from person to person. (interview, June 13, 2022)

In this depiction, Mohan discusses the discriminatory effects of equal treatment. His words express differences between people, and his mention of "white male privileges" invokes structural inequality where different treatment leads to discrimination and marginalization, matching critical perspectives on diversity. Inequalities and discrimination, in his view, must be contested. However, Mohan mainly emphasizes the similarities between people, stressing diversity ("not the same") as similarity ("all the same"), seeing personal, individual connections "from person to person" as the solution. This connects him to the liberal perspective.

These illustrations accentuate how teachers view diversity mainly at the individual level. Taking Els' account as an example, she mentions that "each of us" has "something." She reduces diversity to "having something," being an "outsider," a deviation from the norm. Although she seems to want to normalize diversity—"we are all different"—Els implicitly refers to what is often labeled as deficits: the use of medication, disabilities, ADHD, depression, or other "issues." Additionally, her promotion of Easter also reiterates the normalization of white, Christian-based traditions, pointing to conservative elements in a liberal perspective. In her

discussion of diversity, she acknowledges unequal starting positions, but, similarly to Oscar, does not identify them as possibilities for discrimination or racism, not even implicitly. From a liberal standpoint, Mohan, Oscar, and Els acknowledge difference, but claims such as “we all want the same” or “we are all unique” ultimately level out those differences.

From a liberal perspective, an individualized notion makes the diversity of different people interchangeable. It simultaneously highlights and downplays diversity as interpersonal differences and, moreover, prevents an understanding of inequality or exclusion at a structural or institutional level.

### 3.4. Diversity and a Deficit Perspective

Similar comments were made in conversation with teacher Lotte, a white woman in her 40s. In her description of diversity, we can see more clearly how the acknowledgement of diversity can become tied to a deficit perspective on diversity:

I see diversity in a very broad sense. Diversity encompasses everything about [a person’s] identity and everything in between. This includes taking students’ prior knowledge into account. For me, this falls under diversity besides gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and cultural differences....When I started teaching at RUAS, I said things, formal words, terminology; my students didn’t understand. I felt a sort of dilemma: What should I do? [*Wat kan ik nou doen?*] I can impose those words and terms on them and *make* them learn the concepts. Or I can adapt my lessons so that everyone understands. And I, well, noticed the second option was the best....As a teacher, you have to make sure that everyone can keep up. What about people from vocational schools, people from senior general secondary education, from pre-university education? Do they all have an equal chance to succeed in my subject? I realized I had to change. And that my nerdy terminology really was a bridge too far for most students. (interview, February 16, 2021)

In her response, Lotte uses terms such as “prior knowledge” and “unequal starting positions” of students, which relate to a liberal perspective on diversity. Comments such as “I realized I had to change” and “you have to make sure everyone can keep up” demonstrate Lotte’s sense of responsibility for the needs and support of students to compensate for differences. In her class, Lotte sees how students do not understand her “nerdy” terminology and interprets this as a difference in prior knowledge that she should make allowances for. And she questions the effect of prior education (“people from vocational schools...from senior general secondary education, from pre-university education”) on equal opportunities. Where teachers like Els or Oscar seem to celebrate these differences, Lotte concludes that she “has to adapt her lessons,” implying that students will not understand her “nerdy” language. This shows a further individualization of disadvantage, and an understanding of students’ knowledge as lacking (cf. Yosso, 2005), echoing a dominant conviction of deficit thinking in the Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2006; Ponzoni et al., 2017). The adaptation is well-intended, “taking into account” differences among students, but in fact implies low expectations of students who otherwise would not be able to “keep up.” Such interpretations actually reiterate marginalized positions and existing disparities, by which teachers may unintentionally perpetuate and reproduce inequalities.

In this part of the article, I have described how different teachers express diversity perspectives. A conservative perspective on diversity is less prominent in expressions of teachers at RUAS, as is a critical

perspective. A liberal perspective on diversity is consistent with most expressions of teachers at RUAS. Diversity is acknowledged, but understood as an individual characteristic: a starting position, a need, a “something” that everyone has. Inclusion, then, is understood as “making space” for each person. In this liberal view, teachers mention experiences of exclusion, such as discrimination or racism, but understand this from an individualized form of diversity, in which “everyone is different” and where connection and support arise “from person to person.”

However, as I argued in the introduction, teachers’ diversity beliefs should not be understood as static definitions, but as part of dynamic and relational points within higher education contexts. In the next section, I therefore investigate how teachers interact, exchange, and negotiate their diversity beliefs within the dynamic and relational context of resistance and potential transformation.

#### 4. Teachers’ Negotiations on Diversity Beliefs

A good example to show how teachers interact, exchange, and negotiate diversity beliefs at RUAS is the workshop for new employees, as employees are introduced to the diversity and inclusion policy of RUAS. Every term, RUAS organizes a session, hosted by trainers of the Inclusivity Project Group. On April 16, 2021, I joined an online session. In the large gallery view of Microsoft Teams, I see almost all of the 34 attendees appear on my screen: small squares as a fan of colors from people’s dress, furniture, plants, or bookcases in the background. One person is sitting in a dark living room, another in a study full of things. Someone carries a child on their lap.

“Welcome! I am Ricky Byawhu,” the host says, and he lists names of people joining online: “I see Jannie joining us. Welcome, Jannie. And Marita. Welcome as well.” The first hour includes an online coffee visit with the chair of the Executive Board, Ricky explains and adds: “The second hour includes a workshop by Gerry.” In the top left corner of my screen, I see a woman waving, and Ricky continues: “It is on diversity and inclusion. Very important themes for Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences.”

The first hour shows a highly interactive conversation with several attendees discussing the university’s direction with the chair. In the second hour, Gerry, a woman of color of around 50, appears on screen and introduces herself as a teacher and member of the Inclusivity Project Group. “To give you an impression of the importance of the topics, we have created a quiz with a number of questions about diversity and inclusion in our university,” Gerry explains.

She shares her screen and explains how attendees can join. The screen is full of red, blue, green, and yellow squares while upbeat music plays. At an accelerating pace, first slow then faster, participants’ names appear: Hans, Annelien, Gerlaine, Annemarie, Marita, Odette, Casper, and so on. Gerry starts the quiz and shows the first question: “How many employees with an ‘occupational disability’ did the university hire since the implementation of the Participation Act in 2015?” Four options are shown, and when the timer runs out, we see the correct answer: “It is 43 employees, unfortunately,” Gerry says, and briefly explains the goal of the Participation Act. The next question, on the academic success of “*autochtone* [native] women from *havo* [general secondary education],” evokes a chat response: “*Autochtone* really is an outdated concept,” Annelien writes. “You’re absolutely right,” Gerry says, “but there are only limited characters available, so we couldn’t elaborate further.”

The third question concerns the success of “male students with a non-Western background from vocational (*mbo*) and senior general secondary education (*havo*)” in their first year. It appears that only 20 percent obtain all 60 credits and thus pass their first year. Gerry: “We see huge differences in study success between boys and girls in higher education. Apparently, we offer education that is more inclusive for girls than for boys.”

Another participant, named Annemarie, responds: “In my experience as a secondary school teacher, I saw how non-Western students, like those from Iran and Syria, are extremely disciplined.” Gerry replies that, of course, you cannot generalize about non-Western students: “We also have international students, and some of the students who are characterized as non-Western are born and raised here. What the term measures is the so-called Dutch background: whether both parents were born in the Netherlands or not.” She then emphasizes:

My point here is that we are not inclusive. Apparently, we discriminate on points that should not be relevant in education. For example, because we treat boys and girls differently. Or we differentiate between students from vocational education (*mbo*) and senior general secondary education (*havo*).

The chat reflects an active discussion and shows how participants disagree with the quiz content and phrasing: “Ethnicity is not the same as socioeconomic status!” a participant says. Another participant asks whether numbers are also available for Syrian refugee students, and a third asks what the university does against unequal treatment.

Gerry keeps her spirits up and shows the last question: “How much more often do students who do not fit into the male/female category and/or who are not heterosexual experience study delays?” For participant Hans, this crosses a line, and in the chat, he adds: “I refuse to answer this question!” Gerry asks him why. “I don’t want to think in terms of categories,” he explains verbally and adds: “I also think we shouldn’t collect these numbers.” The chat shows praise and support: “Hooray, Hans!” says one person. Another says: “Fair points, Hans!”

This exchange illustrates how teachers interact, exchange, and negotiate their diversity beliefs within the dynamic and relational context of resistance and potential transformation at RUAS. The first thing that becomes clear from the workshop’s exchange is that multiple views on diversity exist at RUAS. In the workshop leaders’ words, a liberal perspective can be recognized, as differences and disparities are acknowledged, but understood from an individual point of view. This becomes clear in contrast with the participants’ reactions, who relate diversity and differences to structural inequalities, as I will explain below. A conservative diversity perspective does not seem to be expressed here. Also, it becomes clear that these views are not aligned. This is shown from the first criticism of Annelien on the outdatedness of the word “*autochtone*” and Gerry’s indication of limited word count in defense, to Hans’ refusal and the support this gains from other participants, as an act of resistance to the dominant view that seems represented by the workshop leader.

Secondly, it shows how the dominant perspective on diversity, as expressed in the questions of the quiz and Gerry’s responses, is critiqued but also upheld and countered, using power-laden expressions similar to “how we do things around here.” The workshop seems intended to point out the existence of structural exclusion “of boys over girls,” and “non-Western students” at RUAS. Despite criticism of words and phrasing, workshop leader Gerry defends the choices made in the workshop in several ways. She justifies them by indicating practical limitations (“word limit”), and she wards off criticism by reiterating “the point” of the workshop. It is

as if she says that, despite possible unfortunate phrasings, participants should conclude that the university “apparently discriminates” and offers education that is “more inclusive for girls than for boys” or more welcoming for students from senior secondary education (*havo*) than from vocational education (*mbo*). In her response, Gerry does not directly discard critical questions, but does not truly engage with them either. The workshop leader does not divert from her path and instead dictates “how we should understand things around here” (cf. Ahmed, 2012). The *how*, i.e., how structural exclusion and apparent discrimination at RUAS come about, is not in question, even when this is related to the point that the workshop intends to make.

Yet, several participants challenge this dominant view in the chat and through verbal interventions. Annelien questions the use of outdated concepts, such as “*autochtone*.” *Autochtone* and *allochtone* are Dutch conceptions to mark a difference between Dutch citizens. And although a full discussion of the debate is beyond the scope of this article, several scholars have pointed out how these terms use a stigmatizing, racialized perspective on presumed nativeness, by which parts of the Dutch population are perpetually excluded from equal rights and treatment as citizens (van Reekum, 2016; Yanow & van der Haar, 2013). Based on her remark, it seems that for Annelien, the use of “outdated” concepts does not reflect an inclusive position. Other participants question the derogatory and homogenizing presentation of “non-Western” students by providing varied examples that add nuance. In doing so, they challenge assumptions about the homogeneity of “non-Western” groups and identify the implicit negative associations that the question implies.

Hans’ refusal to answer the last question, finally, also points to an objection to the workshop’s language use, even when his wish “not to categorize” is more ambiguous. It could indicate objection to distinction per se (i.e., colorblindness); to a stigmatizing causation of students’ identities with educational disadvantages; to *this* question but not the previous, e.g., because of the topic of sexuality; or, as cheers of other participants suggest, to exclusionary language use, that “categorizes” students only as deviation of an assumed middle point and dominant norm (*not* male/female, *not* heterosexual), that reproduces an exclusionary binary, heterosexist perspective.

Besides negotiations of diversity beliefs related to resistance and potential transformation, we also see how taken-for-granted positions come to the fore by “troubling” the assumed natural categories. Through the critical comments of several teachers, the dominant view on diversity and inclusion at RUAS becomes visible, which would have otherwise remained largely unexamined. By putting “uncontestable categories that should not be discussed” up for discussion, the teachers expose how power gets naturalized (cf. Ahmed, 2012), as demonstrated in the workshop leader’s disciplining attempts to get participants to “understand the point.” Rather than leaving structural aspects of inequality in the background, through which a liberal perspective on diversity can be reinforced as the dominant view in higher education, objections and criticisms by participating teachers interrupt this process and make visible what before “receded from view” (Ahmed, 2012, p.21). The exchange described above points to the relevance of understanding teachers’ diversity beliefs in dynamic and relational contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

As most Western societies are becoming increasingly more diverse, as Agirdag et al. (2014) point out, school boards, policymakers, and classroom teachers are searching for appropriate ways to serve these diverse

student bodies. Many higher education institutions respond by developing diversity policies, and, as is common with educational policies, teachers, i.e., academic staff involved in teaching, are commonly approached as the primary policy actors (Brown et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021). Teachers are seen as prominent change agents for higher education transformations.

However, as I have argued in the introduction, change in higher education is often slow. In the case of diversity policy, this is frequently related to the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and other academic staff. Nevertheless, research on teachers' diversity beliefs in European contexts is missing. Therefore, in this article, I have analyzed teachers' diversity beliefs in the superdiverse setting of RUAS, the Netherlands, to overcome this hiatus and gain insights into its potential for higher education transformation. Because of the contextual factors that influence the frequently slow pace of change in higher education, I have also pointed to the need to investigate teachers' diversity beliefs in dynamic and relational educational contexts, for which an ethnographic research approach is fitting. Therefore, besides an overview of existing diversity beliefs of teachers, I have also analyzed the positions, negotiations, and navigations of these beliefs in the educational context of RUAS.

To investigate how we can understand diversity beliefs of Dutch higher education teachers in relation to transformation for diversity and inclusion, I first analyzed expressions and experiences of teachers at RUAS using a threefold framework of teachers' diversity perspectives. In my findings, a conservative perspective on diversity, which avoids diversity from meritocratic belief and out of fear for discrimination, and a critical perspective, which understands diversity, difference, and inequality on a structural level, are the least observed. A liberal perspective on diversity, which acknowledges and celebrates diversity but understands it mainly as individual characteristics, seems most common at RUAS. Additionally, I showed how this perspective can become tied to a deficit approach, and how teachers can unintentionally reiterate the inequalities they intend to counter. This overview can support the understanding of teachers' diversity beliefs in European contexts.

However, my findings also raise questions on the distinction between these perspectives, as teachers employ different diversity perspectives simultaneously. Teachers like Els simultaneously employ elements of a liberal and a conservative perspective on diversity. Other teachers like Mohan use liberal and critical viewpoints on diversity at the same time. Moreover, my analysis of the exchange of diversity beliefs between teachers in a RUAS workshop on diversity and inclusion more clearly demonstrated the concurrent existence of different and at times colliding teachers' diversity beliefs. Together with overlapping and colliding teacher expressions, this then challenges the usefulness of dividing teachers' diversity beliefs into separate categories. Instead of this separation, researchers should conceptualize the categories as inherently relational, contextual, and dynamic.

Additionally, my analysis of the workshop's exchange made clear how RUAS representatives advocated the preservation of dominant perspectives, with reference to "how we should understand things around here," a disciplining claim where the "how" is presented as a self-evident norm that needs no clarification. Yet, the negotiations and navigations of critical participants on the underlying diversity beliefs revealed how previously invisible principles can come to the fore. These interactions on resistance, by making visible what otherwise "recedes from view" (Ahmed, 2012), show how teachers can use diversity beliefs to achieve steps toward higher education transformation.

## Acknowledgments

This article is based on my doctoral ethnographic research in cultural anthropology at Utrecht University. For confidentiality reasons, I cannot name the student assistant, but I would like to express my appreciation for our collaboration. I would like to thank the reviewers for their comments, and Vinzenz Bäumer Escobar and Taskin Quagliani for their feedback on this article.

## Funding

The research was funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), with a Doctoral Grant for Teachers (023.013.020), and the ROSANNA Fund for Women. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Utrecht University and Cogitatio Press.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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## International Academics as Agents of Transformation: Lived and Managed Internationalization in a Finnish University

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2026 **Accepted:** 5 February 2026 **Published:** 18 February 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

### Abstract

This article explores internationalization processes as an ongoing transformation of higher education institutions by examining a case of internationalization efforts at Tampere University (TAU) in Finland. Against the prevailing policy discourse of international “talent” which tends to instrumentalize international academics, we explore how the experiences of international academics provide a window into complicated dynamics of lived and managed internationalization, including how international academics are themselves agents of transformation. This case study combines a survey and interviews with self-identified international staff at TAU, as well as our own critical reflections as a team of international and Finnish academics who conducted the research and used the findings to advocate for changes. Our analysis emphasizes a relational understanding of international academics and highlights intersecting challenges around language, uncertain career prospects, and distance from university decision-making forums. Taken together, the findings illuminate the contradictory positioning of international academics and show the complicated convergences and divergences between managerial attempts to increase the university’s global competitiveness and the diverse needs, positionalities, and agencies of international academics.

### Keywords

change agent; Finland; international academics; university internationalization

## 1. Introduction

Seen as a way to improve the quality of research and higher education, international cooperation and academic mobility of staff and students have been at the forefront of universities' internationalization actions (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2016). However, critical voices highlight that internationalization has become increasingly dominated by commercial and economic rationales (Bamberger et al., 2019), perpetuating geopolitical, economic, and colonial inequalities (Stein, 2021). This has prompted new ways of thinking about internationalization as a process closely aligned with societal engagement (Leask & de Gayardon, 2021), inclusivity (Janebová & Johnstone, 2020), and sustainability (Nikula & Van Gaalen, 2022).

This new pivot towards internationalization encourages new approaches to international academic mobilities and, more specifically, to international academics in higher education institutions. Rationales for hiring international researchers and teachers are diverse: tackling staff shortages, increasing international cooperation in research and education, supporting institutional reforms through international learning, and boosting research productivity by selecting top researchers (Altbach & Yudkevich, 2016). Attracting academic talent from abroad is widely seen as a key to success for universities and national economies (Leisyte & Rose, 2017), yet much remains understudied regarding how policies and practices interact across national, institutional, and individual levels, and how international academics' experiences entwine in these dynamics (Rumbley & de Wit, 2017).

This article explores internationalization processes as an ongoing transformation of higher education institutions by examining internationalization efforts at Tampere University (TAU) in Finland. Attracting international academics to Finnish universities is seen as one important aspect of internationalization; however, the current policy discourse of recruiting the "best talent" (Siekkinen et al., 2024; van der Wende, 2015) instrumentalizes the presence of international academics in Finnish universities in the interest of increasing research and funding competitiveness. Moreover, building internationalization management procedures around mostly quantitative indicators (e.g., number of international staff and students), homogenizes the diversity of positionalities and lived experiences of internationalization.

This case study provides insight into the complex interaction between planned and emergent aspects of internationalization at TAU, a university recently established through an organizational merger. We seek to produce deep, context-dependent knowledge, to reveal the dynamism and mechanics of processes of internationalization, to capture multi-layered narratives, and to build knowledge for practical decision making (Flyvbjerg, 2011). We present an analysis of a survey and interviews with international academics at TAU, focusing on lived and managed internationalization (as transformation). The survey and interviews with self-identified international researchers, teachers, and other staff emerged as a project of local trade union associations, the Tampere University Association of Researchers and Teachers (Tatte), part of the Union of Research Professionals in Finland, with support from the TAU chapter of the Finnish Union of University Professors. The authors of this article are either members of these unions and international researchers themselves who lobbied on international issues in their respective unions or researchers hired with the unions' support.

While relying on participants' self-identification, our understanding of "international academics" encompasses a broad range of mobilities and varied relationships to citizenships, languages, nationalities,

and other identities. The research itself makes as objects of inquiry the categories of “international” and “internationalization” rather than taking them as settled terms. Furthermore, we develop critical reflections on our participation in the transformation we are researching, and, more specifically, on our attempts, as mostly international academics ourselves, to use this research to advocate for improved conditions for international academics at the university. In doing so, this research uses an engaged form of inquiry that highlights the agencies of international academics as they/we navigate the complicated landscapes of managed and lived internationalization.

Our contribution is to offer perspectives from the lived side of internationalization and to highlight the complicated convergences and divergences between managerial attempts to increase the university’s global competitiveness and the diverse needs, positionalities, and agencies of international academics. Rather than a clear and straightforward opposition, this article reveals an ambivalent landscape, where the agendas and practices of managed internationalization offer both opportunities and challenges, and where the lived interests and identities of international academics continually converge and diverge with managed processes. Contributing to existing conceptions of higher education internationalization (de Wit et al., 2015), we argue for a relational approach to internationalization as a transformative process that unfolds through the relational dynamics between lived experience and managerial strategy.

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives

In the wider context of marketized higher education, internationalization of the academic workforce has been framed within the instrumentalizing discourse of “talent import” and “brain gain” (Scott, 2015; van der Wende, 2015) but also as tokenistic diversity “box ticking” (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Wang, 2021). While policies and public discourse romanticize the “wandering scholar” privilege (Smithers et al., 2025), international academics are usually employed on fixed-term contracts, causing uncertain career trajectories and a range of affective “hidden injuries” (Morley et al., 2018). Previous studies showed the “darker side” of academic mobilities (Richardson & Zikic, 2007) connected to gender inequalities (Henderson, 2021), geopolitical, linguistic, and citizenship-based hierarchies (Bauder et al., 2017; Scott, 2015). Moreover, the mobility/immobility binary has been problematized as individuals experience being “stuck in place” in a chain of mobilities, all the while engaging in “sticky” cross-country ties of family and community engagements (on “stuck and sticky” aspects of academic mobility see Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021). Empirical insight into the lived experiences of international academics is needed to better understand the complex “negotiations between affective and relational attachments, career planning, home and destination attributes, higher education contexts, dominant discourses of internationalisation and postcolonial hierarchies which structure the global higher education sector” (Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021, p. 691). The lived experiences of international academics are particularly under-researched in the context of Finland (Jousilahti et al., 2022; Siekkinen et al., 2024).

Informed by these perspectives on internationalization and international academic mobility, we explore internationalization as a continuous transformation of a higher education institution. Transformation is conceptualized as a deep, extensive change in the strategy, structure, culture, and behavior on the level of a global field, system, or institution (Dee et al., 2023). Transformational change can be planned, i.e., designed and led by transformation actors (e.g., university leadership); or it can be emergent, coming from the grassroots initiatives (Dee et al., 2023). Our focus is on the dynamic interplay between planned and

emergent aspects of internationalization in a university. We use the terms “managed internationalization” and “lived internationalization” as interrelated aspects to capture the planned and emergent aspects of internationalization, respectively. To understand the dynamic interrelatedness, we adopt a relational perspective to the university as an organization (Emirbayer, 1997; Özbilgin, 2006). Rather than researching these phenomena as self-subsistent fixed entities (Emirbayer, 1997), relational ontology focuses on the relations through which the phenomena get constituted.

Exploring the process of internationalization through the lens of relational ontology allows us to focus our analysis on different layers of what Özbilgin (2006) describes as relationality between the self, the others, and the circumstances. We operationalized this relational approach through analyzing the relationalities between international academics and their profession, colleagues, and the university as an institution. We also emphasize the spatio-temporal relations, mobilities, and imaginaries that constitute the university, and the transformation thereof, as both deeply embedded in the prevailing power-geometries of the present and as an always unfinished site of multiplicity and heterogeneity—of the “simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey, 2005, p. 32). This approach is well-suited to understanding the university as simultaneously a site of knowledge production, of teaching and learning, of labor and management, of “human capital” development, of struggles over the direction of society, of state investment aimed toward successful participation in locally and globally competitive knowledge economies, and much else besides. In this sense, the university is constituted by relations and mobilities stretching outward towards its varied “local” and “global” contexts, and this is manifestly the case even “before” intentional strategies of internationalization are considered.

While international academics might be instrumentalized (explicitly or implicitly) by the discourse of strategic internationalization, they themselves can become agents of institutional transformation (Dee et al., 2023) by actively engaging in institutional decision-making or even by simply being present in university spaces in ways that disrupt routines or assumptions, creating the need to be accommodated or responded to. Going one step further, we examine our positionalities in these layers of relationalities and offer our own critical reflections as a team of international and Finnish academics who conducted the research and acted as change agents at the university. Aiming to elaborate on the internationalization relationalities and transformations, this study addresses three research questions:

RQ1: How do international academics experience internationalization transformations at TAU?

RQ2: How are the relationalities of lived and managed internationalization constructed in participants’ accounts?

RQ3: How can international academics emerge as change agents within internationalization transformations at TAU?

### 3. Study Setting

The internationalization of Finnish higher education has been on the national agenda since the 1980s to enhance global competitiveness. The national internationalization strategy discusses Finnish universities in connection with creating a competitive economy that attracts talent (Ministry of Education and Culture,

2022). This strategic direction is clearly communicated in the government's program called "Talent Boost," focusing on attracting workers from outside the country to meet Finland's labor needs. The same intention partly motivated TAU's recent organizational merger (Vellamo et al., 2022). TAU was established in 2019 through a merger of two higher education institutions (University of Tampere and Tampere University of Technology). The merger was a contested process (Poutanen et al., 2022) that resulted in the second-largest multidisciplinary university in Finland with about 22,000 students and 4,200 staff members. The internationalization strategy of the newly merged TAU aimed to build the university's brand as an international cooperation partner and create a global community by investing "in international recruitment of best talents" (TAU, 2020). While the strategic goals of the merger and the internationalization process differ in some respects, Vellamo et al. (2022) found that they both focused on academic excellence through attracting international academics. In other words, international academics are often seen as the "best talent" to be imported (Siekkinen et al., 2024; van der Wende, 2015) for the instrumental needs of increasing research and funding competitiveness.

This study examines TAU's internationalization transformation in the post-merger period of dynamic organizational changes that involved the redevelopment of institutional policies, structures, and procedures, including HR management and internationalization agendas. Conducting this research at that time offered valuable insight into processes and relationalities of lived and managed internationalization transformations as they unfolded. While TAU is a somewhat exceptional case given these post-merger dynamics, the discourse of attracting international talent—both to strengthen competition among universities and contribute to the national knowledge-economy competitiveness—is broadly shared among Finnish universities and within the national policy environment (Siekkinen et al., 2024; Vellamo et al., 2022).

The case study analyses data collected through a survey and interviews, perspectives raised during events in the university community, and our observations and reflections over the course of the research (2021–2025). The mixed-method survey ( $N = 74$ ) implemented in 2021 contained 42 questions grouped into six sections: (a) career and working life, (b) participation in academic and non-academic institutions in Finland, (c) living in Finland, (d) international university, (e) additional comments, and (f) background information. Informed by relevant previous studies (e.g., Bauder et al., 2017; Morley et al., 2018; Tzanakou & Henderson, 2021), the authors drafted the initial survey questions which were then revised based on community feedback in meetings with representatives of the two union associations (some international academics and some authoring this article), correspondence with TAU's international HR unit, and a meeting with TAU's coordination group for internationalization (around 15 administrative coordinators of different university departments). The survey included open-ended and Likert-type (*strongly disagree to strongly agree*) questions, as well as single and multiple-choice items; it was anonymous and no questions were mandatory (see the survey instrument in Tatte workgroup, 2022). The link to the online survey was disseminated through internal communication channels of the unions and the university. This approach allowed the survey to reach the whole university and those participants who might not have responded to an institutional survey. The survey data were first analyzed using descriptive statistics, capturing patterns in participants' responses to Likert-type questions and further interpreted through the participants' written narratives in the open-ended questions. This data-driven analysis process could be characterized as qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014), complemented by the patterns identified through descriptive statistics.

To gain additional qualitative accounts on the patterns observed in the survey responses, we conducted 13 individual interviews with international academics in 2022. During the semi-structured interviews, we asked interviewees to share their perspectives and experiences of working at the university and living in Finland. Interviewees were also asked to share their views on the work of the trade unions and consider practical suggestions for the university's internationalization activities. The interviews lasted between 23 and 40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for the qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014).

The survey and interview datasets were analyzed separately and published in two reports (Honkanen & Tatte workgroup, 2022; Tatte workgroup, 2022). The themes presented in this article include and expand our analysis of the survey and interviews to encompass also the reflections of the university members who participated in community discussions. These include discussions around survey design (in 2021), an event presenting the preliminary survey findings, and a workshop on drafting recommendations to TAU (both in 2022). Through these discussions, we sought to invite a broader community—including international academics who may have not participated in the survey and interviews, and anyone interested in internationalization at TAU—to contribute to the research. We also aimed to involve university administrators to capture their understanding of TAU's ongoing internationalization processes. We critically reflected on our encounters with the university actors, practices, and policies as we reported the study results, developed practical recommendations, and observed the shifts that unfolded in the institutional landscape. Our engaged inquiry produced insights into the change processes over an extended period of time and hence created “opportunities to feed inquiry into collective action and action into collective learning” (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 49). The presentation of the results and subsequent discussions and community engagements created spaces for reflections that fed into collective learning and action that was carried forward into faculties/departments as well as university policy. In this way, the research acted as and mobilized participants as agents of change.

The themes we present in this article were (a) prevalent in the survey and interview data (Honkanen & Tatte workgroup, 2022; Tatte workgroup, 2022), (b) repeatedly revisited in the community discussions, and (c) provided fruitful insights into the complex interrelatedness between lived and managed internationalization (i.e., relationality between individuals and their profession, their colleagues, and their institution).

Participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary and based on principles of informed consent. Prior to data collection, an institutional research permit was obtained from TAU. The call for participation was open to all employees and researchers who self-identify as international members of the university. We noted in the call that “international” is understood broadly to include persons with international backgrounds affiliated with the university, including researchers, teachers, and administrative/professional staff. This also included different forms and lengths of affiliation with the university, such as part-time employees, grant-funded researchers, or doctoral researchers (i.e., PhD candidates who might not have an employment relationship with the university). Participation in the follow-up interviews was not connected to participation in the survey.

The majority of the survey and interview participants were working as researchers and/or teachers across the seven faculties of the university, whereas only seven participants (8%) worked in administrative positions and three worked at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (a separate polytechnic belonging to

the broader Tampere Universities community). Approximately one third of the survey participants were affiliated with the largest Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences, and one quarter with the Faculty of Social Sciences. There were fewer respondents from the second-largest Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology and the third-largest Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences (3% and 6% respectively; see Tattu workgroup, 2022). Most participants were in the early career stage (university instructor, research assistant, doctoral researcher, postdoctoral researcher), and less than a quarter of participants were in advanced career stages (professor, research director, university lecturer). This participation rate reflects the lower proportion of international academics in advanced career stages across Finnish universities (Jousilahti et al., 2022; Pietilä et al., 2021). Gender was asked in an open-ended question, in which approximately two-thirds of the participants identified as women or as female. The reported lengths of stay in Finland varied greatly (from four weeks to 57 years), and over half of the participants have lived in Finland for at least three years. About half of the participants held a (shorter-term or longer-term) permit to reside in Finland, while a little less than half reported being a citizen of Finland or another country (including EU countries) that does not require a permit to reside in Finland. Approximately 42% of the survey respondents had previously worked as a researcher or teacher outside of Finland.

#### 4. International Academics at the Intersections of Lived and Managed Internationalization

In this section, we present our analysis of the survey and interviews examining how international academics experience internationalization processes at TAU (RQ1) and explore how participants' accounts illustrate the interactions between lived and managed internationalization (RQ2).

##### 4.1. *Intersecting Aspects of Career Progression*

International academics at TAU discussed their work and career trajectories as characterized by high-performance demands and future career uncertainty. While these features could be said to characterize work in today's academia in Finland and more broadly (e.g., Pietilä, 2019; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017), being an international academic was seen as adding another layer to the demands of academic work. There are estimates that around 70% of academics at Finnish universities have fixed-term contracts (Pietilä, 2019), and similarly, about 65% of our study participants reported being employed on a fixed-term contract (ranging from three months to five years). A career trajectory consisting of a chain of short-term contracts caused experiences of uncertainty, particularly among early-career academics: 29% of survey respondents perceived that they do not have options for career advancement, and 41% disagreed with the statement that their position is secure enough for career planning. The experience of not having opportunities for career advancement was connected to the position of international academic, but also to intersecting aspects of gender and/or language proficiency, as well as to being perceived as "temporary colleagues" and/or as racialized persons:

[The] thing that worries me a little bit, it comes back again to the languages, is how accessible and inclusive it will be for foreigners at higher levels of management. For example, it's been mentioned already a few times that maybe I'll be the next head of unit, and then some say: "You don't speak Finnish, you have to learn Finnish." And so it could be that I also cannot advance....There is this upper ceiling for internationals because of the operating language still being Finnish....How inclusive are we really when it's already not that inclusive gender-wise. (Interviewee 5 [15])

The quote describes the “upper ceiling for internationals” in advancing their career in a Finnish university in connection to not having access to higher levels of university management and leadership roles (such as leading a unit). The interviewee implies that language (TAU’s administrative language is Finnish; we discuss the language aspect in Section 4.3) and gender act as an invisible barrier to advancing to senior leadership roles, having an impact on equal career progression opportunities. The quote hints at the persistent gender inequalities in (Finnish) academia that have been well documented (e.g., Jousilahti et al., 2022; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019). Jousilahti et al. (2022) call this phenomenon “gender scissors” that clip the career advancement for women in Finnish academia; similarly, they observed “ethnic scissors” clipping careers of international academics in Finland (see also Pietilä et al., 2021).

The relationship between individual academics and the university was discussed as ideally a two-way commitment expressed through an official (long-term) employment contract, as well as academics’ commitment to the university: “Of course I would be motivated [to learn Finnish] because I know that I have a long-term relationship with this university” (I2). However, the conditions for such a two-way commitment were often absent for academics working on short, fixed-term contracts, who are seen as temporary members of the university community, with transient relationships (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). Being perceived as a “temporary colleague” affected how international academics could engage in their work tasks and, more broadly, how they could participate in the university community:

People sometimes just assume that my stay in Finland will be temporary in a way that might limit their interest in working with me or that might cause them to assume that I would be uninterested in being involved in certain ways at the university. (Survey participant 54, [S54])

These experiences of assumed and actual temporariness, alongside barriers to higher-level roles, also tend to narrow the possibilities for international academics to act as change agents within the university, at a complicated intersection of gender, racialization, language, contract type, and career stage.

Experiences of microaggression, discrimination, and even harassment were an important theme in participants’ responses. One interviewee described discrimination as usually an indirect or unintentional comment, “little things” that do not give a basis for a formal complaint:

I have had other experiences that are not very positive of people assuming certain things or thinking that maybe I’m not a full worker...not really seeing me as an equal....There are these little things, like certain comments, it’s not something that you can go and report, [and say] that I was discriminated by this person on this day, because they are just comments...they are not so big that you can complain....But those are things that are affecting the psychological well-being of people. (I10)

Experiences of discrimination are not necessarily shared by all international academics, but, in general, seemed to be tied to appearing in public as a racialized person or to using a language understood as “foreign” or out-of-place: “People have shouted in the street to speak Finnish, and also shouted to go back home” (S33). Another participant explained:

In everyday life, I have experienced nationalism and even racism at varying levels of intensity. Milder forms included being patronized by Finns in public places or a new neighborhood, stronger forms actual harassment or abuse, for example, in traffic or public transport. (S7)

Participants described their own experiences and observations about how they saw discrimination happening around them, e.g., noting that “discrimination is especially crude towards black students and even more for black women” (S11). These experiences become part of the environment through which many international academics must navigate, inevitably affecting their working lives and careers in a range of ways.

#### **4.2. Immediate Working Community and Distant University**

Despite encountering microaggressions, problematic assumptions, language barriers, and the structural constraints of fixed-term contracts, participants’ accounts describe many examples of positive collegial relations (e.g., good workplace induction, supportive research group), and a large majority of survey participants (around 80%) agreed that they could fully participate in the activities of their immediate work community (e.g., research group or teaching team). However, this positive perception dropped steeply to about one-third when asked about participation in faculty or university decision-making processes. Participation in “higher levels of management” was seen as an important way to contribute to the university’s organizational and academic operations, but was acknowledged as inaccessible for international academics, mainly due to the need for strong Finnish language skills. Having limited access to decision-making forums, participants’ narratives convey experiences of not having the possibilities to act as change agents in institutional policies and practices, although they saw the need. Examples given include curriculum committees, faculty councils, university board, as well as working groups developing institutional agendas (such as the internationalization strategy). Having representation in decision-making spaces is also seen as an important part of internationalization efforts: “To advance internationality, there also needs to be a focus on administrative and leadership staff....The university would be a more welcoming environment and it would be international from within” (S8).

Participants stressed the need for the university to provide systematic structures and processes for enabling (equal) access to decision-making forums as well as internal university processes and information. For instance, one doctoral researcher described how insufficient institutional support forced them to “find information on their own and fight for their rights...not wanting to rock too many boats” (S29). Another early-career researcher described how they experience the distance from the university, causing feelings of loneliness and non-belonging:

It was just me and my project, and the money that came with it. But I didn’t have any type of relation besides my supervisor...it has been quite secluded and quite lonely, so it has been very difficult to get to know people and be part of the community of researchers...and feeling that...I, my work is important, or it’s valued. (I6)

These experiences of non-belonging and not having collegial work relations were described by one survey participant as primarily affecting one’s wellbeing: “I sometimes feel I do not belong to the wider TAU community, but it does not affect the quality of my work, it only affects my wellbeing” (S40).

The non-belonging experiences could be related to the fact that most of our study participants were early-career researchers whose work is fixed-term and often solitary: “Just me and my project and the money that came with it.” Ylijoki and Henriksson (2017) observed that in Finnish neoliberal academia, early-career researchers are often placed on a career path of academic freelancers, detached from collegial

relations and the university's (management) processes. Having distant ties to the university's institutional agendas and practices can therefore be seen as a matter that is structurally produced by the university's management and leadership processes, leading to a structurally produced loneliness (Das, 2024). Previous research showed that many organizational change processes in Finnish universities are conducted in a top-heavy manner, led by managerial and administrative procedures (Poutanen et al., 2022). Major organizational transformation, such as the TAU merger, can alienate academics, causing a sense of powerlessness and narrowing of academic self-governance (Poutanen, 2023). While participants conveyed the message that collegial relations are extremely important in supporting one's work and wellbeing, there is a call for structural solutions to enable active participation in the work community and decision-making forums:

There is often this case where it's believed all your colleagues will help you or so, and I think this is wrong. The structure of the institution is what has to make sure that it is taken care of, that the international [academic] has the conditions to work in parallel conditions as the locals. (I11)

### 4.3. *Language as a Crosscutting Aspect*

Language practices were recognized as the most pervasive and consequential issue shaping international academics' work, participation, and sense of belonging. Finnish being the operating language of the institution was seen as hindering international academics' full involvement in the university community. For instance, faculty/department meetings were reported to occur mainly in Finnish, despite them being often announced beforehand as bilingual (Finnish and English). Notably, more than half of the survey participants assess their Finnish language proficiency as "beginner" or "none," despite widespread recognition of the importance of being able to use Finnish. One interviewee described knowing Finnish as "a must" when working in a Finnish university:

It's not only a good thing to know Finnish, but it's a must. Otherwise, you simply can't work, or you will be very insufficient. You will absolutely be [an] outsider. You won't be able to follow up on the events or the communication. (I1)

Overall, participants are motivated to improve their Finnish language proficiency in the hope of overcoming the language barrier towards more active participation. Although there are implicit (university) expectations as well as explicit (academics') motivation to learn Finnish, the language practices entail various knotty challenges. One of them relates to the fact that international academics have predominantly short-term contracts with the university, forcing them to focus on work-related demands rather than language studies:

How is one supposed to learn Finnish on top of a more than 40-hour working week, with no courses for staff (e.g., in evenings, weekend, at a steady pace, etc.)? Staff cannot be expected to learn Finnish without support structures. (S21)

Of the survey respondents, only 24% felt the university provided sufficient time and resources for learning Finnish. At the same time, over half of respondents were either unsure (27%) or agreed (38%) that they would need to learn Finnish to progress in their careers. This implies that there are uncertainties—and possibly differing requirements—on the expected level of Finnish language proficiency. Participants reflected

that even if one was able to use Finnish fluently in daily life, it takes much more time and commitment to achieve a near-native language proficiency needed in academic work. This is further challenged by the important place of English in scientific publishing. While there has been a significant increase in English-taught degree programs offered by Finnish universities, the predominant language of instruction in higher education is Finnish (Finnish and Swedish are the two official languages in Finland; for a historical overview of language use in Finnish higher education see Saarinen, 2014).

These interrelated aspects cause a sentiment of guilt among international academics for “forcing” their colleagues to use English:

With my immediate work community, I feel that there is no problem, we hold all our meetings smoothly and I feel the communication is clear. However, sometimes, I don't feel comfortable enough to participate in meetings and activities of the university/faculty because my Finnish level is elementary and I don't want to force people to switch to English. (S31)

These language challenges require “a lot of dialogue” in the university community, as one interviewee put it:

It's not only about foreign staff learning Finnish, but it's also about Finnish language staff, sometimes struggling with English...not everyone feels comfortable saying things in English, so there is also this side of the coin. It's a dilemma and I think we need a lot of dialogue and a lot of, somehow, togetherness. (I2)

Being actively voiced or not, these sentiments of international academics reached decision-makers and the university developed a set of language principles (TAU, 2024) that emphasizes the parallel use of English alongside Finnish as a practical solution promoting flexible language use in research, education, and internal administration: “In support of equal participation, administrative working groups and committees use Finnish and English in their discussions flexibly” (TAU, 2024, p. 7). While explicitly supporting inclusion and equality, the policy also leaves significant room for interpretation. In the context of the busy university reality, flexibility can mean “defaulting” to Finnish only. Studies that examined internationalization and language processes more extensively showed that similar dilemmas occur across universities in Finland (Jousilahti et al., 2022) and other countries where English is not the national language (Björnö, 2026; Saarinen, 2014).

#### **4.4. On Being International**

In this article, we use the term “international academic” since the majority of the survey and interview participants worked in academic teaching or research positions. Previous research (on academic mobility) uses different terminology, such as expatriate researchers/scholars, immigrant scholars, foreign-born staff, migrant scholars/academics, mobile academics, transnational academics, and so forth. The inconsistency in terminology and definitions stems from the variety of realities among the members of this heterogeneous group as they encounter different career-related decisions and immigration policies. This terminological complexity is further complicated by the unclear status of doctoral researchers sometimes being considered students and/or employees, and/or affiliated researchers.

The estimated percentage of international academics in Finnish universities varies across institutions and career levels: Jousilahti et al. (2022) reported 38.5% of doctoral researchers were international academics,

whereas only 9.4% of those working at the professorial level were international (proportions similar to our study participants). TAU internal statistics report that around 20% of the university community members are international. However, the statistics are usually based on the categorical distinction between “international” and “local” staff, taking into account one’s country of birth and/or citizenship. The lived realities (and our own positionalities) indicate that these categorical distinctions offer a simplistic view of a complex issue. One of the open-ended survey questions tried to prompt reflections on this issue: In what sense do you consider yourself an international? In what ways should the university measure/count who is international (e.g., nationality, working language, something else)? To this, one participant responded:

I’m neither a Finn nor international. I’m nobody; myself. The concept of “international members” is problematic (if not slightly offensive), as it assumes a clean-cut separation, treating every non-Finn as the same. Here’s a question you should reflect on: Why do you think the university should measure/count who is international? (S24)

The participant problematizes the concept of “international member” of the university community, seeing it as a way of homogenizing a heterogeneous group of “international” (foreign-born? Immigrant?) academics. This comment also implies that one should be wary of using the “us-them” distinctions, which oversimplify the diversity of contextually ascribed and/or taken positionalities. To answer the same survey question, another respondent wrote:

Local—national—international?...As a born-Finnish researcher, I have felt (participated in) international (teams) since the 1990s....In some forums, I consider myself to be “more national” but usually also “local.”...“Internationalism” takes place in contexts which are beyond “solely national”? (S32)

Reflecting on our own positionalities, we recognize and agree with the problematic raised by the participants. We are a group of researchers who consider themselves international, despite also (now) having citizenship or permanent residence in Finland. At the same time, the accounts of a group of academics who share similar experiences and positionalities as “international academics” at TAU highlight the need for institutional structures that better support international staff, particularly around language and residence status. These intertwined experiences also appear to motivate some to become change agents who challenge institutional practices and advocate for policy and process reforms.

Participants’ narratives highlight the complexity of terminology and positionality. They often experienced “international” not as a neutral descriptor but as a label shaping how colleagues perceived them. Their accounts also reveal a disconnect between being recruited as “international talent” and later being treated as peripheral within the institution. One interviewee noted that internationalization needs to be a culture-building process, not treating “internationals” as something “extra”:

I would like to see more work within the university culture and how things are managed. I think that the internationalisation as a goal is a bit naïve, just saying that we want more internationals....How are you going to commit as an institution to provide [a] safe space for them and [a] space where they can really develop their skills and feel like a part of the team and not just, like an extra, nice thing to have. (I10)

While highlighting that the university needs to ensure structures for inclusion across formal and informal university spaces, the participants' responses recognize the need for a joint collegial effort—dialogue and togetherness mentioned by one participant—towards internationalizing TAU as a community and an organization:

I do believe that if we want any changes, we need to speak [out] loud, because if I sit here saying nothing, nothing changes....And this is what we experience every day. So it's worth to speak because, otherwise, it directly affects the quality of life for both [parties], for me as well as for the locals. (I1)

This participant expresses how experiencing a shift in their position once joining the university and feeling sidelined could mobilize international academics to act on their own interests and aspirations, and to become change agents.

## 5. International Academics as Change Agents

The need to speak out about the experiences of international academics in dialogue with the broader university community guided this research from the beginning. As a project initiated by local trade union associations and led by international academics, the research was intended to inform union advocacy at the university and, we hoped, prompt changes that would better support international academics. Our research informed a set of recommendations to support international academics at TAU (Tatte workgroup, 2023). These findings and recommendations were presented to the university community, TAU management, and international affairs staff across Finnish universities. They have also informed union advocacy at local and national levels, including work on language policy recommendations. In addition, the study reports were consulted in TAU's internal assessment of internationalization launched in 2024, which informed the university's new internationalization strategy published in 2025. While institutional changes are the result of multiple actors and influences, we are confident that these efforts contributed to ongoing conversations and played a meaningful role, alongside others, in shaping TAU's internationalization transformations. On the one hand, the attention on international academics' experiences energized international academics to voice their opinions and to demand some changes. As was expressed in the community discussions, this research initiative provided an evidentiary basis for international academics to negotiate their positions and actions in the internationalization of the university. On the other hand, the research process and its findings also enabled us, international academics (and local union associations), to act as change agents within the university community. In other words, through these collective efforts, international academics emerged as agents in the university's internationalization transformation (RQ3).

Nonetheless, we also note several constraints shaping their possibilities to act as change agents within TAU internationalization. Challenges discussed earlier—such as insecure employment, perceived temporariness, language barriers, and limited access to decision-making—were experienced as restricting their agentic engagement. We encountered similar dynamics in our own research process, as contributors moved in and out of the project due to unstable positions, and as questions around language use repeatedly influenced how we communicated findings and recommendations. This process also made visible the messy (mis)alignments between managerial interest in attracting international academics and efforts to improve their working conditions. University decision-makers at various levels were generally open to hearing our findings, and we were able to discuss them even with senior leadership. There was interest in strengthening

induction processes, revisiting language practices, and expanding support for Finnish-language learning. However, our emphasis on the central problem of short, fixed-term contracts seemed to generate little discussion or action. This is perhaps a question of different interests in internationalization between the university management (talent use and productivity) and our project (raising sticky points of experiences and inequalities). Interest in creating a competitive workplace that would attract “top international talent” seemingly diverges from our focus on dedicating resources to support all (international) academics at the university. There are also diverging understandings of the relationships between Finnish and English at the university. Some valued English primarily as a language of high-level, “international” science (key to university rankings and success in Finland’s university funding model), while emphasizing Finnish as the language of administration within the university. This diverged significantly from our recommendations, which sought to open up participation in governance and administration to non-Finnish-speaking staff, while also emphasizing the importance of multilingual science and knowledge production.

The process of carrying out this work also taught us more about the contradictory positioning of international academics as simultaneously a potentially privileged category and one that is left out and in need of support. This contradictory positioning had important implications for dialogue with the broader university community. While the prevailing response of the university community to our project was quite positive, we also encountered moments of questioning or hesitation. Insofar as “international” is positively associated with high-level science and “talent,” some colleagues viewed our project as perpetuating (problematic) categorical distinctions between “international” and “local” academics. Within this discourse, the internationality of “local” academics, as well as their pre-existing efforts to support international colleagues, could go unrecognized. Our recommendations about language use could also inspire affectively charged responses, including when they touch on insecurities or difficulties with speaking the language (whether English or Finnish), or when the question of who has the right to decide about language practices in a given situation is raised. Other responses seemed to suggest that international academics were asking for special treatment or that our recommendations were too assertive in tone or too demanding in terms of time and resources. Many of these reactions would be familiar from any situation where a privileged group is challenged. However, the situation here is complicated by the fact that the inequalities in play are quite contextually-bound, even within the university. For example, in a situation of seeking to participate in decision-making at the university, non-Finnish speakers have often been clearly disadvantaged, but in the assignment of undervalued teaching or administrative work, non-Finnish speakers *sometimes* escape burdens that then fall on their Finnish-speaking colleagues. We anticipated some of these complications in our recommendations, but they linger and shape the response to our efforts in subtle ways.

## 6. Conclusion

This article discussed internationalization as an ongoing university transformation. Drawing on the literature on internationalization and academic mobility, institutional transformation, and relational ontology, our study explored the interrelatedness of lived and managed internationalization transformation at TAU by focusing on international academics’ experiences of relationalities to their profession, colleagues, and institution. Their accounts describe (RQ1) career trajectories constrained by short-term contracts, discrimination, and exclusion from decision-making. Language practices play a key role across these issues, accompanied by problematic categorization of “international” as “non-local” and/or “privileged.” These accounts of navigating career demands, collegial relations, and institutional commitment illustrate the

complexity of internationalization transformations as they take shape through negotiations between lived and managed processes in an internationalizing university (RQ2). The findings illuminate lived aspects of internationalization and point to complicated convergences and divergences between managerial efforts to enhance global competitiveness and the diverse needs and agencies of international academics. While much of our analysis highlights obstacles to international academics acting as change agents, our approach to engaged inquiry mobilized participants to voice their views and take action, even as we ourselves as international academics sought to influence university policies and practices through our research and advocacy (RQ3).

Against an instrumentalizing approach to international academics, this article has sought to illuminate a more complicated relational reality—one that includes their experiences, agencies, and roles as potential change agents within the contradictory and complex communities they inhabit. The ongoing transformations of universities and broader societies mean that the contradictions and dilemmas we identify here will continue to shift. Yet, we argue that it is through thinking and acting collectively, as we have attempted to do here, that more inclusive forms of “international” university life can be imagined and pursued.

### Acknowledgments

We thank Bishwo Adhikari, Frank Emmert-Streib, and Juliene Madureira Ferreira for their contributions to this project. We are also grateful to the university community members who contributed to this study by commenting on draft materials, joining workshops, sharing information, and/or participating in this study.

### Funding

This study was supported by Tatte and the TAU chapter of the Finnish Union of University Professors. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Tampere University and Cogitatio Press.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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# The Listening Classroom: Professor and Cultural Change in Inclusion for Students on the Autism Spectrum

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 9 January 2026 **Published:** 12 March 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

## Abstract

This article examines the role of university faculty as agents of institutional transformation in the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum in Chilean public higher education. Based on a case study from the Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana (UTEM) in Santiago, the research explores how faculty training in neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy shapes attitudes and promotes cultural change within the university. The study adopts a critical qualitative methodology informed by Theory of Change (ToC), which was used to model the causal mechanisms linking staff training in neurodiversity, inclusive practices, and institutional change. Data were collected via focus groups and personal academic narratives from both staff and students, exploring the tensions between institutional inclusion discourses and lived pedagogical practices. Findings suggest that genuinely inclusive teaching occurs when difference is acknowledged and normalized, rather than treated as an exceptional or deficit-based condition requiring management or special assistance. Training initiatives were found to improve communication, flexibility, and empathy, although structural barriers persist due to managerial cultures and the precarization of academic work. The study concludes that the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum requires more than mere institutional policy: It requires learning environments capable of acknowledging, understanding, and reframing differences as a transformative force toward genuinely inclusive higher education.

## Keywords

autism spectrum; higher education; inclusive pedagogy; institutional transformation; neurodiversity

## 1. Introduction

The recognition of neurodiversity in higher education represents a paradigmatic shift that challenges long-standing assumptions of homogeneity, cognitive normality, and standardized learning that have historically shaped the modern university. Since the concept was first articulated by Singer (1999), neurodiversity has been understood as a legitimate expression of human variability, displacing clinical and deficit-based approaches in favor of social, cultural, and ethical frameworks that recognize difference as a constitutive value of the human experience (Armstrong, 2018; Belluigi & Thondhlana, 2019; Botha, 2022; Chapman, 2021). Within this perspective, inclusion is no longer conceived merely as access or individual accommodation, but as a process of cultural transformation that reconfigures pedagogical practices, educational relationships, and institutional structures in higher education.

In the university context, this challenge acquires particular complexity. Despite advances in access policies and institutional support, research consistently shows that students on the autism spectrum continue to face pedagogical, relational, and symbolic barriers that affect their well-being, persistence, and sense of belonging (Anderson et al., 2021; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Kenny et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2023). These barriers are not explained solely by a lack of resources or accommodations, but rather by academic cultures that privilege speed, oral participation, individual autonomy, and standardized performance, limiting the recognition of diverse ways of learning, communicating, and participating in university classrooms.

Although research on autism and education has expanded significantly, much of the existing literature has focused on childhood and compulsory schooling, leaving the experiences of adolescents and students in higher education relatively underexplored, particularly in Latin American contexts. Likewise, faculty training in inclusion and universal design for learning (UDL) has been widely identified as a key factor in promoting inclusive practices (Castillo Armijo, 2021; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Forlin, 2010), yet it has often been approached from instrumental perspectives that emphasize technical skills rather than the subjective, ethical, and relational processes through which faculty engage with neurodiversity in their everyday teaching practice.

Within this landscape, it becomes essential to examine how university faculty experience and re-signify inclusion when engaging with the neurodiversity paradigm—not merely as an institutional requirement, but as a process of pedagogical and cultural transformation. Recent studies highlight that educators become institutional change agents when they participate in sustained, reflexive, and situated professional development processes that challenge their beliefs, attitudes, and understandings of teaching (Andrews et al., 2017; Macdonald et al., 2019). In contexts of neurodiversity, this process is often driven by an explicit desire for transformation: a desire to better understand students, to teach differently, and to build pedagogical relationships grounded in listening, empathy, and recognition of difference.

The present study is situated at the Metropolitan Technological University (UTEM), a public university in Chile that, in recent years, has promoted initiatives aimed at recognizing neurodivergence within its student community, fostering faculty development, student support, and research in inclusion and neurodiversity. Adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach, and using the Theory of Change (ToC) as an analytical framework (Angulo Cázares, 2023; Reinholz & Andrews, 2020; Retolaza Eguren, 2009), this article analyzes the role of faculty as institutional change agents in the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum.

It explores how pedagogical practices and ethical dispositions contribute to the construction of classrooms that listen to other minds, arguing that inclusion is strengthened when teaching becomes an act of active listening and re-signification of difference as a structural value of learning and university life. The article is structured as follows: First, the methodology is presented; second, the results are reported, focusing on processes of faculty transformation and student perceptions; third, the findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and the ToC framework; and finally, conclusions and recommendations are offered for institutional policy, faculty development, and future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

### 2.1. Epistemological Shifts in Higher Education: Neurodiversity as a Catalyst for Inclusion

The term neurodiversity emerged in the late 1990s as a sociopolitical category proposed by Singer (1999), which challenged pathologizing notions of neurological development. Since then, several authors (Armstrong, 2018; Botha, 2022; Chapman, 2021; Kapp, 2020) have advanced a critical framework that understands neurocognitive diversity as a natural manifestation of human variability.

In contrast to medical or compensatory models, the neurodiversity paradigm is grounded in three fundamental principles:

1. The recognition of neurological variation as part of human biodiversity.
2. A critique of systems that impose a standard of cognitive normality.
3. The affirmation of universal accessibility and full participation as human rights.

This perspective offers an epistemological shift that impacts educational spheres by reinterpreting neurodevelopmental conditions through the recognition of neurodiversity as a natural expression of the human species and its cognitive variability (Kapp, 2020). Consequently, inclusive education has evolved from approaches focused on the integration of individuals with disabilities toward a structural understanding of diversity as both a value and a right. As Florian and Spratt (2013) argue, inclusive pedagogy is grounded in “planning for everyone,” transcending the logic of individualized accommodations. According to these authors, the model of inclusive pedagogy should emphasize planning for diversity from the outset of teaching, rather than implementing *ex post* adaptations. In this sense, an inclusive classroom is one that recognizes that all students learn differently; therefore, pedagogical design must originate from that inherent plurality. The valorization of neurodiversity recognizes cognitive differences—such as autism—not as deficits, but as legitimate variations of the human experience, demanding the development of flexible and non-medicalized pedagogical practices (Andrews et al., 2017).

This new orientation in inclusion challenges homogenizing educational models while simultaneously paving the way for flexible, ethical, and culturally sensitive teaching practices (Núñez et al., 2025). According to Anderson et al. (2021), the paradigm of inclusive education has evolved from the integration of specific groups toward the structural transformation of educational systems. Through the Index for Inclusion, they argue that truly inclusive education is grounded in the ongoing revision of institutional cultures, policies, and practices, fostering communities that learn to recognize difference as a value. From this perspective, inclusion is not limited to the removal of physical or curricular barriers but involves the creation of spaces of

belonging and participation for all learners. Neurodiversity thus calls universities to move beyond compensatory policies toward deep cultural change, where difference is understood as a source of innovation and cognitive justice (Gonzales Otárola et al., 2023).

## ***2.2. Global and National Context for Inclusion and Students on the Autism Spectrum***

At the university level, within a global context, tensions are particularly evident. Traditional academic structures tend to value autonomy, oral participation, and speed of response as markers of performance parameters that can exclude students with divergent learning styles (Gonzales Otárola et al., 2023). Some research (Anderson et al., 2021; Gurbuz et al., 2019) warns that university environments are rarely prepared to accommodate neurocognitive diversity, leading to experiences of isolation, anxiety, and academic withdrawal. These challenges arise not only from a lack of pedagogical adjustments but also from persistent institutional cultures and a limited understanding of Students on the autism spectrum as a relational rather than purely clinical phenomenon (Kenny et al., 2015).

Regarding the prevalence of this condition, the World Health Organization (2022) estimates that approximately one in every hundred people worldwide is on the autism spectrum—a figure that continues to rise alongside improvements in diagnostic processes and social awareness. In the Chilean case, although official statistics on university students remain scarce, the National Disability Service (SENADIS, 2022) reports that 13.5% of people with recognized disabilities present a psychological or mental condition, a category that encompasses autism. This demographic reality reveals a structural gap in universities' institutional responses, which often rely on fragmented inclusion policies (Ferrer-Mavárez et al., 2025).

In response to these gaps, the enactment of Chile's Autism Law No. 21.545 (Government of Chile, 2023) marked a significant step toward strengthening the legal framework for inclusion. This law mandates compulsory training for educational personnel at all levels, promotes UDL, and seeks to eliminate attitudinal and communicational barriers. As Castillo Armijo (2021) note, the law provides more than just a legal framework; it encourages a cultural shift by compelling institutions to recognize and value neurodiversity. However, the existence of such a mandate does not guarantee immediate transformation; as Leiva et al. (2023) emphasize, it is crucial to understand how faculty members interpret, internalize, and transform their own practices in response to this new legal and ethical landscape.

Despite this progress, the implementation of these mandates in higher education remains uneven, as progress largely depends on faculty agency and institutional commitment.

Recent studies indicate that while training programs are necessary, they are often fragmented and compliance-driven, yielding limited impact on deep-seated beliefs or pedagogical practices (Castillo Armijo, 2021). Similarly, international evidence shows that teacher education in inclusion achieves lasting effects only when it integrates reflective and attitudinal components capable of questioning traditional assumptions about learning and difference (Lim et al., 2023; Skutil & Kratochvílová, 2023). Consequently, the university classroom must be understood as a political and relational space where teaching practices may either reproduce or challenge conditions of exclusion. As Courtois and O'Keefe (2015) point out, managerialism and academic precarity often limit faculty agency, shifting attention from pedagogy to productivity. In response, Belluigi and Thondhlana (2019) propose a critical reading of inclusion as an emancipatory

practice, where difference is not merely “tolerated” but actively listened to and re-signified as a source of learning and cognitive justice.

### ***2.3. ToC: A Framework for Institutional and Pedagogical Transformation***

The ToC has emerged as a pivotal tool for understanding and managing complex social and organizational transformations. Beyond its utility as an evaluation instrument, ToC functions as a robust conceptual framework that visualizes causal relationships among actions, intermediate outcomes, and long-term sustainable changes, while explicitly articulating the assumptions underlying each link in the chain (Mayne, 2015; Retolaza Eguren, 2009; P. Rogers, 2014). Its core strength lies in recognizing the non-linear nature of change and the imperative to incorporate stakeholder voices when defining pathways for transformation (Aguirre-Villalobos et al., 2023, 2025).

In contemporary literature, ToC has been widely adopted across health and community development sectors to map processes of cultural and structural shift. For instance, Cassetti and Paredes-Carbonell (2020) highlight its efficacy in participatory planning, while Núñez et al. (2025) demonstrate its value in identifying success factors within national health programs. Similarly, Jones et al. (2025) document how ToC facilitated the co-creation of healthcare systems in rural Australian communities by integrating local knowledge with scientific evidence. These cases underscore that profound transformations depend not only on policy or resources but also on organizational learning and the collective reflection of those driving the change.

Within the educational sphere, ToC is increasingly recognized for its capacity to plan and evaluate curricular innovations and institutional change (Angulo Cázares, 2023; Reinholz & Andrews, 2020; Worden & Bray, 2025). As López Herrera and Cos Garduño (2025) emphasize, this approach helps navigate uncertainty and coordinate efforts among diverse actors, fostering collaborative and sustainable learning environments. This is particularly relevant for higher education institutions—complex systems exposed to multiple internal and external tensions—which require methodologies that frame change as a dynamic, adaptive, and reflective process (Montenegro & Schroeder, 2019).

ToC distinguishes between first-order changes—technical or procedural adjustments—and second-order changes, which involve profound paradigm shifts in beliefs and values (López-Larios et al., 2022; Manrique Molina, 2024). This distinction is vital in educational settings, where authentic inclusion requires revisiting the fundamental assumptions that guide teaching and learning. As Manrique Molina (2024) notes, ToC not only enhances management but also strengthens the institutional capacity for reflection needed to address future challenges.

When applied to the university context, ToC provides a pathway to understand how faculty training in inclusion generates sustainable cultural transformations. From this perspective, educators are positioned as central agents of change, responsible for activating the sequences of action that lead to inclusive outcomes. Their role extends beyond the mere implementation of institutional programs; it involves interpreting, adapting, and co-creating transformative practices through a continuous process of re-signification. This paradigm invites faculty to systematically reflect on their pedagogical practices, generate evidence, and transform their teaching through a deeper understanding of their students’ diverse needs (Fanghanel, 2013).

## **2.4. Faculty Agency as a Catalyst for Institutional Transformation**

Within the logic of the ToC, faculty occupy a strategic position as the primary mechanisms of institutional transformation. As Ferrare (2019) argues, meaningful change in higher education depends on the dynamic interaction between teachers' internal beliefs and the external practices they enact in the classroom. This perspective recognizes that educators are not mere curriculum implementers but reflective actors who mediate between top-down institutional policies and the bottom-up lived experiences of students.

The impact of faculty on university inclusion lies fundamentally in their capacity for agency. According to Macdonald et al. (2019), faculty members act as “accelerators of change” when they influence peers, share pedagogical innovations, and sustain communities of practice that amplify institutional transformation. Similarly, Skutil and Kratochvílová (2023) identify teacher attitude as a decisive factor in constructing inclusive environments, as faculty expectations and dispositions directly shape the educational trajectory of neurodivergent students.

From this standpoint, effective inclusion extends beyond physical or administrative access—it demands active participation, persistence, and meaningful learning (Tulcanaza-Mantilla et al., 2025). In this process, faculty members perform a triple role: They serve as pedagogical mediators, guarantors of rights, and social change agents (Duta-Toapanta et al., 2025). As Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue, inclusive educators are characterized by their ability to critically reflect on their practice, adapt curricula from a universal perspective, and promote the participation of all learners. These inclusive teaching practices function as “foundational educational bonds” that reduce learning barriers and foster equity within the classroom (Torres, 2021).

Ultimately, institutional transformation depends on the complex interplay of beliefs, emotions, and reflective practices within the teaching body. Pilgrim et al. (2020) contend that lasting educational change requires a fundamental modification of the belief systems that sustain daily practice. Furthermore, the diffusion of pedagogical innovations among peers creates a multiplier effect, facilitating the broader adoption of inclusive strategies across the institution (Andrews et al., 2017). This positions ongoing professional development not merely as a technical requirement, but as an essential driver of organizational change, particularly in contexts where institutional policies remain incipient or fragmented.

## **2.5. Faculty Training in UDL: From Technical Compliance to Transformative Pedagogical Agency**

Faculty training for inclusion has emerged as a central strategy for advancing educational equity, yet its effectiveness depends heavily on the underlying pedagogical approach. When training is conceived through a technical or compliance-oriented lens, its impact tends to be superficial and short-lived. In contrast, programs that integrate critical reflection, interdisciplinary collaboration, and situated experience are more likely to produce lasting institutional transformations (Castillo Armijo, 2021; Forlin, 2010).

In this regard, inclusive training should not be viewed as a static product but as an ongoing process of professional learning and critical self-examination. According to Founes-Méndez et al. (2023), developing inclusive teaching competencies requires a dual focus: Technical knowledge combined with ethical sensitivity, empathy, and a willingness toward self-critique. Within the framework of the ToC, these

competencies operate as essential inputs that activate the causal chain of results, translating professional development into observable shifts in pedagogical practice.

As Torres (2021) emphasizes, these transformations manifest through didactic innovation and the strategic adaptation of methods, resources, and assessments designed to reduce learning barriers. This approach aligns seamlessly with UDL, defined as a pedagogical framework that ensures equal opportunities by creating flexible learning environments and products that can be used by everyone without the need for specialized adaptations (Díez Villoria & Sánchez Fuentes, 2015). This model seeks to preemptively remove obstacles by anticipating diverse ways in which students perceive, process, and express knowledge (CAST, 2018).

Furthermore, specialized training in UDL redefines the faculty role from a mere transmitter of content to a mediator of diverse learning experiences, fostering a transition from an “integrative” model to a truly inclusive one. By equipping educators with digital and pedagogical competencies, UDL training minimizes the need for individualized curricular adaptations, addressing “systemic barriers” within the environment rather than viewing them as student deficits (Parody et al., 2022). Ultimately, this model promotes educational justice by ensuring equal opportunities for access and participation, where the teacher acknowledges the student’s potential from a principle of equality (Gamboa Sandoval, 2024). Consequently, faculty development becomes the catalyst for a broader “chain of change” that impacts not only the individual classroom but also the overarching institutional culture, moving from mere accommodation toward a standard of universal accessibility.

### 3. Methodology Design

#### 3.1. *Research Design, Phases of the Study, and Description of Instruments*

The study adopts a qualitative, inductive, and exploratory approach grounded in the interpretive tradition, particularly within the phenomenological–hermeneutic framework. This methodological positioning enables an in-depth understanding of how educational actors construct meaning through their experiences, practices, and reflections on inclusion and neurodiversity in the university context.

From this perspective, the study seeks to interpret the meanings, tensions, and contradictions that emerge between institutional discourses on inclusion and the situated realities of pedagogical practice, recognizing faculty members as key agents of cultural and institutional transformation within the university. Accordingly, the research does not focus solely on identifying technical or methodological changes in teaching practices, but rather on understanding the subjective and relational transformation processes experienced by both faculty and students. These processes include shifts in conceptions of neurodiversity, pedagogical attitudes, empathy, listening practices, and the ethical dispositions that sustain inclusive teaching.

In terms of design, the study was developed as a qualitative inquiry based on faculty focus groups, student focus groups, and academic life narratives. The methodological process was organized into three phases: (a) design and preparation of instruments, (b) data collection, and (c) analysis and interpretive integration. Data collection was conducted between August and September 2025 through remote focus groups and written narrative submissions.

### 3.1.1. Description of Instruments and Tools

Data collection relied on a set of qualitative instruments. First, semi-structured focus group guides were used with both faculty and students. These guides were developed based on the objectives of the study and the ToC framework and were designed to explore conceptions of neurodiversity, pedagogical attitudes, teaching practices, institutional conditions, and relational experiences within the classroom.

In addition, an accessibility and remote participation protocol was implemented to ensure inclusive communicational conditions. This protocol included the use of clear language, scheduled breaks, optional camera use, and the possibility of participating either orally or via chat, thereby fostering an emotionally safe environment, particularly for students on the autism spectrum.

A narrative format for academic life stories was also employed to guide faculty members in producing written accounts of meaningful experiences supporting neurodivergent students. This format encouraged reflection on lived situations, pedagogical decisions, ethical dilemmas, institutional supports, and emergent learning.

All sessions and narratives were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, forming the qualitative corpus of the study. For data organization, coding, and analysis, the software Atlas.ti 23 was used, enabling systematic management of the corpus, construction of analytical matrices, and traceability of the interpretive process.

All sessions were conducted remotely, ensuring informed consent and adherence to ethical principles of confidentiality and voluntariness. Faculty participants had attended, during the eighteen months preceding the study, professional development initiatives related to UDL, neurodiversity, and the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum. Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling, considering disciplinary diversity, gender, and representation across campuses.

From an analytical standpoint, the study employed an inductive and exploratory strategy, using the ToC as both a methodological and analytical framework. The ToC enables the explicit modeling of causal relationships among actions, assumptions, contextual conditions, and expected outcomes, facilitating an understanding of how and why change processes unfold in complex educational contexts (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020; Retolaza Eguren, 2009). In this study, the ToC framework allowed for the articulation of faculty training processes, subjective and relational mechanisms of change, and the observed effects on pedagogical practices and institutional culture.

## 3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed, allowing for the triangulation of perspectives and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, integrating both faculty and student voices: (a) faculty focus groups, (b) student focus groups, (c) academic life narratives, and (d) data analysis.

### 3.2.1. Faculty Focus Groups

Three virtual focus group sessions were conducted with university faculty members ( $n = 6$  to 8 participants per group), each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The objective was to explore the effects of neurodiversity training on faculty members' conceptions, attitudes, emotional dispositions, and pedagogical practices.

The discussion guide addressed the following dimensions: (a) prior conceptions of neurodiversity and perceived teaching self-efficacy; (b) significant experiences during the Unidad de Mejoramiento Docente (UMD) training process; (c) changes in beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical practices following the training; (d) concrete examples of pedagogical adjustments implemented in the classroom; (e) institutional barriers and facilitators affecting the sustainability of change; and (f) recommendations for strengthening future faculty development programs.

### 3.2.2. Student Focus Groups

Two remote focus group sessions were conducted with students ( $n = 6$  students per session), each lasting between 75 and 90 minutes. Each group included both autistic and neurotypical students. Communicational accessibility was ensured through the use of clear language, voluntary pauses, optional camera use, and open participation via chat.

The discussion guide was structured around five thematic axes: (a) experiences in courses taught by faculty trained in neurodiversity; (b) accessibility and assessment practices, considering clarity, timing, and formats; (c) classroom climate and participation, with emphasis on sensory regulation and respect for diversity; (d) perceived impact on learning processes and emotional well-being; and (e) recommendations for future training initiatives and inclusive teaching practices.

### 3.2.3. Academic Life Narratives

Four academic life narratives were collected from faculty members, focusing on meaningful experiences supporting neurodivergent students. These narratives enabled a deeper exploration of the subjective, ethical, and reflective dimensions of change, revealing processes of identity reconfiguration, cultural resistance, and emergent learning associated with inclusive teaching practices.

### 3.2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic process of open, axial, and selective coding, guided by the ToC framework. A hybrid coding strategy was employed: deductive, based on the core components of the ToC framework, and inductive, allowing categories to emerge from participants' discourse.

The resulting categories were organized to represent inputs (training and content), mechanisms of change (conceptual understanding, belief modification, and the development of pedagogical empathy), proximal outcomes (pedagogical adjustments, accessibility practices, and classroom climate), contextual conditions (time, resources, and institutional support), and perceived impacts (inclusive culture and sustainability). These categories were articulated into chains of change, enabling interpretation of the transformation processes described in the results, from individual and relational modifications to second-order cultural effects at the institutional level.

The software Atlas.ti 23 was used to organize the corpus, manage codes, and construct analytical matrices integrating faculty and student perspectives. Triangulation across techniques and data sources strengthened the study's internal validity and supported a holistic interpretation of the observed processes. As shown in Table 1, the distribution of participants varied slightly by data collection technique and gender.

**Table 1.** Approximate percentage distribution of participants by data collection technique and gender.

Data collection technique	% Women	% Men
Faculty focus groups	~65–70%	~30–35%
Student focus groups	~60–65%	~35–40%
Faculty narratives	~75%	~25%

Notes: Percentages are presented as approximate figures, given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the study; the table is descriptive and intended to provide methodological transparency, not to support statistical comparisons by gender; faculty narratives correspond to individual accounts and are analyzed as a complementary technique to focus groups.

### 3.3. The Case Study

The Chilean higher education system is defined by a structural tension between its role as a vehicle for social mobility and a market-oriented logic characterized by intense competition for enrollment and public funding (Mella & Moya, 2024). While policies based on credit have significantly expanded enrollment over the last two decades, this expansion has not necessarily translated into a reduction of inequality. Instead, the system often reformulates segregation, where access remains highly stratified by social origin and institutional prestige (Valenzuela & Kuzmanic, 2023). In this context, the university is perceived as a primary mechanism for social advancement. Nevertheless, students from the lower deciles who often constitute the first generation in their families to access higher education frequently encounter systemic barriers that undermine their persistence and academic success.

Within this setting, Chilean public universities are called upon to address national priorities by broadening coverage and ensuring equity. Unlike elite private institutions that operate under a logic of exclusivity, public entities such as the UTEM assume a state-mandated responsibility for social inclusion. However, these processes unfold amid academic precarity and managerial pressures that constrain faculty agency (Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015; Deem et al., 2007). Nevertheless, as Leiva et al. (2023) argue, collaborative networks and political pedagogical commitment can counter these limitations, generating spaces of resistance and creative engagement within rigid institutional structures.

As a state institution, the identity of UTEM is intrinsically linked to the democratization of knowledge and the promotion of social justice. According to its updated educational model of 2023 (Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana [UTEM], 2023), the university defines its mission through a vocation of service, prioritizing students from vulnerable social and economic backgrounds. The model moves beyond a traditional focus on academic performance to embrace an approach centered on the student that values diverse educational trajectories. In recent years, this commitment has expanded to the broadest level of inclusion, implementing an active equity and inclusion policy since 2018. This situation made the UTEM context a suitable case study for exploring the impact of the neurodiversity training programs aimed at supporting students on the autism spectrum. The selection of UTEM as a case study is justified by its empirical relevance and its potential to provide transferable insights to other Latin American public universities undergoing similar processes of institutionalizing educational inclusion. This case represents a strategic entry point from which to observe how public institutions, under-resourced and facing market pressures, can leverage faculty development to foster second-order cultural changes. According to Castillo Armijo (2021), this type of design facilitates a comprehensive examination of contextual dynamics, valuing the uniqueness of the case as a source of transferable knowledge.

The neurodiversity training program Universal Design for Learning (UDL): Reasonable Adjustments in the University Context, developed by the UMD, was designed to bridge the gap between institutional policy and the lived classroom experience of neurodivergent students. Within the framework of the ToC, this faculty training is conceived as a key strategic intervention to promote more inclusive pedagogical practices. It aims to equip faculty with practical strategies that allow them to address student diversity and rethink traditional teaching models.

The UDL course was structured into a series of modules oriented toward introducing and deepening the core principles of UDL: representation, action and expression, and engagement. The objective was to ensure that course planning and classroom practices were accessible and effective for all students, including those on the autism spectrum. The focus of the training was not limited to a single educational event; instead, it was articulated as a sequence of activities that foster equitable access to learning, the diversification of teaching strategies, and the enhancement of student commitment and performance. Following the training, faculty were encouraged to integrate UDL principles into their course planning, anticipating student variability and reducing structural barriers within their teaching environments. From the perspective of the ToC, this formative process acts as a mechanism that triggers first-order changes in pedagogical practices and second-order changes in beliefs and values. Ultimately, this contributes to the construction of inclusive classrooms and the resignification of difference as a structural value in higher education (UTEM, 2023).

### **3.4. Participant Recruitment**

Participant recruitment was carried out through a progressive and structured process designed to safeguard ethical principles, voluntariness, and accessibility. Differentiated procedures were established for students and university faculty.

Student recruitment was conducted in three stages. First, institutional information was used regarding students who had declared a diagnosis on the autism spectrum at the time of university admission or during their academic trajectory. This information was provided by the Inclusion and Student Support Unit of the Office of Academic Affairs at the UTEM, in accordance with existing confidentiality protocols. In a second stage, academic program directors from different schools were contacted to disseminate the invitation to participate via institutional email. The message explained the objectives of the study, its academic relevance, and the voluntary nature of participation, and included a direct contact link to the project lead. Finally, students who expressed interest participated on a voluntary basis and formalized their involvement by signing an informed consent form.

Faculty recruitment was linked to prior institutional processes of training in inclusion and neurodiversity. Within the framework of an institutional diagnosis regarding the presence of neurodivergence in the student community, UTEM implemented faculty development programs oriented toward UDL, which were disseminated through official institutional channels.

Approximately eighteen months later, faculty members who had participated in these initiatives were invited on a voluntary basis to take part in focus groups, with the purpose of reflecting on their training experiences and the perceived changes in their pedagogical practices. This recruitment process was carried out with the support of the Faculty Development Unit. Participation was formalized through informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and the academic use of the information collected.

### **3.5. Ethical Protocol**

The study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical principles for qualitative research in education and received approval from the Ethics Committee of the UTEM, which reviewed and authorized all data collection instruments, interview procedures, and accessibility protocols. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without academic or institutional consequences. Participation was formalized through the signing of an informed consent form.

Strict confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process, using alphanumeric codes in transcripts and in the presentation of findings. Given the participation of students on the autism spectrum, specific measures were adopted to prevent forced disclosure of diagnostic status and to ensure accessible and emotionally safe conditions for participation, including the use of clear language, scheduled breaks, flexible participation formats, and optional camera use. The facilitation of focus groups prioritized an ethical stance grounded in listening, respect, and care, consistent with the understanding of inclusion as a relational practice.

## **4. Results: Faculty Change as a Process of Understanding**

Overall, the findings show that faculty change does not occur as the immediate application of new strategies, but rather as a progressive process of understanding that involves conceptual, emotional, and relational dimensions. From students' perspectives, these changes translate into everyday experiences characterized by greater attention, improved communication, and a pedagogical relationship perceived as more respectful and supportive. Neurotypical students reported increased empathy toward their peers on the autism spectrum, while students on the autism spectrum emphasized feeling more listened to, understood, and emotionally safe during the learning process. These perceptions provide the context from which the transformation processes described below unfold.

### **4.1. Redefining Neurodiversity**

One of the first changes identified concerns a redefinition of how neurodiversity is understood by faculty. Prior to participating in training initiatives, several faculty members acknowledged that their understanding of the topic was limited and predominantly clinical. As one participant explained: "Before the training sessions, it was a completely unknown area for me...we used to talk about dyslexia or hyperactivity, and that was the extent of our knowledge" (Faculty D1, FG1).

Another faculty member noted that their conceptual framework relied on categories learned years earlier: "I stuck with what I learned years ago: dyslexia, hyperkinesia, cognitive difficulties. I had no idea there were terms like neurotypical or neurodivergent" (Faculty D2, FG1).

From students' perspectives, this conceptual shift was experienced through pedagogical practices that felt more respectful and less intrusive. One student on the autism spectrum (22 years old) described feeling supported without being overexposed: "The professor knew how to guide me through a path I could follow, without overstepping" (FG1). These accounts reflect a move away from deficit-oriented frameworks toward an understanding of cognitive diversity as a legitimate expression of human variability. From a ToC

perspective, this conceptual transformation constitutes an initial mechanism that enables subsequent changes in faculty attitudes and teaching practices.

#### ***4.2. Attitudes and Pedagogical Confidence Toward Students on the Autism Spectrum***

As conceptual understanding expanded, faculty members also became more aware of the emotional dimensions involved in working with students on the autism spectrum. Several participants described feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability when facing situations for which they lacked clear tools or sufficient institutional support. As one faculty member stated: “You act on intuition. I try to offer a calmer space or give more time, but I feel vulnerable—not knowing whether the student’s blockage is cognitive or emotional” (Faculty D3, FG1).

Paradoxically, this acknowledgment of vulnerability emerged as a turning point that prompted the search for adaptive strategies and gradually strengthened pedagogical self-efficacy (Botha, 2022). From students’ perspectives, these efforts were recognized and valued, although not without tension. One student on the autism spectrum (20 years old) described feeling infantilized in some interactions: “Sometimes I feel like they treat me as if I were a child....I’m not sure if it’s me or the professors, but that’s how it feels” (FG1). Another student (21 years old) explained their decision not to disclose their diagnosis: “I’ve preferred not to make my diagnosis public because sometimes you get segregated or looked at differently” (FG1). These testimonies suggest that inclusion depends both on faculty members’ ethical and relational dispositions and on institutional conditions that sustain—or constrain—pedagogical change. From a ToC perspective, these dynamics correspond primarily to first-order transformations.

#### ***4.3. The Learning of Pedagogical Empathy***

Beyond technical adjustments, both faculty and students described a profound shift in the pedagogical relationship, characterized by the development of greater empathy. Several faculty members reported changing how they interpreted student behaviors. As one participant explained: “I no longer see students as lazy but as unmotivated or overwhelmed. If they are in class, it’s because they want to learn” (Faculty D4, FG2). Another faculty member described a similar process: “Understanding the phenomenon helped me become more patient and go with the flow instead of reacting. I used to feel anxious; now I can observe without judgment” (Faculty D5, FG2).

For students on the autism spectrum, this shift translated into a greater sense of emotional safety. One student (21 years old) explained feeling calmer when differences were not emphasized: “I feel calmer when the professor explains naturally, without isolating me” (FG2). These experiences align with the notion of epistemic empathy (C. Rogers, 2019), understood as the capacity to situate oneself within another person’s cognitive experience. In this context, empathy operates as a relational mechanism of change, transforming teaching into an act of listening and recognition.

#### ***4.4. Transfer and Limits in Pedagogical Practice***

The subjective and relational changes described above were reflected in concrete pedagogical adjustments. Faculty members reported modifications in planning, assessment, and student support, including the use of

diversified methodologies and principles of UDL. One faculty member noted: “In my course, we incorporated UDL as part of the design of social projects; students understood that no one should be left behind” (Faculty D6, FG2). Another highlighted both progress and ongoing limitations: “I use short capsules, concise videos, and collaborative groups. However, there is still a lack of professional support in the classroom to accompany these cases” (Faculty D7, FG1).

From students’ perspectives, these changes were experienced as greater clarity in instructions, improved time organization, and more accessible visual support. However, they also identified persistent structural barriers, including the coexistence of inclusive practices with traditional teaching methods, sensory overload associated with excessive use of technology, and a lack of transparency regarding which faculty members had received inclusion training. These findings suggest that faculty training is valued when it translates into tangible pedagogical practices, but loses impact when it is not supported by sustained institutional structures.

#### **4.5. Inclusion as a Relational Act**

Faculty and students converge on a fundamental idea: inclusion cannot be imposed by decree—it is constructed through the pedagogical relationship. Meaningful change occurs when teaching incorporates listening, flexibility, and naturalness as everyday guiding principles in classroom practice. Under these conditions, inclusion is no longer experienced as an external mandate, but as a different way of relating to learning and to others. From this perspective, inclusion is configured as a deeply relational act that articulates several interdependent dimensions. Faculty dispositions are central, particularly the ability to avoid infantilization, foster student autonomy, and implement adjustments without segregation. These dispositions are expressed through concrete practices such as clarity in instructions, the use of diverse formats, active pauses, and experiential methodologies that accommodate different learning rhythms and styles. Together, these practices shape classroom climates characterized by empathy, respect, and emotional containment, especially in moments of dysregulation or overload.

Participants’ accounts also highlight the importance of a supportive training infrastructure, including professional development initiatives grounded in an ethic of care and the visible recognition of inclusive competencies. From a ToC perspective, these dimensions operate as interconnected chains of institutional learning, in which micro-level adjustments in everyday classroom practice can trigger second-order cultural transformations. In this sense, the “classrooms that listen to other minds” function as laboratories of educational innovation, spaces where a new ethic of difference is practiced and refined.

### **5. Discussion**

Taken together, the findings confirm that training in neurodiversity does not operate as an immediate transfer of techniques, but rather as a gradual process of identity reconfiguration for faculty (Brookfield, 2017; Illeris, 2018). Inclusive teaching becomes consolidated when technical knowledge is interwoven with reflective and emotional processes that transform beliefs, foster pedagogical empathy, and reshape the overall meaning of teaching. From the perspective of the ToC, this process can be situated in the transition between mechanisms such as conceptual understanding and belief modification and proximal consequences, including pedagogical adjustments and improvements in classroom climate. Although these changes remain

fragile and uneven, they signal an emerging cultural transformation: a shift from an assistance-based logic toward an ethic of recognition, in which difference is understood as a legitimate and productive dimension of learning.

The study further demonstrates that authentic faculty change is unlikely to occur through isolated training initiatives. Rather, it emerges when professional development is embedded within sustained processes, supported by communities of practice and institutional spaces for dialogue and reflection (Wenger, 2001). In this sense, neurodiversity moves beyond being a discrete field of intervention and becomes a collective learning laboratory that challenges the dominant power structures, temporalities, and epistemologies of the university.

Consequently, inclusion is revealed not merely as a policy objective, but as a relational, situated, and inherently political practice. It requires not only institutional frameworks and regulations, but also ethical dispositions, pedagogical sensitivity, and a willingness to listen. The “classrooms that listen to other minds” thus symbolize a transformative horizon: spaces where learning occurs in two directions—between faculty and students—and where difference is re-signified as a driving force for cultural change within higher education.

### **5.1. Institutional Policy Recommendations**

Based on the findings, several policy-oriented recommendations can be proposed to strengthen inclusive transformation processes in higher education.

First, universities should promote transformative faculty training grounded in inclusive pedagogies (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Forlin, 2010), prioritizing reflective components and an ethic of care over purely technical instruction. Second, institutions may consider the development of formal certification systems for inclusive competencies, including training in neurodiversity and emotional management, applicable not only to academic staff but also to administrative personnel and leadership teams. In addition, the creation of interfaculty communities of practice can facilitate the sustained exchange of inclusive strategies and collective learning, as suggested by Macdonald et al. (2019) and Andrews et al. (2017). These spaces should be complemented by participatory co-design mechanisms that actively integrate the voices of neurodivergent students into course planning and evaluation processes (Leiva et al., 2023).

From a monitoring perspective, the ToC framework offers a valuable tool for evaluating inclusion not through regulatory compliance, but through transformational outcomes related to classroom climate, pedagogical relationships, and students' sense of belonging (Angulo Cázares, 2023; López Herrera & Cos Garduño, 2025). Further recommendations include the development of an emotional infrastructure within universities, such as brief crisis response protocols and basic training in mental health, as well as institutional recognition of time and workload allocation for inclusive planning and pedagogical reflection.

Finally, universities should promote the ethical and accessible use of educational technologies, aligning digital platforms with inclusive instructional design principles, avoiding sensory overload, and prioritizing universal accessibility (Gonzales Otárola et al., 2023).

## 5.2. Study Limitations and Future Research Lines

First, the number of testimonies included in this study was determined by voluntary participation, considering both the existence of a prior diagnosis and participants' personal interest and motivation regarding autism. Nevertheless, some students on the autism spectrum did not feel comfortable making their diagnosis public, which limited their participation and constitutes one of the main limitations of the study.

Second, due to the case study design, the findings are not generalizable across higher education systems. Comparative research involving public universities in different Latin American countries would be particularly valuable for identifying institutional, cultural, and policy-related factors that enable or constrain the sustainability of inclusive change processes. Such approaches would also help distinguish context-specific dynamics from broader regional patterns in the implementation of inclusive pedagogies. In relation to the above, a limited number of studies were identified that apply ToC within educational settings, particularly in contexts focused on the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals and students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, the development of this research focus helps to address an existing gap in the literature.

Third, future studies should adopt longitudinal research designs to assess the long-term impact of faculty development initiatives, such as communities of practice and certifications in inclusive competencies. Examining their effects on student retention, well-being, academic engagement, and autonomy, particularly among students on the autism spectrum, would provide more robust evidence regarding the sustainability of institutional transformation processes.

Finally, future research should explore the role of educational technologies as supportive platforms for inclusion, not only in terms of academic accessibility but also as resources for socio-emotional support. Particular attention should be paid to how digital tools, learning management systems, and hybrid teaching environments can contribute to emotional regulation, anxiety reduction, and the creation of emotionally safe learning spaces for students on the autism spectrum. The ethical and situated use of technology, such as visual supports, anticipatory task structuring, asynchronous communication channels, clear feedback mechanisms, and emotional self-regulation resources, may play a key role in strengthening student well-being, autonomy, and active participation in higher education.

## 6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study aimed to analyze the role of university faculty as agents of institutional transformation in the inclusion processes of Students on the autism spectrum within a Chilean public university, with particular attention to the relationship between training in neurodiversity, inclusive pedagogical practices, and institutional cultural change.

In this regard, the research team found that the university's inclusion of students on the autism spectrum advanced when teaching capacities developed through training initiatives were translated into reflective and situated pedagogical practices oriented toward mutual understanding, emotional regulation, and instructional flexibility. In addition, the findings showed that active listening and the normalization of difference constituted central ethical dimensions for transforming teaching into a practice of cognitive justice, capable of recognizing a plurality of ways of learning and inhabiting the university.

However, the results also revealed the persistence of structural tensions between institutional inclusion discourses and university cultures marked by managerialism and the precarization of academic labor, which limited the sustainability of pedagogical innovations and constrained faculty agency as a driver of institutional change. In this context, the ToC proved to be a relevant analytical framework for identifying causal mechanisms, forms of resistance, and levels of transformation, allowing inclusion to be understood not as a set of isolated actions but as a systemic and relational process.

From a public policy perspective, the study results underscore the need for regulatory frameworks, including the Chilean Autism Law, to move beyond an exclusive focus on diagnosis and individualized accommodations and to promote institutional conditions that strengthen faculty development, curricular flexibility, and the recognition of neurodiversity as a structural component of higher education.

In this sense, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening faculty agency as a key driver of inclusive transformation in higher education. When supported by institutional conditions that value pedagogical reflection, collaboration, and recognition of neurodiversity, faculty agency can contribute to reshaping university cultures toward more equitable and responsive learning environments.

### Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge Víctor Poblete Pulgar, Dean of the Faculty of Construction Sciences and Territorial Planning at UTEM, and the Unidad de Mejoramiento Docente (UMD) for their institutional support.

### Funding

This project was supported by the Competition for Research Regular Projects, 2023, code LPR23-19, of the Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The datasets analyzed in this study are not publicly available due to interviewees' anonymity and data protection requirements. A de-identified summary of the data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### LLMs Disclosure

LLM tools were used solely for stylistic improvement.

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## Relational Change in Higher Education: How Students and Staff Navigate Diversity and Agency

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 9 January 2026 **Published:** 12 March 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

### Abstract

Higher education has traditionally been characterized by slow institutional change and entrenched norms, yet recent developments point to growing collective agency among academic staff, administrative professionals, and students. This study examines how different university actors—students, academic staff, and administrative staff—perceive diversity and their own agency in fostering change within higher education institutions. Drawing on Giddens’ theory of structuration and Bourdieu’s theory of practice, it explores how individual and collective actions both reproduce and transform institutional structures. Based on nine focus groups ( $N = 56$ ) across three European universities in Austria, Spain, and Lithuania, the research applies a shared coding framework and a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative pattern detection. The findings show that perceptions of diversity and agency are shaped more by professional role than institutional context. Students emphasize lived experiences and grassroots activism but feel structurally underrepresented; academic staff frame diversity as a pedagogical responsibility that is constrained by workload and limited institutional support; while administrative staff interpret agency through procedural discretion and professionalism, yet face bureaucratic inertia. Across all roles, the participants reveal a sense of “diversity fatigue,” reflecting the emotional labor of unsupported efforts towards inclusion. The study concludes that meaningful institutional change arises less from formal policy than from relational alignment, mutual recognition, and collaboration among actors, which enables everyday transformations within existing structures.

### Keywords

agency; diversity; enablers and obstacles for change; higher education; university actors

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, diversity and inclusion have emerged as central concerns within higher education (HE) research. Scholars have examined how structures of power shape access to and experiences within universities, documenting persistent inequities in student persistence and belonging (Museus, 2014). They have also highlighted institutional cultures, the reproduction of privilege, and institutional responses (Ahmed, 2012; Gillborn, 2008; Mergner et al., 2019). Despite the growing corpus of scholarship on diversity and inclusion in HE, several research gaps persist. For many European regions, empirical case studies remain limited, restricting the ability to draw comparative or longitudinal conclusions. Comparative cross-country studies in Europe are even more scarce, especially those examining how institutional structures and the role of different actors, such as students, academic staff, and administrative staff, intersect in shaping experiences of discrimination and inclusion. Only recently have studies demonstrated the pivotal role of different university actors and their agency and influence on diversity in HE (Altes et al., 2024; Bhambra et al., 2018; Leišytė et al., 2023; Pérez-Carbonell et al., 2021; Stage & De Jong, 2023). On the one hand, these groups are recipients of institutional diversity management. On the other hand, they also play an important role as actors of change, as they have the power to either facilitate or hinder it. However, integrative approaches that consider interactions between different actors and that connect micro-level experiences of inequality with broader structural and institutional dynamics are still missing (Brooks et al., 2020; Della Porta et al., 2020).

This article contributes to the literature on diversity in HE, filling these gaps by building on a cross-institutional analysis of focus groups conducted at the University of Salamanca (Spain), Mykolas Romeris University (Lithuania), and the University of Vienna (Austria). These three European universities were selected for their institutional diversity and geographical distribution across Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. The study captures perceptions during a specific post-pandemic period (2022–2023), recognizing that institutional change unfolds slowly over time through structures that are both longstanding and continually renegotiated. Drawing on Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration—still highly relevant in current analyses of agency in HE (McLaughlin, 2024)—and Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), complemented by contemporary applications in HE (Reay, 2017), this study examines how different actor groups within the university context perceive diversity and their role in supporting and reinforcing it, while situating these perceptions within broader institutional structures and fields of power. The study uses a shared coding framework to identify patterns and variations across institutional and actor-group contexts. In doing so, the study sheds light on how different groups across the three universities understand and position themselves—and others—as drivers or obstacles of change concerning diversity.

The aim of this research is to explore how university actors perceive diversity and how agency is perceived and enacted by different groups of actors, while situating these perceptions within broader institutional structures and fields of power. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews literature on diversity policies and everyday realities, as well as the role of actors in HE. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 outlines the methodological design at the heart of the contribution. Sections 5 and 6 present and discuss the findings of the study, before finalizing with some concluding remarks.

## 2. Diversity, Inclusion and Actors in HE

In the field of HE research, scholars have examined how structures of power shape access to and experiences within universities, with particular attention to categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, disability, religion, migration background, and sexuality (e.g., Ališauskienė et al., 2023; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Deem, 2018; Morley, 2012; Museus, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; Nyunt et al., 2025; Oliveira et al., 2025; Reay, 2017; Renn, 2007; Wolff et al., 2020). A defining feature across these domains is the growing influence of intersectionality, emphasizing how overlapping identities and structures of inequality produce distinct forms of disadvantage (Gast et al., 2025; Ifedi, 2017). This perspective has shifted the focus from individual resilience and adaptation to institutional accountability, systemic reforms, and the role of policies (Ahmed, 2012; Brooks et al., 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

### 2.1. *The Gap Between Policy and Day-To-Day Realities in HE*

Diversity policies have become a near-ubiquitous feature of HE institutions, often presented as evidence of progressive values, institutional accountability, and alignment with global norms of social justice (Ahmed, 2012). Government regulations, accreditation bodies, and public funding structures have also played an important role in incentivizing universities to adopt explicit diversity commitments (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019). At the same time, activist mobilization by students, staff, and faculty, particularly from historically marginalized groups, has compelled universities to acknowledge structural inequities and to promise reform (Bhambra et al., 2018; Watts, 2022). In this sense, diversity policies are not only regulatory artefacts, but also institutional responses to political and cultural contestation.

Yet, as a growing body of critical scholarship makes clear, the translation of these policies into everyday academic life is uneven and often even contradictory. Ahmed (2012) has been pivotal in illuminating the perceived gap between diversity policy rhetoric and the lived realities of those it purports to serve. Ahmed conceptualizes diversity policies as “non-performatives”: institutional speech acts that signify commitment without necessarily producing the transformative effects they describe. Institutional discourse tends to abstract and depoliticize questions of race, gender, and inequality, and policy interventions often encounter resistance or inertia before becoming absorbed into existing managerial and bureaucratic routines without destabilizing entrenched hierarchies (Ahmed, 2007).

On the contrary, Marín-Spiotta et al. (2020) show that institutional climates themselves can be hostile to equity—for example, within the geosciences, where barriers to diversifying the field remain despite formal commitments to equity. The uneven translation of diversity policies is also visible in the realm of pedagogy and student development. Yi et al. (2024) demonstrate how students’ reactions to university-sponsored diversity workshops are shaped by underlying colorblind racial ideologies, revealing the limits of policy when student attitudes and expectations are not directly addressed. For racially minoritized graduate students in HE programs, Nyunt et al. (2025) capture the difficulties of navigating institutions that espouse diversity rhetorically yet remain structurally unresponsive to their lived challenges.

These critiques highlight an important tension between the symbolic and the lived dimensions of diversity policy. As Rhoades and Slaughter (2004) note in their analysis of what they term “academic capitalism,” universities increasingly operate within systems of neoliberal logic that prioritize market competitiveness,

branding, and reputation management. Diversity becomes a resource to be leveraged for institutional gain—as the “politics of appearance,” rather than a substantive practice of transformation (Ahmed, 2012). Moreover, recent research warns that the symbolic celebration of diversity can translate into disproportionate emotional and symbolic labor for members of minoritized groups, who are often positioned as both beneficiaries and implementers of inclusion agendas (Secules et al., 2025). When institutional responsibility is displaced onto these actors without structural backing or recognition, diversity work risks becoming exploitative rather than emancipatory. Without structural support, such work risks becoming exploitative, generating “diversity fatigue” and emotional exhaustion from unevenly distributed responsibility (Harris & Linder, 2018).

## **2.2. The Role of Actors in HE**

Scholarship is increasingly beginning to examine the roles of different actors in HE (Leišytė et al., 2021). Students, academic staff, and administrative staff play distinct but interdependent roles in advancing or obstructing transformation. Student activism has driven curriculum decolonization, anti-racism, and gender justice through strikes, occupations, social media, and policy advocacy (Rhoads, 2016). In European contexts, activism has targeted tuition, neoliberal restructuring, climate justice, equality, and democracy (Brooks et al., 2020; Della Porta et al., 2020; Watts, 2022), yet research shows that high-visibility campaigns often yield only symbolic wins or initial policy shifts rather than sustained change (Della Porta et al., 2020; Shahjahan et al., 2021).

Research on academic and administrative staff remains limited and mostly UK-focused (Papen & Atanasova, 2025). European studies highlight academic staff as agents of change through curriculum innovation, inclusive pedagogy, and critical reflection on disciplinary norms (Altes et al., 2024; Mergner et al., 2026; Papen & Atanasova, 2025; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). Their capacity to meaningfully embed diversity depends on the alignment of individual commitment with structural support and the institutional frameworks that enable them (Enslin & Hedge, 2024; Tamimi et al., 2024).

Administrative staff play a key role in institutionalizing equality duties and governance mechanisms (Krücken, 2011; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004; Stage & De Jong, 2023), strengthening their sense of agency through professionalization (Velas et al., 2023). They often create the offices, procedures, and compliance mechanisms that sustain diversity work (Baltaru, 2019; Nímanté et al., 2021). At the same time, staff may encounter resistance to diversity initiatives or resist implementing policies themselves (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2023).

## **3. Theoretical Framework: Studying Agency in HE**

This article proposes the application of Giddens’ theory of structuration, in combination with Bourdieu’s theory of practice, to the question of how university actors perceive diversity and act accordingly within these institutional settings. Giddens emphasizes the temporal and recursive dynamics of structure and agency: how actors draw upon structures while simultaneously reproducing or transforming them (Giddens, 1984; Tucker, 1998). Central to Giddens’ perspective is the idea of the duality of structure: Social structures are both the medium and the outcome of social practices. He emphasizes that institutions shape actors’ possibilities for action, but actors also reshape institutions through their everyday practices (Giddens, 1984).

These everyday practices are structured by the rules and resources that actors apply to their actions (Ortlieb & Sieben, 2014). Structures are thus constraining and enabling at the same time. Moreover, this approach emphasizes that institutions are dynamic and prone to change.

Giddens thus alerts us to the possibilities of transformation through the everyday practices of staff, students, and administrators. Much of the university is built around deeply embedded routines: teaching practices, evaluation criteria, hiring procedures, student support services, etc. These routines can perpetuate exclusionary practices when they reproduce implicit norms, such as privileging certain academic traditions or dismissing experiences of discrimination as isolated incidents. At the same time, the routine character of institutional life means that small shifts—such as introducing inclusive teaching practices or creating reflexive spaces for dialogue—can, over time, reshape expectations and institutional cultures (Ortlieb & Sieben, 2014).

Bourdieu, by contrast, directs attention to the embodied nature of social dispositions and to the unequal distribution of capital within fields of power (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). His theory of practice deepens the analysis by foregrounding the role of power, embodied dispositions, and symbolic recognition. His approach contends that “individuals are positioned in shared social spaces (fields) according to their varying levels of resources (capitals)” (McLaughlin, 2024, p. 4). A university can be seen as an example of one of these “fields”—a relatively autonomous arena governed by its own rules of recognition and hierarchies of value. Within this field, actors bring different forms of capital. The notion of habitus gives people a tacit sense of how to become a competent social agent, which in turn generates practices that are constitutive of social life (Tucker, 1998). For example, students from underrepresented backgrounds may experience misrecognition or self-doubt in environments where their cultural capital is devalued, while staff may unconsciously reproduce dominant norms that privilege certain forms of knowledge and expression. Discrimination is thus not only overt, but also often embedded in everyday practices and taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge. This perspective helps explain why microaggressions or structural barriers in HE often remain invisible: They are not always recognized as discriminatory because they are naturalized within institutional fields.

## 4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative focus group design to capture in-depth perceptions of diversity, discrimination, and institutional responses across three university contexts. Focus groups allow participants to express experiences, opinions, and concerns in their own terms and to interactively question one another (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). This approach was complemented by the quantitative content analysis of coded data to identify patterns and divergences across universities and participant groups.

### 4.1. Case Studies, Sample, and Recruitment

This subsection introduces the three university case studies and outlines the sample and recruitment procedure. Table 1 presents a comparative overview of the three universities. By juxtaposing historical background, size, organizational structure, and internationalization indicators, the table establishes a factual basis for analyzing similarities and differences in diversity-related conditions across the institutions.

**Table 1.** Overview of the three universities.

Features	University of Vienna	Mykolas Romeris University	University of Salamanca
Year founded	1365	1990	1218
Number of students	~90,000	~7,500	~30,000
Number of staff	~11,000	~680	~2,800
Number of faculties	20	5	26
Number of international students	~30%	~12.5%	15%

As shown in Table 2, a total of nine focus groups (three per institution) were conducted at these universities between 2022 and 2023, involving 56 participants overall.

**Table 2.** Number of participants per focus group.

University (coded)	Students	Administrative staff	Academic staff	Total participants
U1	5	6	5	16
U2	8	5	5	18
U3	8	7	7	22
Total	21	18	17	56

All focus groups were held in person and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Diversity in gender, age, and institutional trajectory was ensured. Discussions were conducted in the national language, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in the original language. A common focus group guide and observation sheet (see Supplementary File 1) ensured methodological consistency. Participants were recruited through course visits and information sheets, and discussions were facilitated by a moderator and observed by a second researcher documenting group dynamics. Participation was voluntary, written consent was obtained, and anonymity was guaranteed. For comparability, transcripts were translated into English by bilingual experts, prioritizing semantic and cultural equivalence over literal accuracy (Lingard & Klasen, 2025; Piazzoli, 2015).

## 4.2. Methods

The study employed two-phase content analysis combining qualitative and quantitative approaches (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Julien, 2008). The coding framework was developed through a deductive–inductive process: initial codes were derived from theoretical perspectives on discrimination and inclusion in HE and refined through engagement with the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Trustworthiness was ensured following established quality criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), including systematic coding, intercoder reliability checks, consistent procedures across sites, and the transparent documentation of analytic decisions.

In the qualitative phase, transcripts were analyzed line by line, with codes and subcodes applied iteratively and organized hierarchically to capture broad categories and specific subthemes. Six qualitative experts conducted coding, piloted on an initial transcript to refine definitions and ensure consistency. Intercoder reliability was assessed on a student transcript excluded from the final analysis, with Krippendorff’s Alpha exceeding  $\alpha = .82$  (Krippendorff, 2004). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the finalized codebook (see Supplementary File 2) was applied to all transcripts.

Following qualitative coding, the relative frequencies of each subcode were quantified to examine their presence within and across universities and participant groups. In the quantitative phase, subcode frequencies were calculated and compared across participant groups (students, administrative staff, academic staff). Next,  $\chi^2$  goodness-of-fit tests were performed ( $H_0$ : equal distribution across categories); adjusted p-values were reported using the Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR); standardized residuals were used to identify over- and under-represented categories; and Cramér’s V was calculated as a measure of effect size (Cohen, 1988). The quantitative analysis complemented qualitative interpretation, identifying cross-context patterns without replacing in-depth thematic understanding. This dual-level analysis enabled the identification of common patterns and divergences shaped by institutional context and role. While the inclusion of three universities from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe enabled meaningful cross-contextual comparison, the study’s sample cannot represent the full diversity of European HE. The modest number of participants ( $N = 56$ ), while appropriate for qualitative depth, limits the generalizability of the quantitative results, which should be interpreted as exploratory and complementary to the qualitative findings.

## 5. Quantitative Findings

Following the mixed-methods design described above, the quantitative analysis provided a complementary overview of how perceptions of diversity, discrimination, institutional change, and agency were distributed across roles.

In category A (perceptions of diversity and discrimination), four variables displayed statistically significant variation across groups after FDR correction: *celebration of diversity* (A11;  $\chi^2(2) = 12.33$ ,  $p_{adj} = .0079$ ,  $V = .59$ ), *perceived lack of diversity* (A15;  $\chi^2(2) = 13.79$ ,  $p_{adj} = .0076$ ,  $V = .50$ ), *mental health and psychosocial disability* (A24;  $\chi^2(2) = 12.67$ ,  $p_{adj} = .0079$ ,  $V = .84$ ), and *understanding of discrimination* (A31;  $\chi^2(2) = 21.43$ ,  $p_{adj} = .0003$ ,  $V = .71$ ). Students were significantly overrepresented in A11 and A15, alternating between celebrating diversity and denouncing institutional homogeneity. Faculty members concentrated their contributions in A24, reflecting a pedagogical concern with well-being and inclusion, whereas administrative and service staff dominated A31, consistent with their procedural and regulatory orientation.

In category B (change agencies), contrasts were particularly pronounced. *Individual empowerment* (B11;  $\chi^2(2) = 47.41$ ,  $p_{adj} < .001$ ,  $V = .68$ ) was significantly higher among faculty members, while *Institutional enablers of agency* (B21;  $\chi^2(2) = 19.18$ ,  $p_{adj} < .001$ ,  $V = .75$ ) and *multi-level resistances and capacity gaps* (B23;  $\chi^2(2) = 10.89$ ,  $p_{adj} = .007$ ,  $V = .26$ ) were overrepresented among administrative staff. Students appeared less engaged across these subcodes, underscoring their limited perception of their own institutional agency. Overall, these patterns indicate that perceptions of change and empowerment shift from individual to structural levels along professional hierarchies.

In category C (perceptions of institutional change), *lack of leadership or will* (C22;  $\chi^2(2) = 20.33$ ,  $p_{adj} < .001$ ,  $V = .75$ ) was overrepresented among faculty members, while *structural and procedural constraints* (C21;  $\chi^2(2) = 4.59$ ,  $p = .101$ ,  $V = .21$ ) appeared most frequently among administrative staff. Although only C22 reached statistical significance, the effect sizes suggest meaningful practical differences, pointing to a shared perception of institutional inertia coupled with divergent attributions of responsibility and agency.

Taken together, these quantitative results depict a stratified landscape of meanings and priorities across roles and contexts. The following section deepens this analysis through qualitative evidence, illustrating how these statistically observed divergences are articulated in the participants' own narratives and experiences.

## 6. Qualitative Findings

### 6.1. *Diversity Matters! How Actors Perceive Diversity*

Consistent with the quantitative analysis, perceptions of diversity in HE are shaped more by professional role than by institutional context. Students, academic staff, and administrative staff share a commitment to diversity and an awareness of persistent inequalities, but interpret them differently. Students view diversity as a lived, socially formative experience, marked by both enthusiasm and disillusionment. Academic staff frame it pedagogically and structurally, emphasizing its learning potential alongside the added workload and limited institutional support. Administrative staff see diversity as an institutional and managerial concern, noting achievements in internationalization and procedural inclusion while expressing fatigue with bureaucratic demands. Across universities, these patterns reflect a shared interpretive field in European HE, differentiated by role and positional experience.

### 6.2. *Students' Perception of Their Agency and That of Others*

Students predominantly understand agency as the capacity to intervene in situations perceived as discriminatory or unjust, framing agency as something exercised within existing institutional structures. This can be through grassroots initiatives and decentralized actions, as well as through contacting student representatives. The use of collective representation structures (student councils, advisory services) is seen as an instrument for change, while at the same time, it is considered outdated for certain problems that arise in day-to-day university life:

When we saw the problem, we didn't just accept it. We wrote to the student representatives and said this isn't okay. They actually took it seriously and something changed. (Student, U1)

However, students' considerations are also critical to their own agency. Students emphasize the lack of collective student power and the need to foster student communities, representation, and internal connection through more collective, visible, and inclusive spaces for dialogue and engagement:

In comparison to anonymous complaint boxes or feedback forms, where there is only very isolated feedback, and then they say okay, one person says this and these are all just individual opinions. Um, I think it's important that there is a collective opinion-forming process or decision-making process taking place. (Student, U1)

Students widely recognize that change often comes through collaboration—especially collaboration with peers and academic staff. However, students also appreciate strict and transparent responses from leadership when problems arise, and report their discontent when there is no response:

I was glad that the whole university and the head of the university were so strict towards it. They were so open to communication with the media and everything. The teacher was kicked out of the university. And it was so transparent. (Student, U2)

### 6.2.1. Students' Perception of Enablers for Change

Students identify responsive lecturers and supportive administrative staff as key enablers of change, particularly through teachers' control over curricula and theoretical perspectives. Institutional support is perceived as mixed and highly context-dependent, with micro-level relationships based on recognition and dialogue contrasting with the institution's formal distance. This type of cooperation is described as contingent on individual allies rather than a coherent institutional culture, but where it exists, it enables small yet meaningful shifts, including curricular adaptations, procedural facilitation, and access to decision-making. From a structural perspective, these micro-level interactions function as enablers through which students and staff momentarily reconfigure institutional rules, allowing agency to be exercised within otherwise rigid structures.

### 6.2.2. Students' Perception of Obstacles to Change

The main obstacles that students experience come in the form of procedural inertia and implementation gaps: structures (commissions, evaluation instruments, guidelines) exist but often fail in practice or require sustained student pressure to act. This produces resignation and the sense that there is no routine level of institutional care. The result is frustration and, at times, disengagement: students continue to participate, but with diminished trust. Although students were less vocal, their qualitative accounts strongly emphasize procedural inertia and perceived institutional stagnation, suggesting that their actual experiences of these obstacles may exceed their frequency in the statistics:

If you've been there long enough...you know that nothing will come of it...it's always been like that and continues like that, we are just so used to certain things. (Student, U1)

Students also notice symbolic exclusion and hierarchical whiteness in programs: curricula, staffing, and classroom cultures reproduce homogeneity and thus constrain who can act or be heard. Here, academic staff and lecturers can also obstruct more inclusive and diverse settings:

We had a course related to the psychology of love and close relationships. Did we study anything about LGBTQ couples? Of course, not. So, the whole course was dedicated purely to heterosexual couples....So yeah, and the books support it, they were like from the 80s, the 90s. Even though there is a lot of research done on LGBTQ. (Student, U2)

## 6.3. The Perception of Academic Staff of Their Agency and That of Others

Academic staff show reflexive awareness of their role as agents of change within teaching contexts, enacting agency through curricular and discursive interventions, including introducing intersectional perspectives and implementing diversity into the curriculum by selecting specific texts, moderating debates, and modelling critical reflection. In this narrow sense, their agency is largely confined to the classroom, reflecting Giddens'

notion that actors navigate and reproduce structures within the immediate context in which they think that their actions have an effect:

In my courses, I made a formal commitment to include women and non-European authors. That's how I try to contribute to change. (Academic staff, U3)

They also emphasize self-control and intercultural awareness, mediating classroom diversity while managing the emotional labor associated with balancing institutional norms and student needs. At the same time, this emotional labor performed by staff can be read as an expression of habit, revealing how embodied dispositions and professional norms are negotiated within hierarchical fields to enable or constrain change:

Sometimes I feel like I'm doing emotional work that the institution doesn't see—mothering in academia—but it still feels like a form of activism. (Academic staff, U3)

I believe that as a teacher, you have to take the time to bring sensitivity into the room. For me, a practical difficulty is how to strike a balance between giving people a voice and putting them in the spotlight, and making them a representative of their religion. (Academic staff, U1)

### 6.3.1. The Perception of Academic Staff of Enablers of Change

Academic staff interpret institutional support mainly through the lens of resources and recognition. They acknowledge symbolic commitment to inclusion and equality, but lament limited practical follow-through. Institutional support is perceived as something that is slowly emerging and often only partial, delegating much of the responsibility to individuals:

Support is there, but it's voluntary. Nothing is mandatory, so it stays fragmented. (Academic staff, U1)

Academic staff across the three universities recognize the transformative potential of students and peer collaboration. They highlight vocal students as drivers of classroom change, which is co-constructed. In certain cases, teachers situate transformation in institutional and professional networks, extending the classroom to engage with supportive institutional units such as equality or diversity offices. This form of alignment manifests as shared ethical commitment rather than coordinated strategy:

The equality office helps when we need materials or when we want to organise something related to inclusion. (Academic staff, U3)

### 6.3.2. The Perception of Academic Staff of Obstacles to Change

Obstacles are described mainly as structural: heavy teaching scripts, limited seminar time, performance metrics, and career pressures constrain inclusionary practices. Academic staff at all three universities emphasized the challenges they face in supporting students and managing sensitive situations:

I had a three-day crash course before I started teaching...how can I deal with a heterogeneous student body...there's hardly any support at an institutional level. (Academic staff, U1)

Institutionally, they are actually trying to make barriers against any discrimination, but de facto, in our country, diversity is higher in university than in society. In fact, students here meet different cultures and they themselves make statements of a discriminatory nature, and we can see that....How much do we have to intervene in those situations? We manage only the teaching process and its organization. (Academic staff, U2)

Another important obstacle is the reproduction of entrenched power relations: professor versus mid-level faculty, permanent versus non-permanent staff, and academic versus administrative staff. This reflects the structure of the academic field, where unequal distributions of symbolic and institutional capital constrain opportunities for transformative action:

Universities are institutions...permeated by power relations...there are a lot of 'aha' moments for many students. (Academic staff, U3)

The university is more a reflection of society than a driver of change. (Academic staff, U2)

#### ***6.4. The Perception of Administrative Staff of Their Agency and That of Others***

Administrative staff perceive their agency primarily through professional ethics and discretionary judgment, navigating bureaucratic rules humanely and bending procedures to support students. Agency is linked to personal conviction and self-awareness, as training is voluntary and institutional frameworks are often lagging, constraining structural change. Staff members exercise agency at the intersection of structure and practice: bureaucratic constraints frame their actions, while embedded professional norms govern discretion and flexibility within the system:

Sometimes you just have to decide on your own. If a student needs help and it's not exactly in the rules, I'll still try to find a solution. (Admin staff, U1)

Administrative staff frequently acknowledge that students drive institutional change. Such cooperation is valued as productive pressure: students' demands and peer learning stimulate incremental institutional improvement. Alignment is sustained through everyday professionalism and mutual respect, not through formal consultation frameworks:

Just a small example from everyday life: In our seminar rooms, we only have two restrooms—one for "men" and one for "women." Now the students went and stuck a sign over them that says "All Gender." And they [the students] sent us an email saying they'd like us to change that. I forwarded the request. I don't even know if the university has taken any steps. I'm not sure if the university is already at the point of officially designating all restrooms as all-gender. But when I was recently in the seminar rooms, I saw that a discussion had broken out on that very piece of paper stuck to the restroom door. It said "All Gender" and underneath someone had written: "What about female students who don't want to share a restroom with men? For whatever reason?" Then someone else added: "It's a single-use restroom, you idiot." So, this kicked off a debate, right there on a piece of paper. I took a photo of it because I found it really fascinating. And this discussion won't end and shouldn't end, either. I don't know if we'll ever find a definitive solution. (Admin staff, U1)

#### 6.4.1. The Perception of Administrative Staff of Enablers of Change

Administrative staff discuss institutional support in pragmatic and procedural terms, focusing on how leadership and policy frameworks back (or fail to back) inclusion-oriented practices. Administrative staff express ambivalence: They acknowledge formal structures but note a lack of consistent guidance, describing a growing awareness but a lack of resources. However, if there is a proactive institutional environment, then staff also feel enabled to realize change in their own administrative practices:

There is more talk about inclusion now, but no extra time or budget for it. We do what we can; the will is there, but not the structure. (Admin staff, U2)

They [the diversity office] organize training, and that helps us deal with cases more confidently. (Admin staff, U3)

#### 6.4.2. The Perception of Administrative Staff of Obstacles to Change

Administrative staff articulate procedural and regulatory barriers very clearly: top-down directives, non-inclusion in planning, cumbersome systems, and visa and tuition rules that create inequities and limit front-line flexibility. These structural features are practical, recurring obstacles to change:

For the new colleague who just arrived from Ghana and has to deal with everything right from the start. The HR portal is not in English. It's really difficult to sit with him and fill it out when it constantly keeps reverting back to [the national language]. (Academic staff, U1)

They also highlight the reticence of leadership and a lack of a clear institutional stance: inconsistent statements on racism, partial compliance tied to legal obligations, and little visible top-level accountability. This reveals a hierarchical divide: Administrative staff see themselves as executors rather than co-designers of change. The feeling of being left out of discussions undermines motivation and limits ownership of reform processes.

## 7. Discussion

By analyzing diversity through the positions of actors rather than via institutions, this study advances an actor-centered understanding of diversity and transformation in HE. Across universities, students, academics, and administrative staff interpret and enact diversity through shared logics of practice shaped by their access to authority, resources, and recognition (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). These findings also indicate that actors experience institutional change as gradual and cumulative rather than disruptive, a temporality that aligns with Giddens' view of structures as recursively reproduced. At the same time, the convergence across roles reveals a shared interpretive field: a common language of diversity, inclusion, and fairness that transcends institutional boundaries. Actors are fluent in this language, yet experience its performative limits. They know what should happen, but encounter daily reminders that resources, recognition, and authority remain unevenly distributed. The resulting dissonance, valuing diversity while doubting its feasibility, produces fatigue but also opens up new spaces of potential and action.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its cross-institutional perspective, which reveals shared interpretive patterns across diverse European contexts. The consistency of perceptions—across students, academics, and administrators and across universities—supports Claeys-Kulik et al. (2019) and Watts (2022), who identify the emergence of a convergent European diversity discourse shaped by internationalization pressures and policy alignment. The study's evidence of a shared field of meaning across institutional contexts suggests that diversity rhetoric has become normalized across European HE, but remains filtered through similar managerial, pedagogical, and affective logics. This confirms that the challenges of implementing diversity are not confined to particular institutional cultures, but are embedded in transnational governance trends. These dynamics also align with broader European developments: both the Bologna Process and the European Strategy for Universities frame diversity and inclusion as core priorities while delegating much of their implementation to individual institutions. This helps explain participants' perceptions of slow and uneven progress.

For students, agency is experiential and voiced in a reactive way when they encounter behavior that they consider unjust or discriminating. Although they represent the majority in terms of numbers, they feel relatively unrepresented in these structures, and also perceive their own lack of networking as a limitation on their ability to act. Accordingly, collaboration with other university actors is key for them in order to achieve small but crucial changes. In contrast, academic and teaching staff have a strong understanding of their own agency. By being able to design their own courses and materials, they see themselves as transforming agents. They note critically that recent developments and new forms of governance at universities are increasingly limiting their agency through the creation of more organizational tasks. Additionally, administrative staff consider themselves as executors rather than co-designers of change. Their agency is deployed in collaboration with students and academic staff, whom they support. They also see their ability to act in their capacity to implement, bend, or refuse rules and regulations. However, this discretion only applies to a small part of everyday regulations, whereas they feel powerless in other areas. Patterns of engagement thus differ across roles due to different field positions and the distribution of symbolic capital.

The findings of this study show that diversity fatigue is unevenly distributed across these groups of actors. In line with critical scholarship (Harris & Linder, 2018), the emotional and symbolic labor of inclusion falls on those who are personally driven to address it. These actors experience both empowerment and exhaustion, as well-intentioned diversity work reproduces structural asymmetries when insufficiently supported (Ahmed, 2012; Giddens, 1984). This misalignment between formal structures and everyday practices was translated into two strands by the actors interviewed in this study. Firstly, individual misalignment means that other actors do not fully instantiate policies. They misbehave, ignore, or deliberately bypass existing policies—for example, teaching staff ignoring recommendations on gender-sensitive language. Secondly, institutional misalignment means that policies do not exist or do not fully enable the outcome that they were initially supposed to enable—for example, training that is not mandatory for all staff or a lack of university statements against racism.

These results suggest that despite, or perhaps because of, these structural shortcomings, relational change is the key to institutional transformation: it is through the negotiated interactions of actors that inclusion becomes a lived reality. This contribution thus reveals (for those actors interviewed) that meaningful change in diversity practices in HE arises less from formal policy than from relational alignment between actors.

When students, academics, and administrators engage in mutual recognition, listening, collaborating, and acknowledging each other's expertise, change becomes tangible. These findings resonate with Ahmed's (2012) observation that institutional transformation depends on "everyday diversity work," yet extend her argument by showing how change emerges between rather than within actor groups, even when it is not necessarily concerned with diversity work. Alignment typically occurs in micro-contexts, classrooms, committees, or small administrative units, where interpersonal trust allows experimentation and learning (cf. Mergner et al., 2019). However, such micro-alliances rarely translate into institutional strategies, leading to fragmented innovation rather than systemic reform, a dynamic also noted by Morley (2010) and Carr et al. (2025) in their analyses of proceduralized equality agendas.

These findings advance ongoing debates about the tension between rhetoric and reality in diversity governance (Ahmed, 2012; Morley, 2010; Stage & De Jong, 2023) by demonstrating how this gap is negotiated in practice. Diversity work emerges not simply as compliance or resistance, but as a field of interaction in which actors reinterpret institutional rules, forming alliances that occasionally subvert inertia. The study contributes a relational and actor-centered framework for understanding change: It shows that transformation depends less on new policies than on cultivating everyday reflexivity, recognition, and collaboration within existing institutional structures. In this sense, it redefines institutional inertia not as immobility but as a dynamic field of negotiation, where symbolic power can be both reproduced and contested.

These dynamics also carry implications for ongoing DEI efforts in European HE. Supporting inclusion requires recognizing the interdependence of students, academic staff, and administrative staff, and enabling them to act collectively rather than in fragmented ways. Sustained progress further depends on institutional infrastructures that align policy commitments with clear mandates, adequate resources, and opportunities for professional development. Finally, the slow and cumulative nature of change observed across the three universities highlights the relevance of long-term, relational approaches that reinforce everyday practices within the broader frameworks set by European-level processes.

## 8. Conclusion

This study examined how students, academic staff, and administrative staff perceive diversity and their agency in fostering institutional change. The findings across the three universities reveal strong cross-actor similarities, suggesting that perceptions of diversity are shaped more by professional role than by institutional context. Students experience diversity in everyday interactions, academics in pedagogical and structural terms, and administrators through the procedural and managerial lenses. The differences are not in the underlying values—as diversity is consistently viewed as a moral and professional good—but in the positions from which actors experience the limits of diversity. This highlights how universities, despite national or policy differences, operate within a shared transnational field of HE, where common norms, bureaucratic practices, and managerial logic structure engagement with diversity.

Through the combined lens of Giddens and Bourdieu, universities emerge as dynamic fields where structures are continuously negotiated. Giddens' structuration illuminates actors' everyday negotiation of rules, while Bourdieu's habitus and field capture patterned asymmetries of power and recognition. Rather than fully reconciling these perspectives, this study mobilizes their tension heuristically to explain how

inclusion in HE is simultaneously enacted and constrained within the same institutional settings. Ultimately, change depends less on new policies than on sustained alignment among actors who recognize their interdependence in shaping inclusive academic cultures.

### Acknowledgments

This study was conducted within the HELCI Project (Erasmus+ 2021-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000032234). We thank the HELCI team and all participants for their contributions.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

The interview data analyzed in this study contain sensitive and potentially identifiable information and cannot be shared publicly due to participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts relevant to the analysis are included within the article.

### LLMs Disclosure

The authors declare that no large language models (LLMs) or generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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## “You are One of Them”: Performing Inclusion and Practicing Marginalization in Academia

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**Submitted:** 30 October 2025 **Accepted:** 9 January 2026 **Published:** 26 March 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Diversity and Change Agents in Higher Education” edited by Liudvika Leišytė (TU Dortmund University), Rosemary Deem (Royal Holloway), and Ivana Nacinovic Braje (University of Zagreb), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i480>

### Abstract

This article critically examines how diversity initiatives in higher education can paradoxically reinforce exclusionary practices, particularly within academic systems that frame inclusion as both an ethical commitment and institutional achievement. Through an autoethnographic approach grounded in everyday academic encounters, I analyze how power is reinforced through routine interactions and how individual actors actively sustain racialized hierarchies under the banner of inclusion. Scholars of color are frequently perceived through reductive racialized or migrant identities, regardless of credentials or scholarly contributions, revealing how institutional whiteness is reproduced not only structurally but through interpersonal practices. Rather than presenting these dynamics as abstract or unintentional, the article interrogates how specific actions—such as symbolic inclusion, exceptionalization, and performative allyship—uphold the “neutral” norms of white, middle-class academic culture. Drawing on García Peña’s (2022) critique of “The One,” I argue that diversity discourse often masks deeper power asymmetries by isolating and instrumentalizing minoritized scholars, positioning them as representatives rather than colleagues. By shifting attention from representational inclusion to the micro-politics of complicity, this article calls for greater accountability in how inclusion is practiced and performed within academic communities. By naming these practices, it aims to open space for more critical institutional analysis and the possibility of transformative change.

### Keywords

autoethnography; critical whiteness; exclusionary dynamics; performative allyship; practices of complicity; representation politics

## 1. Introduction

*Bi gur ra dikujin, bi şivan ra duxwin, bi xwedî re digrîn*

With the wolf, they kill; with the shepherd, they eat; with the owner, they cry.

This Kurdish saying captures the contradictory and opportunistic nature of complicity and shifting alliances. Each part of the proverb names a performance of solidarity that masks self-interest. “With the wolf, they kill” suggests that rather than resisting harm, actors actively join the aggressor when it is profitable or safe to do so. “With the shepherd, they eat”: Here, the same actors move seamlessly into sharing spoils with those in positions of authority or resource control. The act of eating implies not just survival but participation in the rewards of the dominant system. Finally, “with the owner, they cry” signals alignment with the victim through performances of grief, solidarity, and innocence. This framing exposes mourning as a performative practice—less oriented toward justice than toward the appearance of ethical responsibility—while concealing prior participation in violence and consumption. Mourning thus functions as spectacle, stabilizing existing power relations by allowing those implicated in harm to disavow responsibility.

Read as a theory of complicity, the proverb stages the performativity of solidarity itself: People occupy whichever role—violent collaborator, loyal companion, or grieving ally—best serves their immediate interests. It critiques the fluidity of positioning, where gestures of empathy or “diversity” function less as ethical commitments than as tactical maneuvers. In contemporary academic contexts, this proverb resonates with critiques of institutional antiracism and diversity work, where proclamations of commitment co-exist with complicity in harm, and symbolic acts of mourning or inclusion obscure the structures of violence that persist beneath them (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022). The proverb thus condenses a sharp skepticism toward representation politics, revealing how performances of solidarity can operate with power rather than transform it: aligning with power when it kills, profiting when it distributes, and mourning only when mourning is safe.

The institutional response to an increasingly diverse university has largely taken the form of diversity statements and the establishment of anti-discrimination offices. Yet these initiatives often do not bring about the changes they name; instead, they function as institutional speech acts that substitute declaration for transformation. They follow a logic of representational inclusion, assuming that the presence, naming, or visibility of a person from a marginalized community is sufficient to meet diversity demands. Diversity thus becomes a mode of self-presentation, allowing universities to appear progressive while leaving racialized power relations and structural inequalities fundamentally undisturbed (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022). This form of representational inclusion functions less as a pathway to genuine inclusion than as a regulatory mechanism that manages difference while preserving institutional comfort.

Within these conditions, diversity initiatives frequently reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to dismantle. They foster the emergence of academic “saviors”—predominantly white scholars—who leverage the lived experiences and narratives of people of color (PoC) to advance their own intellectual and institutional standing. Drawing on hooks’s (2015, p. 7) critique of the “imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize,” I argue that spaces ostensibly dedicated to dialogue and solidarity are transformed into sites of epistemic extraction. Narratives shared in trust are appropriated, translated into institutional capital, and repurposed for careerism. This dynamic is sustained by neoliberal academic logics

that prioritize competition, visibility, and productivity over collective engagement, disproportionately disadvantaging scholars of color who lack access to institutional protection and networks of power.

Through a reflexive autoethnographic analysis, this article develops three interrelated contributions: It reframes inclusion as a micro-political practice, conceptualizes complicity beyond intention, and treats autoethnography as a mode of epistemic accountability. As such, it examines these dynamics not only at the level of policy or discourse, but through the micro-politics of everyday academic interactions—moments in which individual actors actively reproduce whiteness while claiming the language of inclusion. Drawing on encounters across multiple higher education contexts, I analyze how practices of diversity and solidarity are enacted in practice, illuminating the proverb’s insight, particularly the phrase “eat together with the shepherd.” Focusing on moments when a person of color enters an academic space and disrupts the comfort of managed diversity—what Ahmed (2021) terms “killing the joy”—the article argues that, within a colonial academic framework, invitations to inclusion often entail subtle but consequential forms of appropriation. This epistemic and professional cannibalization transforms PoC into resources whose presence and narratives are mined for institutional legitimacy.

As Ahmed (2021) notes, while many academics are experienced in researching marginalized communities, they are far less accustomed to working alongside marginalized people as colleagues. Academic institutions thus continue to reproduce racialized hierarchies even in spaces that explicitly promote diversity. My positionality as a person from Turkey living and working in Austria is central to this analysis. People from Turkey—historically associated with *Gastarbeiter* (“guest worker”) migration—are often subjected to specific forms of racialization that fix them within a narrow migrant image. In Austria, migration is predominantly framed through discourses of integration, treated as a burden that migrants themselves must manage. Integration is individualized and culturalized as an obligation, while structural issues such as labor exploitation, housing precarity, and educational exclusion are obscured by dominant narratives of security and identity. Although so-called guest workers were expected to be healthy and hard-working, they were largely denied access to language education and opportunities for social mobility. This history has now been erased and replaced by a deficit-oriented narrative through which both “guest workers” and their descendants continue to be governed and devalued—conditions that shape how scholars from these backgrounds—even those who are not descendants of “guest workers”—are positioned within academia.

### **1.1. Autoethnography as a Method of Resistance**

In reflecting on autobiographical writing in the context of slavery, Morrison (1995) argues that autobiography was, for the enslaved, the only means of being acknowledged as existing subjects. Their very existence—and its recognition—became possible through forms of white co-authorship, whether through editorial control, prefaces, or introductions. Such mediation rendered Black narratives “objective” and thus acceptable for literary appraisal; otherwise, they were dismissed as “biased.” As a result, Black autobiographers were compelled to write with restraint and composure, suppressing expressions of anger in order “not to offend the reader by being too angry” and risk alienating their predominantly white readership (Morrison, 1995, p. 87).

Clearly, the violence of slavery does not operate within the same historical, ethical, or lived context as academia and carries profoundly different implications for human life. However, what Morrison identifies

here is not a historical exception but a recurring epistemic demand: That marginalized subjects must render their knowledge legible, controlled, and palatable to white authority to be recognized as knowledgeable at all (Abuzahra, 2023). Academic knowledge production continues to be structured by this demand. Claims to objectivity, neutrality, and distance often function not as methodological virtues, but as disciplinary technologies that regulate who may speak, how, and with what affect. Autoethnography is not employed here as a substitute for more “rigorous” methods, but as a necessary methodological intervention. It allows for the systematic analysis of lived experience as structurally produced rather than personal, and for the examination of complicity, extraction, and exclusion as they unfold in routine academic practices. Because the forms of power analyzed in this article operate through informal encounters—seminars, workshops, conferences, meetings, collaborative projects, and moments of unsolicited intimacy—they cannot be adequately accessed through methods that presuppose stable boundaries between researcher and field, or that treat racialized harm as an exceptional event rather than a patterned condition of academic life. Autoethnography explicitly acknowledges subjectivity and emotionality, refusing the pretense of neutrality that often functions to silence critique. This method sensitizes readers to experiences that are routinely dismissed as anecdotal, individual, or irrelevant within institutional contexts (Viaene et al., 2023)

This methodological choice is particularly significant in light of institutional responses to racism, discrimination, and harassment. These responses often require affected individuals to document each incident in detail, producing a protocol that institutions claim can support accountability. However, such documentation frequently disappears into what might be called a “grave of protocols,” where it is dismissed as anecdotal, insufficient, or emotionally driven. In some cases, the account circulates back to those implicated in harm, producing further vulnerability for the person who reported it. As such, the burden of emotional and administrative labor falls on the complainant, who remains without redress (Alpagu, 2024). This article refuses such institutional modes of memory management and institutional forgetting.

All individuals and institutions referenced in the analysis are anonymized, and identifying details are deliberately obscured to prevent recognition. The material analyzed in this article consists of contemporaneous field notes documenting academic interactions across multiple higher education contexts, supplemented by retrospective memory notes. These notes were produced over an extended period during my engagement with academic spaces focused on migration, diversity, and related fields. What counts as “data” in this study are not only explicit incidents of exclusion or conflict, but also mundane interactions: invitations framed as inclusion, requests for collaboration, moments of recognition and misrecognition, and affective responses to being positioned as representative, exceptional, or extractable. These moments are treated analytically because it is precisely through such ordinariness that racialized power is reproduced and rendered unremarkable.

Field notes were written as close as possible to the time of the events they document, often immediately after encounters, and later revisited through reflective memo-writing. Rather than aiming for comprehensive coverage, the analysis focuses on recurring patterns across encounters, tracing how similar dynamics reappear in different institutional settings and with different actors. This repetition is analytically significant: It allows individual experiences to be situated within broader structures of whiteness and academic normativity, rather than framed as isolated or personal misunderstandings. My positionality is not a limitation to be controlled for; it is a condition of access to the phenomena under analysis. The interactions documented here occur precisely because I am positioned as a racialized subject within academic spaces that claim to value diversity

while reproducing exclusion. While the encounters analyzed here are situated in Austrian academic contexts, the dynamics discussed resonate with broader patterns documented in other contexts (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023).

The analytical strength of the data lies in its patterning rather than its singularity (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023). The encounters analyzed are not presented as representative in a statistical sense, but as structurally symptomatic. Their repetition across time, space, and institutional settings demonstrates that they are not anomalous but constitutive of how inclusion is practiced within contemporary academia. By making the conditions of knowledge production visible—rather than masking them behind claims of objectivity—this article offers a form of epistemic accountability that is often absent from institutional diversity research. Through this methodological approach, the article adopts an “oppositional gaze”—one that resists the “imperial gaze” (hooks, 2015), refuses whiteness as the unquestioned norm, and insists on the legitimacy of marginalized knowledge as knowledge. Autoethnography here is thus not merely a method of narration, but a method of intervention: One that interrupts institutional forgetting, exposes complicity, and insists that everyday academic practices be taken seriously as sites of power.

### 1.2. Whiteness and PoC: Terms in Context

James Baldwin reminds us that whiteness is not merely a racial category but a locus of power—defined by who holds it, exercises it, and benefits from it (Baldwin, 1967; Peck, 2016). This power shapes interactions even among those it marginalizes. The term “people of color” is inseparable from how I conceptualize whiteness as a structural and normative regime. Whiteness operates as the unmarked center of belonging, legitimacy, and epistemic authority, while “people of color” names those positioned as outside this norm. Crucially, “color” does not refer solely to skin tone; it functions as a relational marker that renders certain bodies, names, accents, and histories legible as not belonging. What marks someone as “of color” is their perceived distance from whiteness as the dominant frame of reference, their construction as *not from here*, where *here* signifies whiteness as the taken-for-granted horizon of social, institutional, epistemic, and national belonging.

The shifting operations of whiteness become particularly visible through examples shaped by movement across national and geopolitical contexts, and these movements illustrate the context that this article problematizes. As someone who moves between Turkey and Europe, I draw on the case of Kurdish people in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where Kurds constitute a large transnational population historically denied nation-state sovereignty and subjected to systematic political, cultural, and linguistic repression. Within these dominant national normative systems, Kurds are minoritized and exposed to exclusion and the “imperial gaze” (hooks, 2015), as whiteness operates through state power, nationalism, and ethnic majoritarianism rather than phenotype alone. When people from Turkey—and from the other three countries in which Kurds originate—whether Kurdish or non-Kurdish, are situated within European contexts, internal distinctions are largely flattened and they are collectively racialized as non-white. As a result, Kurdish individuals are subjected to multiple, overlapping forms of racism and discrimination. This example demonstrates that whiteness is not fixed but contextual and relational, reconfiguring who is marked as “of color” depending on location, power relations, and dominant frames of belonging. In this article, I use the terms “people of color” and “marginalized” interchangeably to emphasize that these are positions produced through processes of peripheralization.

In what follows, I return to the Kurdish proverb to illuminate academic practices, showing how academic institutions consume the labor and voices of their members while projecting the illusion of sharing the table. Through various academic encounters, I demonstrate how invitations to inclusion are structured by extraction rather than solidarity—how the invitation to the table is not to eat together but to be eaten. I do not invoke this metaphor as a form of resignation; rather, I do so to draw attention to the importance of marginalized people recognizing their own power—and their vulnerability, which does not oppose their power—and to insist that white positionality requires a genuine reckoning with the system it benefits from. Even when there appears to be no space at the table—or when the invitation exists only to cannibalize—there remain ways to make space, including through autoethnographic writing that documents and intervenes.

I begin with the first encounter: A seemingly ordinary academic interaction that reveals how inclusion operates as extraction, rather than as solidarity or as an opening of space for migrant voices.

## 2. Everyday Exclusion in Academia: Inclusion, Tokenization, and Reproducing Marginalization

I am staring at the screen, thinking, “what was that?” I feel an urgent need to talk about it—to understand what just happened. I contact my colleague, tell her about the situation, and add, “please tell me I’m not crazy. Am I exaggerating to feel this shocked after an academic meeting?” She writes back, “oh no, this is awful.”

These are my notes written immediately after an academic meeting. As a scholar specializing in migration studies, I had been informed about an upcoming convention on guest worker migration. Beginning in 1964, this migration was established through a bilateral agreement between Turkey and Austria to regulate the temporary migration of workers; ultimately, many migrants built lives and permanently settled in Austria. The meeting was convened to plan a series of events marking the anniversary of guest worker migration. I was invited to participate as a sociologist who had completed a dissertation on guest workers and had worked in this field for many years—or at least, that was how I understood my invitation.

During the meeting, I noticed that most of the organizers and invited speakers were white Austrians. I pointed this out, suggesting that the program should include more space for guest workers and their descendants. A white professor immediately responded: “Why? You are one of them, a child of guest workers,” and gestured toward two other scholars of color—both descendants of guest workers—implying that the presence of the three of us constituted sufficient representation. When I clarified that I was not a descendant of guest workers, an awkward silence followed. That silence was broken by one of the two scholars referenced before, who dismissed my comment by saying: “An organization with only people of color would be suspicious. A good mix is good.” She then took over the discussion, proposing to “ask around” for potential speakers and then continuing as though my intervention had never occurred. Earlier in the meeting, both scholars of color had admitted that they were unfamiliar with the current research on the topic. It became clear to me that they had been invited primarily because of their background rather than their scholarly engagement—an example of *lived representational diversity*. Their presence functioned symbolically, while expertise—mine included—was rendered irrelevant.

My colleague's invocation of a "good mix" signaled not balance but limitation: white Austrian scholars accompanied by a limited number of tokenized scholars of color. Tokenization operates by making scholars of color visible in name or presence while simultaneously limiting their influence, assigning them representational labor without epistemic authority. When I suggested centering the experiences of so-called guest workers and their descendants, this intervention was reframed as a disruption to the performance of diversity rather than a substantive contribution. In this way, initiatives framed as inclusive reproduce exclusion by tolerating difference only insofar as it does not unsettle the dominant order.

As Ahmed (2021, p. 246) observes:

Doors can be shut through perception: who you are perceived as being, how you are perceived as being. You can be shut out by being registered as an intrusion, sensory or otherwise. If the diversity door appears open, the diversity door is how so much does not appear.

Although I emphasized that an event marking this anniversary should feature not only (white) scholars but also the people whose experiences were under discussion, I was reduced to a single marker: being from Turkey. I was positioned as a presumed descendant of guest workers—a demographic token rather than a scholarly contributor. This reduction underscores how people from Turkey in Austria continue to be perceived through a singular and limiting lens, including within academic spaces that claim reflexivity and critical awareness.

This interaction illustrates how scholars of color are often perceived from the outset as outsiders or representatives, regardless of qualifications or expertise. Despite my longstanding engagement with the field, my analytical intervention was dismissed, and my presence was transformed into a performative act of inclusion. What became visible in this moment was not a misunderstanding, but a patterned academic practice through which racialized hierarchies of knowledge and belonging are reproduced—often in spaces that claim to resist them. How, under these conditions, can academia expect to build trust with communities of color while simultaneously treating its own scholars of color with such dismissiveness?

This moment can be read not only as an instance of exclusion but as a sociological crisis produced when racialized expectations are unsettled. Schütz's (1944) notion of the "stranger" captures this dynamic: When a person does not conform to the image assigned to them, their presence produces discomfort and disorientation. Marginalized individuals—here specifically migrants—are expected to fit into preconceived categories; deviation exposes an unwillingness to engage with complexity. In this encounter, my identity was fixed through name and appearance rather than expertise. My refusal—or inability—to inhabit the role assigned to me triggered a form of crisis, positioning me as a disturbance rather than a contributor. In Ahmed's terms, I was assigned the role of the "killjoy" (2023): the one who interrupts comfort, harmony, and the smooth performance of diversity.

My experience is not unique. Despite a growing population of students of color at Harvard—by 2021, more than fifty percent—faculty diversity remained minimal. During a Harvard faculty hiring process, Lorgia García Peña—who taught in the Department of Romance Languages—proposed hiring a scholar of Latinx studies to address this demographic imbalance. In response, a "well-intentioned" senior white colleague warned that bringing in another Latina scholar could jeopardize Peña's tenure. As García Peña (2022, p. 9) writes: "We are expected to make white people comfortable with our presence, or we risk being expunged.

My unwillingness or inability to be in harmony with whiteness...culminated in my dismissal from Harvard via tenure denial." García Peña's account makes explicit the disciplinary logic of whiteness that governs academic inclusion: Discomfort is punished, refusal is framed as excess, and those who do not perform gratitude or harmony are rendered disposable. García Peña (2022, p. 5) concludes that "the university was actively making sure racial diversity among faculty did not grow beyond the representational." The institution tolerated diversity only up to the point where it remained symbolic and contained.

As someone who has worked in academia for many years, I have encountered numerous challenges, including instances where my research was hijacked, alongside experiences of racism and discrimination (Alpagu, 2024). What shocked me during the convention meeting was not its novelty, but its familiarity—its ordinariness. It reactivated earlier experiences and made unmistakably clear that these are not isolated incidents but recurring expressions of a systemic logic within middle-class white academia that reproduces inequality while claiming diversity (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022). Naming these practices is therefore not optional; it is a necessary intervention into academic life as it is currently organized—where inclusion is performed, but exclusion remains intact.

This exclusion extends beyond ethnicity to the intellectual division of labor: Topics such as gender, race, and disability are frequently assigned to a single representative, as if one person were sufficient. These fields are thus treated as peripheral rather than integral to the institution's broader academic vision—where more than one scholar is considered too much. As García Peña (2022, p. 5) describes, "there can be only one of us." This logic resonates with Morrison's (1992) critique of literature, where the presumption of white experience as universal renders whiteness unmarked, and all other experiences are positioned as deviations expected to conform. Just as the university limits scholarly diversity to the representational, the literary canon enforces a similar normativity, shaping whose perspectives are recognized as standard and whose are marginalized.

### 3. Too Much, Too Visible: The Marginalization of PoC in Dominant Spaces

In an interview on the Australian television program *Uncensored* (1998), journalist Jana Wendt asked Toni Morrison whether she would ever write stories centered on white characters. Morrison responded:

You can't understand how powerfully racist that question is, can you? Because you could never ask a white author, "When are you going to write about black people?" Even the inquiry comes from a position of being in the center and being accustomed to being in the center. It implies, "Is it ever possible for you to enter the mainstream?" It's inconceivable that I already am in the mainstream. (dadadad321, 2017)

Morrison's response exposes how whiteness functions as an unmarked norm—positioned as universal, neutral, and unquestionable—while all other perspectives are treated as deviations that must justify their presence. This presumption of centrality mirrors my own experiences in academia. Deviation from the presumed center—whether in literature, academic discourse, or event organization—provokes discomfort, resistance, and silencing. The question posed to Morrison assumes whiteness as the default, just as my suggestion of a PoC-centered panel was interpreted through a lens that centers whiteness, implicitly rendering PoC peripheral. A PoC majority is perceived as "too visible" and a critical individual is already seen as 'too much' while a white majority remains unnoticed and unmarked. That a PoC-only panel could be deemed "suspicious," as remarked by a PoC participant herself, reveals how dominant norms are not only

imposed from above but also internalized and reproduced within marginalized groups. The insistence on “a good mix” did not function as a call for plurality, but as a mechanism of regulation, signaling that critique must remain within acceptable bounds. In this moment, PoC voices were mobilized to neutralize dissent—effectively conveying: “See, even one of you agrees.”

Alongside me, the other two PoC participants occupied different positions within this performative enactment of inclusion. One opposed my intervention immediately and energetically, dominating the discussion and foreclosing critique, while the other remained silent. In Turkish, there is a saying—*mazlumun mazluma yaptığını kimse yapmaz* (“no one hurts the oppressed like the oppressed do to each other”)—which captures how systemic oppression fractures solidarity by compelling marginalized individuals to police one another. This dynamic can be further understood through Du Bois’s (2007) concept of “double consciousness.” In his autoethnographic work, Du Bois describes the African American experience of living with a split perception of the self—one shaped by one’s own sense of identity and another imposed through the racist gaze of a dominant white society. Double consciousness names the condition of subordinated or colonized groups who are compelled to see themselves through the eyes of others, internalizing the judgments, stereotypes, and expectations of whiteness.

Read through the lens of double consciousness, the differing reactions of the two PoC participants—one actively opposing critique, the other remaining silent—cannot be understood simply as individual dispositions or moral failures. Rather, they reflect strategies shaped by the constant awareness of being evaluated against white norms of legitimacy. Overperformance, silence, or even opposition to critique function as survival strategies within dominant spaces, where being perceived as reasonable, compliant, and non-threatening becomes a condition of continued inclusion. Double consciousness thus helps explain how marginalized subjects may reproduce the very norms that marginalize them—not because they believe in them, but because they are required to navigate institutions that demand constant self-surveillance.

Two interrelated dynamics structure this process. First, PoC are often compelled to overperform in order to prove their worth within dominant institutions. As Baldwin (1967) observed, some of the most feared police officers in Black communities were Black themselves—not despite oppression, but because proximity to power required the visible demonstration of loyalty. This overidentification with authority echoes within academic spaces, where compliance is more readily rewarded than critique, and where challenging whiteness risks exclusion. Second, institutions position certain individuals of color as “chosen ones,” authorizing them to articulate narratives that align with dominant expectations. The television show *#1 Happy Family USA* (Youssef & Brady, 2025) satirizes this logic in the sketch “The Good Ones: Minorities Saying Majority Opinions,” where a Muslim, a Black person, an Asian person, and a gendered figure are staged as legitimate voices precisely because they reproduce majority views on race, religion, and gender. What is parodied here is the same mechanism that operates in academia: Representation is permitted only when it remains compliant.

The immediate opposition of one PoC participant and the silence of the other thus signaled institutional reassurance: “We are compliant; we are the ‘good ones’; we will not disrupt.” This positioning granted temporary authority while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchical power relations. As García Peña (2022) argues, institutions often rely on a single PoC scholar—“The One”—to perform diversity while containing its effects. This figure is burdened with representing “difference” as such, erasing internal plurality and

producing the illusion of a singular PoC perspective. Meanwhile, white and middle-class viewpoints continue to dominate institutional narratives, protected by their invisibility.

This logic of limitation reveals that performative inclusion does not disrupt whiteness but conceals it. Whether through the elevation of a token figure or the privileging of PoC voices willing to comply, the system ensures that diversity remains representational rather than transformative. Once more, deviation from the presumed white norm—whether in literature, academic debate, or institutional practice—produces crisis, resistance, or silencing. As is demonstrated in Morrison’s refusal to decenter herself, Du Bois’s articulation of double consciousness, García Peña’s account of academic containment, and my Schützian “crisis” of not conforming to what is expected of “the stranger,” being *too visible* becomes a problem precisely when visibility threatens to unsettle the center.

#### 4. Cannibalism Through the Instrumentalization of PoC Experiences

This section argues that academic commitments to diversity and antiracism frequently operate through the instrumentalization of PoC experiences, transforming harm into ethical and professional capital while systematically avoiding accountability. Drawing on everyday academic interactions, I show how racialized injustice is acknowledged, displayed, and circulated, yet rarely confronted in ways that disrupt institutional power relations.

I have written elsewhere about the hijacking of my research and the active support this appropriation received from a group of white women (Alpagu, 2024). Specifically, a participant in a women’s coaching program appropriated my work—an act later shown to have been enabled by the program’s coach, coordinator, and several members. When I exposed and resisted this injustice, neither the individuals involved nor the institution offered accountability or support. Instead, the response revealed a familiar institutional pattern: Commitments to diversity and antiracism collapsed when confronted with concrete instances of racial injustice. Initial reactions consisted of denial and deflection, followed by a refusal to assume responsibility. What emerged next, however, was a more insidious dynamic—instrumentalization. My experience was reframed as material through which others could advance their careers, a clear instance of performative antiracism. Harm became a resource: Its circulation functioned as proof of ethical credibility without requiring accountability. One central figure in my exclusion privately acknowledged wrongdoing but immediately framed it in terms of personal consequences, writing that she needed to consider “what the consequences are for me [her],” after which she ceased all contact. I later came to understand that these “consequences” referred to her newly acquired institutional role as a co-trainer combating racism in academia.

While I was seeking acknowledgment and support, she positioned herself as a “complaint actor” (Ahmed, 2021), filing a complaint against the program’s coach while refusing to publicly acknowledge her own role or that of the group. In doing so, she selectively redirected critique away from herself, converting proximity to racial injustice into professional legitimacy. Notably, she remained silent when another colleague experienced a similar injustice within the same program. At the same time, she went on to establish an antiracist training initiative at the university, positioning herself as an exemplar of ethical whiteness—someone who “acts the right way.” The initiative she developed was co-led by a person of color who was aware of both my experience and her involvement. As García Peña (2022, p. 33) observes, “the

biggest challenge in fighting against the colonizing structures of the university is precisely its accomplices...often unwilling to see their own complicity.” Rather than confronting specific instances of harm, racial injustice was abstracted, neutralized, and transformed into institutional capital.

A similar dynamic emerged in my interactions with another white colleague, illustrating how ethical disapproval often substitutes for responsibility. I had shared my experience of racism and exclusion with this colleague, only to learn later that she was collaborating with the same individuals who had previously marginalized me. I felt particularly uncomfortable, as she knew that her collaborators had actively participated in hijacking my research. During our conversation, she expressed compassion, acknowledged the wrongdoing, and repeatedly affirmed the value of my critical perspective and of voices like mine in academia. She criticized the white actors as “problematic” and the marginalized scholars, whom she saw as complicit, as “tokens.”

Following my withdrawal from collaboration with this colleague, she repeatedly asked me to recount what had happened, insisting, “I don’t want to work with racists.” Yet this insistence functioned less as solidarity than as extraction. As I noted in my memory reflections:

I had already lived through this scenario: pouring out my heart, exposing my experience of harm, only to watch nothing change—except that her reputation as an antiracist scholar grew stronger. I was left with the emotional labor, the exclusion, and the disappointment.

I was reminded of the same thoughts and feelings I had had when dealing with the administration of the coaching program that excluded me (Alpagu, 2024). The individuals had changed, but the structure was identical: *Tell me everything you experienced so that I can trim my performance.* I was hit by a “diversity wall,” where emotional labor is extracted and ethical legitimacy claimed while institutional arrangements remain unchanged (Ahmed, 2012). Dawson (2024) conceptualizes this dynamic as “trauma pouring,” a process in which marginalized individuals are repeatedly asked to narrate harm to sensitize the university, often at great emotional cost. While such disclosures may appear to mobilize concern, they do not necessarily guarantee structural change; instead, they risk becoming voyeuristic engagements—what some participants of Dawson’s study termed “trauma porn.” Listening and expressing sympathy, without pursuing structural change, thus function as performances of care rather than acts of solidarity.

This dynamic recalls the story of Nasreddin Hodja and the blue beads. Hodja gives each of his multiple wives a blue bead and instructs them not to tell the others, to avoid sparking jealousy. When asked which wife he loves most, he responds that he loves the one who holds the blue bead. The allegory captures how ethical gestures are distributed strategically to manage relationships, exploit vulnerabilities, and conceal self-interest. My colleague’s expressions of concern—calling me a “critical voice,” condemning “token migrants,” and critiquing “problematic” white actors—functioned as such blue beads, allowing her to occupy multiple ethical positions simultaneously. These practices illustrate a broader academic pattern in which acknowledgment replaces responsibility, critique substitutes for action, and harm is metabolized into institutional legitimacy. Rather than challenging the structures that produce exclusion, ethical performances often stabilize them, turning antiracism into a resource for professional advancement rather than a commitment to transformation. In this sense, my colleague embodied the proverb that frames this article—performing all three roles at once, distributing blue beads widely, and ensuring that accountability never fully materialized.

## 5. Epistemic Violence, Knowledge Appropriation, and Performative Collaboration

This section examines how epistemic violence operates through knowledge appropriation, particularly within academic and creative collaborations that are framed as ethical or collegial. Another instance of knowledge appropriation occurred with a white colleague who sought my consultation and drew extensively on insights from my dissertation for his art project, yet failed to acknowledge my contribution. When I confronted him, he justified his actions by assuming—without consultation—that I would not want to be associated with the project because of the institution’s Turkish nationalist leanings. While he engaged with me as a colleague—what I understood as an invitation to eat together—he was, in fact, appropriating my labor while silencing my name as a subaltern subject (Spivak, 1988). This encounter reflects a broader pattern in which career advancement is prioritized over ethical accountability, and institutional optics and personal gain outweigh recognition of marginalized contributors. The colleague’s actions exemplify selective acknowledgment and performative ethical positioning: Ethical concern is expressed rhetorically, while responsibility toward the source of knowledge is strategically deferred or erased. What is at stake here is not only recognition, but epistemic authority—who is permitted to speak, to be cited, and to appear as the origin of knowledge.

He offered me a kind of “blue bead” by sharing critiques of racist and exclusionary practices within migrant communities, while simultaneously offering another “blue bead” to the organization itself—thereby reinforcing intra-migrant hierarchies and exclusionary logics. In doing so, he positioned himself as the young white man capable of understanding and mediating between competing perspectives, framing my contributions on his terms while erasing my role. He thus participated in Western knowledge systems that consume “the Other” while presenting themselves as neutral or benevolent, reproducing imperial academic hierarchies (Spivak, 1999). Recognizing later that he had failed to acknowledge my involvement, he insisted that I not conflate him with the person who had previously hijacked my work (Alpago, 2024), thereby further controlling the narrative around my labor and analysis. This moment was particularly revealing: I had not mentioned that person, yet he introduced her himself—aware of the story and having previously criticized what had occurred. It was another instance in which ethical positioning and gestures of solidarity were mobilized in the service of careerism rather than accountability.

This episode exemplifies a broader structural pattern in which marginalized people are expected to provide the knowledge, labor, and affective resources that sustain others’ visibility, while their own contributions are minimized, reframed, or co-opted. This dynamic resonates with Mbembe’s (2017) analysis of how marginalized groups simultaneously contribute to and are exploited within dominant systems. Mbembe shows how Black individuals and communities function as sources of labor, knowledge, and cultural capital while remaining invisible or undervalued within dominant narratives. Their contributions are appropriated without acknowledgment—they bring the resources, and they are the resources, at the same time. This dynamic is vividly illustrated by the “invitation to eat together,” which ultimately results in one being consumed.

García Peña (2022, p. 37) captures this process succinctly through the words of a Brown Latinx studies professor, whose labor was appropriated by a white scholar: “My colleagues took my work and made it theirs, all the while disappearing me.” Within such institutional contexts, careerism and performative allyship routinely supersede accountability, relegating ethical responsibility and the lived realities of marginalized

communities to the background. Privileged actors navigate academic and creative spaces by extracting knowledge, performing ethical concern, and presenting themselves as intermediaries, all while reproducing exclusion and marginalizing the very voices they claim to support. With the increasing neoliberalization of universities, these dynamics have become even more pervasive and entrenched. As academic institutions grow ever more driven by competition, branding, and metrics of visibility, the extraction of intellectual and affective labor from marginalized scholars is not merely tolerated but structurally incentivized. The rhetoric of diversity and inclusion often functions as a cover for these exploitative arrangements, transforming gestures of solidarity into performances that sustain—rather than challenge—institutional inequities.

### 5.1. Reflections on Autoethnography as Critical

Autoethnography has been central to this intervention. Far from being a personal or confessional exercise, it has functioned here as a methodological refusal of institutional forgetting. In academic contexts, experiences of racism, exclusion, and appropriation are routinely individualized (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Viaene et al., 2023), dismissed as emotional, or buried by bureaucracy. By insisting on continuity, pattern, and analysis, autoethnography resists the disappearance of these accounts and reclaims them as epistemically meaningful. The experiences documented in this article are not isolated incidents; they are records of reproducible institutional logics that govern who may speak, who may be cited, and who may remain visible without being consumed. Writing about these experiences is therefore not supplementary to academic critique, but a necessary mode of knowledge production in contexts where silence and erasure are structurally enforced. Writing is not only evidence of harm, but also a political and epistemic intervention: It records patterns, holds institutions accountable, and refuses the erasure of marginalized experience.

At the same time, autoethnography is not without complication. Writing from lived experience within institutions that control hiring, funding, and legitimacy entails real risks—particularly for marginalized scholars. Such work is frequently dismissed as overly emotional, insufficiently rigorous, or “too personal,” while its authors bear the burden of exposure, professional vulnerability, and potential retaliation. These risks are unevenly distributed: What may be read as reflexivity or courage when undertaken by white scholars is often read as excess, complaint, or threat when articulated by marginalized ones. Acknowledging these vulnerabilities does not weaken the method—it highlights the very institutional dynamics that the analysis seeks to illuminate.

The costs of these practices are not merely affective—they are epistemic, professional, and political. Within academic institutions, knowledge is appropriated while its sources are erased; labor is extracted while recognition is withheld; and harm is metabolized into ethical credibility for others. Scholars of color are invited to the table under the promise of inclusion, only to find that the invitation was never to eat with them, but to *be eaten*. What appears as collaboration often operates as epistemic appropriation; what is framed as allyship frequently reproduces hierarchies it claims to contest. In this sense, exclusion is not the limit of academic power but one of its techniques: Academia does not merely exclude—it cannibalizes. These dynamics are not anomalies within otherwise inclusive institutions, but constitutive features of academic systems shaped by whiteness, neoliberal competition, and imperial modes of knowledge production (Ahmed, 2012, 2021; García Peña, 2022).

## 6. Conclusion: Refusing Exclusion

This article began with a Kurdish proverb about killing with the wolf, eating with the shepherd, and crying with the owner, a logic that I have traced across everyday academic practices to reveal how inclusion is performed while exclusion is sustained. What the preceding sections have shown is how closely this logic maps onto contemporary academic life—particularly within institutions that speak the language of diversity while reproducing exclusion. Across everyday interactions, academic actors move fluidly between positions of power, complicity, and moral performance, aligning themselves with whichever role best secures legitimacy, safety, or advancement. Solidarity is thus not absent, but highly conditional: enacted when it is profitable, withdrawn when it threatens comfort, and mourned only when it is risk-free and personally beneficial.

Rather than treating exclusion as an abstract structural effect or an unintended consequence of institutional disinterest, this article has traced how it is actively produced and sustained through routine academic practices. Through autoethnographic analysis, I have addressed three examples of how such exclusion has taken shape in practice: How in everyday academic life my expertise was repeatedly dismissed, and I was reduced, as García Peña (2022) puts it, to a representative of a geography—expected to be “The One” within the institution; how moments framed as solidarity were later instrumentalized for careerism; and how my experiences of racism, along with my intellectual and affective labor, were appropriated by white scholars. As such, invitations to inclusion operate through tokenization, regulation, and extraction; ethical concern is performed while accountability is deferred; and harm is acknowledged, circulated, and converted into professional and institutional capital. What is repeatedly framed as participation or “sharing the table” operates instead through an extractive logic in which marginalized scholars are rendered intelligible only insofar as their knowledge, labor, and experience can be taken up, consumed, and metabolized by dominant epistemic frameworks (Spivak, 1999). Crucially, marginalized perspectives are often publicly dismissed as excessive, emotional, or irrelevant, only to later be privately interpreted, translated, and incorporated by dominant actors without acknowledgment—an operation that preserves whiteness as the epistemic authority while extracting value from what it initially rejects (hooks, 2015). Diversity, in this sense, does not fail—it functions precisely as intended, stabilizing whiteness by managing difference rather than transforming power relations. By foregrounding the micro-politics of complicity, this analysis has shifted attention away from representational inclusion and toward the everyday actions through which exclusion is normalized and justified. Studying and documenting these processes is crucial precisely because they are rarely recognized as violence, but instead normalized as collegiality, professionalism, or ethical engagement.

This article has not offered solutions framed in the familiar language of diversity and inclusion; such language has already proven its capacity to absorb critique without altering conditions. Instead, this analysis has insisted on naming the practices through which exclusion is reproduced and on recognizing that transformation cannot occur without accountability. Reckoning with complicity—individual and institutional—is not an optional ethical exercise but a necessary condition for change. As long as academia continues to perform inclusion while practicing exclusion, to eat while claiming to mourn, the invitation to the table will remain an invitation to disappearance. Refusing that disappearance, and documenting its conditions, remains one way of making space where none is given.

In this light, the proverb that guided the discussion—joining the wolf, eating with the shepherd and crying with the owner—serves not only as a metaphor for individual navigation within power structures, but also as

a cautionary reminder: Without conscious resistance, even acts of empathy, acknowledgment, or critique can be co-opted to reproduce the very systems they seek to challenge. As decolonial and feminist institutional critique (Ahmed, 2021; García Peña, 2022; Spivak, 1988) has shown, institutional performances of care and grief often function to shield institutions from critique, converting harm into evidence of ethical virtue rather than grounds for accountability. Yet the metaphor of the blue bead offers a final, critical insight: Those who receive the blue beads—the marginalized voices whose knowledge and labor have been exploited—are increasingly aware of exclusionary dynamics and refuse to remain silent. True solidarity and institutional transformation demand that these scholars be recognized, their contributions be valued, and their labor no longer be invisibilized. And so, confronted with institutions that perform inclusion while practicing exclusion, one must ask: How can scholars of color truly trust such a system?

### Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. I also thank Bahia Munem and Dominique Bauer for their critical engagement, thoughtful insights, and collegial support throughout the development of this article. I would also like to sincerely thank Starr Campagnaro for her careful editing, which greatly improved the clarity and readability of the manuscript.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

The data is based on auto-ethnographic memory notes of the author.

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SOCIAL INCLUSION  
ISSN: 2183-2803

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