

Research Papers/Extended Abstracts

Future Research Directions on Sustaining Diversity in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

A substantial number of higher education institutions acknowledge the importance of diversity and inclusion and have launched various initiatives aimed at ensuring diversity among students and staff. However, diversity within these organizations is complex and requires continuous effort. This paper reviews current attempts at creating diversity in higher education, pointing out the deficiencies and failures of present approaches and strategies, and proposes future research directions toward more effective and more workable approaches. As such, it aims to give an overview of areas needing further exploration by consolidating studies published recently on perceptions of diversity initiatives, institutional commitment, inclusive teaching practices, and support for LGBTQIA+ and disabled students. The results showed that while many institutions show significant commitment through policies and resources, a gap remains in implementation and execution. Issues that were highlighted range from the lack of educator training to the very formation of gaps in provision of assistance being offered to groups that are marginalized, coupled with the lack of stronger accountability procedures. The current study points out the need to promote more inclusive teaching practices, enhance access for students with disabilities, and address intersectional issues. Future research should focus on how diversity programs can be more effectively integrated and measured for their enduring impact, as well as find new ways to support the success of diverse student groups. Addressing these problems will make it easier for higher education institutions to retain diversity and provide more inclusive learning environments for all students.

Keywords: *Diversity, Future Directions, Higher Education, Inclusion*

Introduction

The role of higher education institutions in encouraging diversity is increasingly recognized as crucial for a dynamic academic community (Smith, 2022). There is a growing expectation that these institutions will foster inclusive settings that can accommodate a diverse student body (Kezar & Gehrke, 2021). An inclusive and diverse classroom better prepares students for the challenges of a globalized job market (Denson & Chang, 2022). At several universities, diversity and inclusion programs include policies, specialized offices, and allocated funding (Miller, 2021). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these programs differs. Full integration of diversity initiatives into operations is a difficulty for certain institutions, while others have achieved great progress (Kezar & Gehrke, 2021). Despite robust diversity declarations, new research shows that programs may yield varying degrees of success (Smith, 2022). The gap between official promises and real actions is a major obstacle. As Elwick said, "diversity declarations" often serve more of a show than a trigger for change. Research by Valle-Flórez *et al.* shows that many organizations claim to value diversity in theory, this is often not reflected in practice. Also, some minority students feel that their needs are not adequately addressed by these programs, indicating varied experiences among different groups. According to Denson and Chang, 2022, "To truly address these issues, comprehensive research has to be conducted on assessing the outcomes of existing diversity programs and finding ways through which diversity can be kept alive". Future research by Mora *et al.* (2021) and Sharma and Mullick (2020) should focus on how diversity training, inclusive teaching methods, and support networks can further support the underrepresented students. In fact, welcoming policy creation calls for an understanding of the intersectional nature of student identities.

Objectives

The purpose of this article was to map the landscape of diversity initiatives at universities, identify knowledge gaps, and provide recommendations for moving forward. According to Smith (2022), this research contributes to the continuing dialogue on ways of maintaining diversity in higher education; it reflects on current studies and highlights areas for improvement. Increased diversity initiatives at universities are a microcosm of greater social changes. This is expanded from an initial focus on increasing access for underrepresented groups to the creation of inclusive settings. Understanding how far we have come in embracing diversity sometimes requires looking back at our starting point. According to research, students hold varied perspectives on diversity programs.

For instance, based on Ovink and Murrell 2022, some diversity initiatives appear not to consider Black women's lived experiences. Additionally, White students may tend to have a more negative feeling about such programs, suggesting a strong demographic difference in opinion regarding their implementation (Smith, 2022).

Methodology

This research adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, focusing on an in-depth analysis of the existing literature related to higher education and sustaining diversity. The research in this regard tries to underline the current state of knowledge and identify areas that need further research. Desk research was carried out using Scopus as the main database, from which relevant academic materials were obtained.

1. Scope and Goals of Research

These are informed by the following objectives, which guided the SLR approach:

- To review the existing literature on diversity and inclusion within higher education.
- To identify strategies and challenges associated with sustaining diversity.
- To map future research directions in this field.

These objectives were used to develop the search strategy and also to inform the selection criteria of the relevant studies.

2. Database Selection: Scopus

The Scopus was selected as the primary database due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals related to the particular subject domains. The same relates to education, social sciences, and diversity studies. Therefore, the present database was deemed relevant given its comprehensive scope regarding global research on issues such as higher education and diversity.

3. Search Strategy

A targeted search was conducted on Scopus using keywords that fit the focus of the research. The keywords were designed to identify studies related to diversity in higher education. These included key terms combined in various ways as follows:

"The role of higher education"

"Sustaining diversity"

"Diversity and inclusion"

"Diversity in universities"

"Strategies for educational diversity"

Specific searches were carried out in the titles, abstracts, and keywords of articles to make sure a comprehensive review of existing literature.

4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to narrow the selection of articles:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Articles published in refereed journals from 2014 to 2024.
- Studies relating to the sustainability of diversity in higher education.
- Research papers discussing strategies, challenges, or frameworks regarding the management of diversity initiatives at universities.
- Articles published in English.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Articles not directly related to higher education or sustainability in diversity.
- Studies from sectors or contexts other than educational.
- Materials that are not peer-reviewed, such as conference proceedings or editorials.

5. Screening and Article Selection

Targeted results underwent a two-tiered screening process, as follows:

Initial Screening: This involved the initial screening of articles by title and abstract to identify studies relevant to the research objectives. This helped in eliminating papers falling outside the scope of the review.

Full-text Review: The articles that passed the initial screening stage were further reviewed in full to ensure alignment with the focus of this study, which is the sustaining diversity in higher education. Only those studies that fully satisfied the inclusion criteria were retained for data analysis.

6. *Data Extraction and Analysis*

The selected articles were analyzed for relevant data based on the following schema:

The focus of the study, such as diversity strategies, challenges, or policy frameworks.

Methods utilized in the various studies are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Significant findings as well as their contribution towards the research area. The various literature review findings were categorized into themes, and hence it allowed for systematic review of the major issues surrounding sustainability of diversity within higher education institutions. Thematic analysis aided in the identification of repetition and gaps in the literature, and hence provided the scope for hypothesizing on possible research direction.

7. *Synthesis and Interpretation*

These selected articles were synthesized by categorizing the studies into thematic clusters that would, in essence, re-categorize the studies on their topics, such as institutional approaches to diversity, barriers that threaten the sustainability of diversity in educational institutions, leadership's role in diversity initiatives, and finally, best practices to create inclusive environments in higher education. Thematic grouping of this nature allowed better interpretation of the results and pinpointed areas that require further exploration in subsequent research work.

8. *Limitation of the Desk Research Methodology*

This paper realizes the following limitations associated with desk research:

- The literature review is limited to studies indexed in Scopus and does not represent the results from other databases or unpublished research.
- The findings, because of reliance on secondary data, are confined to the perspectives and methodologies of former researchers, which may introduce biases or deficiencies in the coverage.
- The scope of this review is limited by the selection criteria, and hence, generalization of results may only apply in some contexts, such as geographical location and institutional type.

Desk research, combined with a systematic literature review, provided an overview of the current state of research into sustaining diversity in higher education. It allowed for the structured in-depth study and description of current issues and opportunities, thus suggesting directions for further research by identifying gaps in the literature.

Research Gaps

1. Evidence Gap

There is a notable lack of research on how anti-racism training programs can be integrated into existing university curricula. Theories are abundant, but an actual dearth of data exists to prove their effectiveness.

2. Knowledge Gap

There is a very low rate of knowledge about the individual experiences of minority students, with a lack of comprehensive data on the types of support structures needed and systemic barriers exist. Additionally, many are unaware of how race intersects with gender, socioeconomic position, and immigrant status, contributing to exclusion and discrimination on multiple bases.

Literature Review: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the emphasis on diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) at universities and colleges. The main goals of these programs are to make campuses safer and more welcoming for all students while addressing past injustices. Recent research on DEI at universities examined specific themes, including the diversity and inclusion training effectiveness, institutional support for diversity and inclusion, and challenges encountered by underprivileged groups. The review offers an overview of the barriers to implementing initiatives concerning DEI at educational facilities by highlighting key findings and gaps within the literature.

Diversity and Inclusion Training and Institutional Support

Race, gender, and sexual orientation are dimensions of diversity on which higher education institutions have taken major steps to educate students, professors, and staff. Majority of these programs focus on cultural competence, bias reduction, and fostering inclusive behaviors. However, as noted by Valle-Flórez *et al.*, despite these similarities in goals, the success of such programs varies greatly across demographic subgroups and institutional settings.

Research by Ovink and Murrell suggests that perceptions of institutional diversity efforts differ significantly by gender and race. For example, while White women tend to view these programs somewhat positively, Black women are generally less optimistic. This discrepancy may indicate that women, particularly women of color, feel an additional perceived responsibility to promote inclusion. While the institutions attempt to provide an inclusive environment, Ovink and Murrell (2022) propose that certain White individuals expect BIPOC students to be responsible for integration. Such a belief

has the potential consequence of questioning institutions' commitment to the authenticity of DEI, as it would further marginalize students. Notwithstanding these limitations, institutional support remains an important developmental factor for students. Having administrative support for the diversity initiatives depicts an interest in student inclusivity as well as a concern for social justice. This is evidenced by arranging sessions or even providing funds for such activities; one such example of providing students with opportunities and celebrating their successes can be reflected from the fact that the administration had to be convinced about undergraduate conferences, as it was deemed too expensive to begin with.

Institutional Commitment and Role of Diversity Principles

Public statements or value statements are usually used by higher education institutions to declare their commitment to diversity. The stated intent of these statements is to attract prospective students and demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, these commitments may sometimes serve as marketing tools than as indicators of genuine action (Ahmed, 2007, as cited in Elwick, 2019). According to Ahmed (2007) as cited by Elwick, (2019), organizations that do a good job developing auditable procedures and publish cogent records of their DEI initiatives are more likely to achieve racial equality. The value statements with concrete acts from this vantage point, which is all about responsibility, needs to be ascertained.

How institutions manage and enact these commitments also influences the effectiveness of value statements in advancing DEI. Addressing systemic issues and then engaging in how to be diverse can render institutions incapable of making a difference. Organizations would be creating a kind of "diversity paradox" in trying to evade more fundamental problems of racism and inequality through the promotion of diversity. It follows, therefore, that as one develops a workplace where inclusiveness is encouraged, while value declarations are good, rules and actions must be witnessed to enforce those declarations.

Practices and Training for Inclusive Education

Teaching practices should view diversity as an asset in building an inclusive classroom where all students feel welcome. The only teaching method that can be said to try and fulfill these needs is the one known as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP): it integrates students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum. However, there is a significant gap in the application of CRP, mainly due to a lack of proper training for lecturers (Rudhumbu, 2020). This need for proper training is further supported by Sharma and Mullick (2020), Mora *et al.* (2021), who underlined the need for educating university teaching staff to create inclusive policies and practices.

Training professors to adopt CRP and address broader concerns of diversity and inclusion is needed. Institutions and governments should fund training programs for teachers that provide them with the necessary skills on how to work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds. This investment shall ensure effective advocacy and delivery of inclusive teaching methods in classrooms.

Challenges Faced by Underrepresented Groups

University programs aimed at overcoming difficulties typically faced by minorities are rarely effective. For instance, women of color are increasingly questioning the sufficiency of already existing programs directed towards diversity and are calling for the development and enforcement of more inclusive policies. Resource limitations and solid opposition to student-driven diversity initiatives are common obstacles in these organizations. There is also a need for ongoing evaluation and revision of DEI programs, as institutional claims often do not align with the actual experiences of minority students.

Beyond this, LGBTQIA+ students face unique challenges in higher education. As noted by Tinoco-Giraldo *et al.* (2021), though some universities boast advanced policies of promoting non-discrimination and gender equality policies, "there is a gap regarding the recognition of LGBTQIA+ identities and use of inclusive language." More policies and practices should be tailored to the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ students, since there has been "a lack of conversation and initiatives centered around LGBTQIA+ concerns".

Disabilities and Diversity

Another aspect of diversity that highly affects college life is disability and socioeconomic status. According to research, students hailing from low-income families often encounter heightened difficulties, such as financial barriers and a lack of support (Ovink & Murrell, 2022). To tackle these problems, diversity programs should assist low-income Black and Brown students, especially those from rural and suburban regions who are not athletes.

The same challenges apply to students with disabilities, who face additional challenges in the classroom. Higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to meet the needs of students with disabilities by making reasonable adjustments and providing enough support (Heffernan, 2023). Crisol-Moya *et al.* (2023) emphasize the need of providing effective classroom attendance models and providing lecturers with training on the requirements of students with disabilities. These measures are critical for ensuring that these students have equal opportunities to succeed.

Research Gap Identification

Gap between Practical Knowledge and Conflict

Designing Pedagogical Feedback: Higher education is associated with a lack of designs that are diverse and inclusive. There is also a gap between theory and practice because researchers have not satisfactorily answered the question of how different feedback systems would accommodate the needs of diverse students in the literature available to a sufficient degree (Jonsson, 2024).

- Methodological Gap

Cultural and Contextual Impact of Feedback: The studies hardly consider the ways through which cultural and contextual variables impact on the efficacy of feedback. There is a need for methodological diversity in investigating feedback mechanisms, as is obvious now, this leads to a one-size-fits-all strategy that might not work for all students (Jonsson, 2024).

- Empirical Gap

One area in which research is considerably short is the development of effective tactics for bringing racial conversations into rural university classrooms. Empirically, scholars have under investigated the challenges and possibilities that come with such settings (Smith, 2024). The durability or effectiveness of diversity efforts in rural higher education settings has usually been overlooked by researchers.

- Theoretical Gap

First, frameworks for systemic racism: this has been theoretically debated, but there is very little literature on the impact of applying it in education. This gap underscores the importance of theory validation and testing in real-world practice environments (Unsworth, 2023).

Future Research Directions

There are several key areas where further research could be conducted to advance knowledge and practice both in education and rural higher education settings. Most importantly, the development of anti-racism training programs specifically tailored for educators and students should be followed by their long-term evaluation for the elimination of systemic racism from educational and therapeutic setups. In conjunction with this, qualitative research should also be conducted to document the experiences of minority students, outlining institutional obstacles and support systems that work. Indeed, to better understand the problems that marginalized groups are going through, this research needs to go further by developing a better understanding of how race intersects with other identities, such as gender, socioeconomic position, and immigrant status.

Further, there should be studies on new and inclusive instructional feedback methodologies. These should include assessment of the effectiveness of new technologies, such as AI and virtual reality, in improving feedback processes for a diverse student population. As per Jonsson, (2024), comparative studies in various cultural and contextual settings could provide some useful insights into what makes the feedback effective for various student populations. For example, future research into rural higher education should focus on designing and assessing effective communication strategies for integrating race into the classroom, considering the contextual cultural and environmental factors specific to rural settings. There is a further need for long-term studies to evaluate sustainability and effectiveness of diversity programs in these areas, with a view to establishing best practices and scalable solutions.

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