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Relational Change in Higher Education: How Students and Staff Navigate Diversity and Agency

Helena Segarra [1], Concha Antón Rubio [2], Inga Juknytė-Petreikienė [3], Lisa Tackie [4]

[1] Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Austrian Academy of Science, Austria
[2] Faculty of Psychology, University of Salamanca, Spain
[3] Faculty of Public Governance and Business, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania
[4] Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna, Austria

Correspondence: Concha Antón Rubio (canton@usal.es)

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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

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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 (Veles et al., 2023). They often create the offices, procedures, and compliance mechanisms that sustain diversity work (Baltaru, 2019; Nīmante 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, χ^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.

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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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About the Authors



Helena Segarra (PhD) is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Urban and Regional Research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She holds a PhD in political science and her research areas include migration, bordering, belonging, higher education, urban/regional areas, neighborhoods, and arts-based research.



Concha Antón Rubio (PhD) is an associate professor at the Universidad de Salamanca. Her work focuses on hate crimes, restorative practices, and conflict resolution in educational, community, and institutional settings, with extensive experience collaborating with police, prosecutors, and other justice professionals, as well as leading European-funded research and training projects.



Inga Juknytė-Petreikienė (PhD) is an associate professor at Mykolas Romeris University. With extensive leadership in European projects and joint programmes, she specializes in quality assurance, internationalization, and strategic academic management.



Lisa Tackie (MA) is a graduate in African Studies at the University of Vienna and currently studies International Development. Her research and activism address empowerment, anti-racism, and the Black diaspora from an intersectional perspective. She has worked on FWF and Erasmus projects and published on activism and Black travel writing.