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Academic diversity paradox: tension between institutional regulations and university culture

Abstract

Research background and purpose: This article examines the complex relationship between institutional regulations and the development of a diverse academic culture within higher education institutions (HEIs). It investigates the tension between formal policies of tolerance, equity, and diversity (TED) and the actual practice of fostering an inclusive environment, highlighting the challenges of implementing effective diversity strategies in academia.
Design/methodology/approach: The study uses qualitative methods and data from 20 HEIs, collected by four researchers who interviewed 20 key informants, to understand the gap between formal policies and their practical implementation.
Findings: The research finds that university managers often confuse tolerance, equality, and diversity, treating them as overlapping rather than distinct concepts. Tolerance is seen as acceptance of different views, equality as equal opportunity, and diversity as varied perspectives, but these ideas are practiced independently without systemic integration. Formal policies on diversity exist in universities, yet implementation and resource allocation vary widely.
Value added and limitations: The research contributes to higher education by providing empirical evidence on how diversity, equity, and inclusion are interpreted and implemented across HEIs, and by identifying practical areas where formal policies can be better aligned with academic culture. It offers university leaders practical insights for moving beyond fragmented efforts toward more coherent and context-sensitive diversity practices.

Keywords: *academic culture, governance of university, diversity, tolerance, equity, HEI*

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1. Introduction

Diversity is frequently perceived in literature as the advantage of the organization enhancing the quality, dynamism, and identity of the organization (Hofhuis et al., 2012; Kumar & Gupta, 2023). In higher education institutions (HEIs), diversity has become both a fast-growing theoretical concept tied to social justice, access, and the social mission of universities (Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2022; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Sułkowski, 2023; Wang, 2023) and a highly politicized field of practice linked to organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) discourses (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Duarte & Katri, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2019; Yanıkoglu, 2025).

On the one side, diversity orientation is part of wide cultural and social change connected to gender and ethnic emancipation processes. The other perspective highlights the institutional, regulative pressure on organizations and their stakeholders. In many HEIs, we observe the growth of diversity culture alongside an expanding apparatus of diversity regulations (Smith, 2009; Sörlin, 2007; Byrd, 2019; Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Gaebel et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). These usually take the form of strategic objectives, policies, guidelines, and "good practice" manuals, often accompanied by dedicated committees, offices, and "DEI champions"(Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Universities Canada, 2023; Gaebel et al., 2024).

Recent studies suggest that diversity documents frequently perform more as symbolic, temporally oriented commitments than as instruments of radical change, reproducing existing norms and deferring real transformation to a "future" when "diversity will happen naturally" (Ahmed, 2012; Campion & Clark, 2022; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023). This two-sided process of diversity promotion in academia may generate an implementation tension that can be interpreted as a potential paradoxical dynamic: the more regulations are introduced, the more they may be resisted, symbolically adopted, or defused by academic culture, which is relatively spontaneous and less amenable to top-down control (Yanıkoglu, 2025). Academic communities may resist centrally developed regulation, treating diversity policies as artificial, bureaucratic, or even akin to political correctness, which limits the perceived legitimacy of DEI work (Asfari & Gacek, 2025; Toma et al., 2024).

Systematic reviews on faculty DEI (Manoharan et al., 2024) highlight that qualitative links between institutional regulation, academic culture, and everyday practices of tolerance, equity, and diversity remain insufficiently understood. This paper addresses that gap by using qualitative data from key informants responsible for TED-related policies and practices to explore how academic managers and other institutional actors interpret and enact tolerance, equity, and diversity (TED) within specific institutional contexts. In doing so, it moves beyond treating tolerance, equity, and diversity as interchangeable commitments or as purely symbolic policies, and instead unpacks policy-practice gaps, implementation tensions, and forms of

symbolic compliance. By focusing on the operational meaning of TED in everyday practices, the study contributes primarily empirical evidence on how these tensions appear in Polish HEIs; conceptually, it offers a modest refinement by framing the "academic diversity paradox" as a possible emerging dynamic of decoupling between formal governance and informal academic norms, rather than as a conclusively demonstrated causal effect. It offers university leaders practical insights to balance formal diversity policies with an inclusive academic culture, supporting more consistent implementation.

Therefore, the objective of the conducted research is to explore the observed tension between HEIs' policies and a culture of diversity by addressing three questions: (1) What is the meaning of tolerance, equity, and diversity in academia? (2) What are the differences between 'real practices' and 'formal policies' regarding tolerance, equity, and diversity? (3) What are the practices of tolerance, equity, and diversity in HEIs?

2. Theoretical background of TED

The concept of tolerance, equity, and diversity (TED) developed in the 1990s and has at its roots ideas of dignity, human rights, and tolerance, referring to the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola, Kant, Voltaire, and John Locke emphasized that man is a source of value and deserves respect for his dignity, usually motivated by natural law. Tolerance has been discussed in the literature as a complex, paradoxical, and multidimensional construct (Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021) and can be conceptualized as the permission, coexistence, respect, and esteem conception (Forst, 2013).

The next stage of inclusivity and commitment to diverse relations with other people - after tolerance - is emancipation, i.e. not only respecting the dignity of other people but liberating them from servitude and granting them equal rights (Vermeulen, 2010; Dobbernack & Modood, 2011). The term emancipation was first used in 1785 by Charles Godfrey Leland to describe the limitations of legal restrictions imposed on Catholics in Britain. The changes, granting equal rights, took place gradually in the 19th and especially in the 20th century and affected disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, women, religious minorities, and the disabled (Wood, 1988; Brulle, 1995; Marković, 2007; Bonefeld, 2010; Hahn et al., 2013). Universities have mainly played a positive role in developing and promoting the idea of tolerance and emancipation processes, although negative or at least ambivalent examples can also be found (Künzel, 1975; Carrington, 1990; Stromquist, 2000; Magnússon & Rytzler, 2019).

The idea of tolerance thus gave rise to the concept and movement of equal rights and equal opportunities, which found widespread application as a moral principle advocated in organizations (Fleurbaey, 1995). The ethical principle of equal rights and equal opportunities states that people should be able to compete on equal terms.

However, theorists and practitioners have argued that formal equality is insufficient without an explicit focus on equity, understood as fairness achieved through tailored support that addresses structural barriers and historical disadvantage (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022; Toma et al., 2024; Vohra & Baral, 2025).

Diversity, also culturally equated with multiculturalism, is defined by the view that cultures, races, ethnic, religions, and other groups, especially those belonging to minority groups, deserve special recognition for their differences in culture and social practices (Levrau, 2018). It is not only about tolerance or even acceptance of otherness but about valuing people for their diversity. People differ in visible categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, and disability, but also in less visible ones: sexual orientation, religion, ideology, national identity, mentality, and temperament. Recent research on faculty diversity, equity, and inclusion stresses that diversity in academia must be understood intersectionally, taking into account how gender, race, class, disability, and other dimensions interact in shaping access, workload, and career trajectories (de Wit & Jones, 2018; Kwiek & Roszka, 2021; Manoharan et al., 2024).

Diversity is conceptually related and intertwined with other theoretical perspectives such as gender studies (an area of interdisciplinary research devoted to gender identity and gender representation as the main category for analysis) (Lahiri-Dutt, 2024). The research concerns both women and men - feminism and masculinism from the political and social perspective (Beasley, 2013); feministic paradigms that emphasize the problems of women in various situations and institutions constituting the context of these situations (Olesen, 2000); racial discourses that raise important questions about the control and production of knowledge, particularly about members of other races and their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2000); critical theory perspectives deal with the possibilities of overcoming the constraints imposed by race, class, or gender (Fay, 1987); theory of gender identity (queer) concerning people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. This approach does not serve to objectify the surveyed people but to search for cultural and political meanings based on the opinions and experiences of individuals excluded from the mainstream of social life. Another is the perspective of disability issues (disability inquiry), which deals with the problems of social integration in schools from the point of view of education administrators, teachers, and parents of children with disabilities (Mertens, 1998). It also resonates with critical work on inclusion and agency in higher education, which indicates that students and staff often navigate diversity and DEI practices under conditions of unequal power, limited resources, and competing institutional logics (Asiimwe, 2025; Segarra et al., 2026). Diversity implies appreciating and respecting these differences and actively opposing discriminatory practices. Based on the assumption of respect and even affirmation of differences, equality of opportunity, and tolerance, it rejects the concept of both assimilation and exclusion of minority groups. Comparative data from European HEIs indicate that while most institutions

now explicitly value diversity and inclusion, the translation into daily practices – such as curriculum design, assessment, and collegial relationships − remains partial and uneven (Brown, 2004; European University Association, 2023).

To sum up the differences between these three similar concepts, we could emphasize that tolerance is defined as allowing different perspectives to exist within a legal and moral context, even if they are not personally endorsed (Forst, 2013; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021). Equity, however, focuses on fairness through the provision of resources and opportunities tailored to individual needs, thereby ensuring equal chances of success (Godwin et al., 1998; Mugo & Puplampu, 2022; Toma et al., 2024). Lastly, diversity goes beyond tolerance by actively valuing and embracing differences across social categories, fostering inclusivity and belonging (Leonard & Leonard, 2006; Manoharan et al., 2024; Vohra & Baral, 2025).

3. Between policy and practice of diversity implementation in HEIs

When HEIs seek intellectual inflows from other countries, it is essential to recognize the importance of diversity. The question arises whether and how management practices implementing ideas of diversity can be applied in universities. A discrepancy between institutional declarations and management practices in universities exists. On the one hand, there is a Recommendation of the European Commission of 18 January 2022 on the European Charter for Researchers, and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers is of fundamental importance for university employees. The signatories of the Charter undertake that funders or employers will not discriminate in any way against scientists on the grounds of gender, age, ethnicity, national or social origin, religion or belief, sexual orientation, language, disability, political beliefs, and social or material status (EC, 2022).

Global policy shifts, particularly the increasing emphasis on performativity, accountability, and academic entrepreneurship have led to a gradual erosion of university autonomy, profoundly impacting academic culture and diversity initiatives (Sułkowski, 2016; Sułkowski, 2023). Performance-based funding regimes, as seen across many higher education systems, encourage vertical differentiation among institutions, often promoting a competitive environment that sidelines diversity (Sörlin, 2007). These global shifts align with the declining 'publicness' of higher education, where universities increasingly operate under market-oriented frameworks, thus reinforcing institutional isomorphism. As Kim and Otten (2009) suggest, this shift toward transnational and intercultural HEIs further complicates efforts to maintain diversity, as policies often focus more on performance and less on inclusive academic practices. This tension between performativity and inclusivity continues to shape academic culture in ways that may put pressure on traditional values of diversity and equality. When looking at practices in universities, it is useful to look historically at

positive examples that include references to diversity, statutory provisions reinforcing equal opportunities and tolerance, implemented procedures, personnel policies, and a human resource management system oriented towards equality and minority participation (Table 1).

Table 1. **Management areas and TED practices in universities**

Organization and management area	TED practices
Domestic law	– statutory guarantees of equal rights and opportunities – widespread use of regulations to promote diversity
Organisational strategy	– diversity in the organization's strategy, values, and vision – promoting inclusiveness through functional strategies, e.g. in the area of HR or marketing
Procedures	– operationally promote diversity through procedures in the university e.g. in the sphere of educational quality – analyse the effectiveness of procedures modified to increase diversity
Personnel policies	– ensure personnel policies that eliminate bias – audit of HRM systems for inclusiveness
Human resources management	– recruitment of staff that values representatives of disadvantaged groups – inclusive development, motivation, and appraisal systems – training, coaching, and educating employees in the spirit of diversity – equal opportunities personnel administration system
Authority	– ensuring representation of disadvantaged groups in decision-making bodies – collection and analysis of data on the representation of women, older people, and minorities: ethnic, disabled
Organizational structure	– establish and empower within the structure positions responsible for maintaining diversity – assigned responsibility for positions to enhance diversity
Organisational culture	– building a culture of participation and equality based on the values of diversity – reducing the effects of discriminatory aspects of culture such as stereotypes, prejudices, unconscious biases
Organisational communication	– proper communication of diversity practices – negative experiences in the development of inclusivity
Change management	– design and implement organizational changes that enhance diversity – preparing change agents to promote multiculturalism
Leadership	– identification by university leaders of barriers to diversity – leaders creating positive role models of inclusivity

Source: own elaboration based on McCaffery (2018)

However, the reality is still far from the recommended policies, as evidenced by various studies concerning inclusive academic culture (Jonasson et al., 2018); ongoing discrimination in the form of sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism (Skachkova, 2007); the persistent gender gap in academia (Siemieńska, 2001), social stratification in science (Kwiek, 2015). The salary gap affecting racial minority scholars has been documented by Lee (2002), and Zacher et al. (2019) highlight the gender glass ceiling that hampers academic career development.

Diversity and inclusion efforts in higher education institutions (HEIs) can be usefully, but cautiously, understood through the lens of paradox theory (Lewis & Smith, 2014). This perspective sensitizes the analysis to the challenges associated with diversity management, particularly its frequently mixed and uneven outcomes. While many studies conceptualize diversity management as a rational, adaptive, and well-planned process expected to generate intended results (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016), the paradox perspective emphasizes the coexistence of competing demands and persistent tensions within organizational change processes (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014).

It is also important to explore how national and institutional regulations, as well as multilingual policies, shape diversity management within HEIs. As Darquennes et al. (2020) highlight, language diversity management is a key challenge in higher education, where the medium of instruction can either promote or hinder inclusivity. Yanaprasart and Lüdi (2018) further emphasize the tension between the use of English as a global academic language and the need to foster local linguistic practices. They argue that an inclusive multilingual policy can help HEIs balance internationalization with local diversity needs. Additionally, other authors outline how institutions can re-examine their policies and communication strategies to better integrate diversity, particularly in multilingual environments (Yusof et al., 2009).

Institutional regulations designed to promote diversity and inclusion may also be perceived as misaligned with traditional academic culture, creating implementation tensions within HEIs. These tensions stem from the balance institutions must strike between promoting free speech and fostering a diverse, inclusive environment. Moreover, structural barriers in academia have sustained inequities, particularly for underrepresented groups. These include issues such as unequal workloads, unequal remuneration, and retention difficulties, further exacerbated by resistance to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Fowler et al., 2023). Addressing these tensions requires a shift toward policies that prioritize tolerance, equity and diversity.

4. Method

The research methodology is grounded in the interpretative-symbolic paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), which shapes both the research design and analysis. The focus of this research is to explore the complexity of social, professional, and

cultural processes within academic culture, along with their interactive contexts. Additionally, it seeks to understand how employees interpret their experiences and translate them into their actions. A triangulation method was employed to enhance understanding of the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), incorporating triangulation of (1) data (collected through semi-structured interviews, internal HEI documents, and literature on diversity and inclusion); (2) investigators (four researchers conducted interviews), and (3) contextual triangulation (research was conducted in 20 HEIs). This approach enabled a deeper analysis of potential tensions between institutional regulations and academic diversity culture, highlighting discrepancies between policy and practice.

Participants were selected based on three main criteria: 1) formal responsibility for TED-related policies or practices; 2) experience in implementing or overseeing diversity/equality initiatives; 3) capacity to reflect on both institutional regulations and everyday academic culture. The final sample of 20 academic leaders (key informants) (Pahwa et al., 2023), representing diverse professional roles in Polish universities, was determined by theoretical saturation.

The purposive sampling included semi-structured interviews with respondents (60% female), aged 25 to 65, representing a balanced mix of public and non-public HEIs in Poland. The characteristics of respondents are in Appendix 1. Due to anonymity and the sensitivity of diversity-related topics in small academic communities, we anonymized institutional and positional details to prevent identification of participants, while still clarifying the sampling design and procedures. The core aim of this study is not to compare specific universities in a statistically rigorous way, but to explore the observed tensions between institutional regulations and academic culture of diversity, equity, and tolerance. Given the qualitative, explanatory design, we interpret the 20 interviews as contextual cases that provide rich, cross-institutional insights into how TED is understood and enacted in Polish academia.

Ethical requirements were met at every level of the research procedure (Creswell & Plano, 2018). At the data collection stage, each interviewee provided written consent to participate in the research. The form included the identification of the researcher, the purpose of the study as well as a guarantee of confidentiality regarding the data obtained from the participant and an assurance of the possibility to withdraw from the interview at any time.

An interview with 32 open-ended questions was developed to capture academic managers' experiences and opinions, divided into three sections related to research questions and supplemented by source document analysis. The first section examined the understanding, implementation, and promotion of tolerance in academia and its impact on teaching, research, and community relations. The second focused on equality, addressing its application in management, teaching, research, and responses to inequality. The third explored diversity, analysing its acceptance, impact, and

distinction from inclusion. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and were documented through notes and/or transcriptions. NVivo Release 1.6.1 software was used to aggregate and organize the data. The method used to analyse the material was template analysis, which is a type of qualitative data analysis involving the application of a template (category) from a pre-conceived theoretical perspective (Brooks & King, 2017). Themes were identified as recurring features of the interview participants' accounts that characterize specific perceptions and/or experiences, and a group of four experts considered them relevant to the research questions posed (Appendix 2).

In the template analysis, direct quotes from interview participants were used to illustrate and support the interpretation of the raw data by the four research experts conducting interviews. After transcribing the interviews and classifying the collected data, the analysis focused on identifying similarities and patterns of congruence in the respondents' statements, while highlighting areas of incongruence.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings of the empirical research conducted to explore the understanding and practices of TED in HEIs. The analysis was conducted through the lens of three research questions related to: (1) the meaning and conceptualisation of TED; (2) formal policies on tolerance, equity, and diversity; and (3) practices and initiatives supporting TED in HEIs.

5.1. Meanings and conceptualization of TED in academic practice

The findings indicate that university actors rarely distinguish clearly between tolerance, equality, and diversity. Instead, these concepts are treated as overlapping and mutually interchangeable, reflecting conceptual ambiguity in everyday academic discourse. Tolerance is generally understood as acceptance of different views, but is often confused or combined with equality. Equality is meant as providing equal opportunities and chances for all, but its meaning is often intertwined with the concepts of tolerance and diversity. Diversity, in turn, is valued for bringing different perspectives and experiences but is also seen in the context of tolerance and equality. However, respondents frequently combined these categories into a single normative idea of "fairness" or "openness," without analytical differentiation:

> *These measures of tolerance, equality, and diversity are usually mentioned after a comma- because I get confused by these terms and it is more about equality. As far as I am concerned these concepts lie close to each other (SW5).*
>
> *Tolerance is a strange word, I have a problem with it. Because it's not just about acceptance. I think tolerance, equality, and diversity are overlapping concepts (TW3).*

In my opinion, these three issues are inseparable and as you ask about solutions for building tolerance in the university and respecting equality (...) these answers can be the same (EW2).

In practice, equality is the most developed area, followed by diversity, while tolerance remains vague and less well defined. This indicates that TED is not conceptualized as a staged or developmental framework in institutional practice, but rather as a set of loosely connected ideas. This finding nuances literature that assumes increasing institutional maturity leads to clearer integration of diversity-related concepts. Instead, the data suggest conceptual flattening rather than progression, where distinctions between tolerance, equity, and diversity are blurred rather than institutionalized. At the same time, a minority of respondents offered more differentiated interpretations, particularly regarding equality as a broad structural principle of access:

This is a broad notion of equality. Here we have equal access to opportunities, to learning, to research, to development, to conditions, to study, and to employment. So it is as broad, as wide a concept as possible (EW1).

The simplest way to say it is that it looks different depending on where you put your ear. But what has been achieved, is university bodies are responding to needs because we are approached by institutions, individuals (ŁW2).

This divergence indicates variation in conceptual sophistication across institutions and roles, suggesting that TED meanings are not uniform but context-dependent.

5.2. Formal policies versus implementation: decoupling and symbolic compliance

All investigated universities formally include TED-related principles in strategic documents such as Statutes, Senate Resolutions, Strategy 2020-2030, and separate policies like the Equality Plan (including Gender Equality Plan 2022-2024) and the Diversity Charter. However, while these formal policies are present, there is significant variation in how these values are institutionalized in practice. Some universities have dedicated structures for promoting diversity, while others rely on actors with limited resources, for example:

The division is the equality team, which is the team I belong to. It is three people. I am the main equality officer. I am in charge of the gender mainstreaming policy, i.e., coordinating and implementing systemic solutions for diversity and equality. I am also the anti-discrimination coordinator, which means that I receive official complaints about discrimination and refer them if they are justified (EW1).

This also reflects the broader institutional isomorphism theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), where institutions adopt formal structures to align with external expectations, such as accreditation standards or regulatory requirements, without necessarily integrating

these principles into their everyday practices and human resource availability. A key implementation constraint is therefore the limited allocation of human and financial resources. In many cases, TED responsibilities are assigned to one or a few individuals without institutional support:

There is no team, it's just me. Because it is the case that there is one person, there is no office, and after four years I feel the big limitations of this situation and even the dangers because one person is on the one hand something – because some activities are carried out. On the other hand, it's not enough to deal with everything in one person: equality, pro-tolerance (TW2).

These statements illustrate that TED responsibilities are often structurally under-resourced, which may limit their effectiveness. This aligns with prior research showing that diversity governance in HEIs often takes the form of "compliance without capacity," where formal structures are not matched by operational support:

It's something on paper, we don't know what we're for, what we can and shouldn't do. It's not positions, it's a kind of function on paper because let me be clear we are not paid for it. That means that if we have to do something, and we are both academics, we do what we are held accountable for and paid for first (SW5).

The interviews suggest that diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives are often driven more by external pressures, such as meeting accreditation criteria or securing EU grants, than by clearly articulated internal strategic commitments:

Equality and diversity work often takes the form of an obligation arising from formal requirements, such as accreditation or the need to meet criteria to obtain EU grants, which requires having a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) and meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (EW1).

Importantly, this creates variation across institutions: some HEIs develop small dedicated teams, while others rely entirely on informal or symbolic arrangements. This variation indicates that implementation is not uniform but depends on institutional capacity and leadership commitment. It also suggests that some universities adopt diversity and equality policies primarily to meet external demands rather than as part of a fully internalized strategy to improve inclusivity.

5.3. Organizational dynamics: grassroots initiatives and limited awareness of TED

Despite the shortcomings in formal diversity structures, grassroots, student-led initiatives have emerged as important in supporting tolerance, equity, and diversity within universities. These practices often fill the gaps left by institutional limitations and suggest the capacity of bottom-up approaches to support meaningful change:

There are many grassroots initiatives undertaken by staff and students. Our activities are also recognized at various events both inside and outside the university, such as visiting special schools and running workshops on tolerance. (TW1).

At our university, it is the students who initiate many actions for equal treatment and to show what diversity is (EW3).

These findings suggest that TED implementation is partially driven by informal agency rather than formal governance. However, their impact remains limited without institutional integration and resource support.

The interviews also indicate a significant gap between the declared principles of tolerance, equity, and diversity and their actual implementation in universities. One reason for this gap is the lack of systematic research and evaluation of the real needs of diverse groups within academic communities. Many respondents expressed concern over the absence of data and institutional analyses, which prevents universities from tailoring policies to meet specific needs:

We are currently conducting an extensive university-wide survey on the needs of parents, together with the equality team and a team from the Women's Gender Research Centre. We are focusing on understanding the needs of employees in different groups and contexts, and the results will certainly yield valuable information (EW1).

Without robust data collection and analysis, universities struggle to assess the effectiveness of their diversity policies or identify areas for improvement. While some efforts have been made to gather data, these tend to be isolated and insufficient to drive systemic change:

We conducted a survey at the university in 2019 on awareness and accessibility, which showed that there is no gender pay gap. However, access to benefits, such as those for projects, is no longer symmetrical (TW3).

This suggests that although universities have started to identify DEI problems, substantial work remains to help ensure that those issues are not merely formal policies but are actively implemented throughout the institution. Ongoing assessments are crucial for monitoring progress and ensuring that these formal policies lead to meaningful outcomes.

Participants were asked to indicate which areas of Human Resource Management (HRM) include issues of tolerance, equity, and diversity, as well as how these issues are communicated to students and staff. Their responses reveal that awareness-building activities related to equal treatment are predominant, while diversity management is less integrated and often handled in a more isolated manner, for example:

We provide equality policy training, which 50% of staff have already completed (TW3).

These issues are present in training for individuals and managers in leadership positions, as well as in workshops designed to develop equality attitudes among teaching and academic staff (EW1).

My activities include advocating for women's rights, promoting equality, providing staff training, ensuring equal treatment, supporting the LGBT community, conducting training for secondary schools, participating in international debates, and meeting with people from Ukraine and other cultures. Additionally, I organize exhibitions on diversity (SW1).

Another issue noted by respondents concerns participation in training that may have limited effectiveness due to its voluntary nature:

We organize training and workshops for staff and students on equal treatment, but attendance is not mandatory (EW5).

This suggests that although training and workshops are available to promote these crucial social values, their impact may be limited by the lack of mandatory participation, particularly in areas where risks of unequal treatment are highest. This voluntary nature of training reflects the current state of tolerance and diversity management in many HEIs: while efforts are made, their effectiveness is undermined by insufficient institutional enforcement.

5.4. Fragmented HRM integration and selective implementation

When analysing other HRM functions, such as recruitment, motivation, appraisal, and remuneration, the concept of equality and diversity appears to be implemented in a fragmented and unsystematic manner. While there are isolated examples of good practices, overall, diversity is not yet fully integrated or effectively used across these key areas of HRM:

We have managed to construct accessible buildings, but we tend to think of disability primarily in terms of mobility, while the challenges are often cultural or psychological/mental (ŁW2).

Feminatives have emerged; this is a novelty that came into effect in 2021 and has been incorporated into the statutes (TW3).

The overall picture suggests that HRM practices still lack a comprehensive and systematic integration of diversity and equity values. One notable example of progress is the incorporation of gender parity in hiring decisions:

We consider parity in hiring; when we have both a woman and a man with the same qualifications and knowledge, we choose the candidate who will help achieve parity in project groups and departments. However, there is no such rule when recruiting students, as we rely on points from their certificates. What we can do is take proactive measures; for example, we promote girls in architecture because there are not enough of them in that field (TW4).

This practice indicates an awareness of gender imbalances in specific fields, but it also highlights the selective application of diversity principles, which is more prominent in areas where external pressures or obvious disparities exist.

Several initiatives, specifically targeted at students, illustrate the university's proactive approach to addressing student needs concerning DEI. Despite the broader challenges in integrating these values into HRM, these actions suggest that universities are making efforts to provide practical support for students to meet their diverse needs:

We have introduced support for transgender individuals by allowing them to change their preferred details on attendance registers (TW1).

We are working on textbooks that address the needs of blind and partially sighted students (EW1).

The overall lack of full integration of diversity and equity into HR practices highlights the need for further development and strengthening of these values in institutional management strategies, of which academic leaders are aware:

I believe that expanding the diversity support system is necessary – just as we have HR, payroll, and a project office. Similarly, we should establish an equalities office that focuses on the preparation of procedures and training (EW1).

This comment reflects the broader need for a more structured and strategic approach to diversity and inclusion in HRM.

6. Discussion

The research suggests that in academia, the concepts of tolerance, equality, and diversity are often perceived as closely related but vaguely defined and unevenly implemented ideas. Academic managers do not always distinguish between these concepts and operationalize them in different ways. This is consistent with the view that diversity and inclusion have different meanings and their concepts may overlap (Mor Barak, 2019) and their practical application depends on individual initiatives. The present data nuance this literature by showing how such overlap appears in Polish HEIs, where practical application often depends on individual initiatives. Tolerance is often narrowly defined by respondents as passive acceptance of diversity, aligning with Forst's (2013) model of 'passive tolerance'. However, according to the theory of emancipation (Bonefeld, 2010), tolerance should evolve into more proactive efforts toward equality and justice.

Our findings suggest that HEIs face challenges in transitioning from passive to active tolerance practices. Equity in the academic context was frequently understood by respondents as formal equality of opportunity, reflecting the concept of procedural equality outlined by Fleurbaey (1995). However, many interviewees expressed that formal equity policies alone may not lead to substantive change for marginalized groups. As the theory of equality of opportunity suggests, institutions may need to introduce compensatory measures to ensure meaningful access to resources and opportunities (Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021).

All investigated universities formally incorporate TED-related principles into their strategic policies. However, despite this formal inclusion, there is considerable variation in how these values are translated into practice and institutionalized within organizational processes. The findings point to decoupling between formal policy and actual implementation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This decoupling can be interpreted as an implementation tension and, at most, as an emerging paradoxical dynamic between formal TED policies and their actual enactment in academic practice. The data do not show that regulations produce outcomes opposite to their aims; rather, they indicate that formal commitments may remain symbolic. Although these values are formally embedded in university missions and strategic documents, their practical enactment remains limited, fragmented, and often dependent on individual initiatives, resulting in inconsistencies between declared commitments and everyday practices.

In many cases, universities appear to adopt diversity frameworks primarily in response to external pressures, such as EU funding requirements or accreditation criteria, rather than as part of internally driven, transformative strategies. This tendency is consistent with broader changes in academic governance, where evaluation systems and institutional performance frameworks increasingly shape organizational priorities and academic behaviour (Sułkowski et al., 2025).

One possible explanation is institutional uncertainty and reluctance among authorities to take more explicit steps for equal treatment in the face of increasing diversity. Such dynamics are also consistent with recent research showing that metric-based evaluation systems increasingly reshape academic priorities and organizational behaviour, creating tensions between measurable performance and broader academic values (Kulikowski et al., 2026).

Moreover, limited awareness among academic communities, including university authorities, about discrimination and inequality hinders the development and implementation of inclusive policies.

National regulations and rankings also have historically played a key role in shaping the diversity landscape within HEIs. Some national ranking systems now include diversity and inclusion as important parameters, influencing the recruitment strategies for faculty and staff, as well as the selection of students. This explains why universities adopt diversity and equality policies primarily to meet external demands rather than as part of a genuine strategy to improve inclusivity. This façade of action aligns with the concept of decoupling (Marquis & Qian, 2014; Jamali et al., 2017),where the symbolic adoption of policies does not lead to substantive changes in organizational behaviour. As a result, many of these initiatives remain poorly integrated into the daily workings of the institution.

External factors play a crucial role in shaping diversity policies in HEIs. However, internal motivations should not be overlooked. They can also drive inclusive practices,

especially in contexts where formal diversity metrics are weak or absent. In this study, we focused primarily on institutional policies and formal actors. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the internal motivations and diverse backgrounds of staff and faculty are important for promoting diversity and ensuring equity. This is particularly important in the socio-cultural context of HEIs, where intrinsic motivation can support the development of a more inclusive organizational culture. As noted by Mor Barak and Travis (2013), organizations with diverse teams are more likely to foster innovation and inclusivity. This suggests that the diversity of faculty and staff may influence how diversity is promoted within institutions.

The role of internal motivations therefore appears important. HEIs that actively support inclusivity - through diversity training, gender-neutral recruitment, or support for underrepresented groups - help create environments where tolerance, equity, and diversity are valued beyond formal requirements (Thomas, 1999). Even if external metrics do not fully capture these efforts, the intrinsic commitment of staff and faculty may remain a key driver of organizational change.

Our study suggests that TED initiatives are often structurally under-resourced, which may significantly limit their effectiveness. This aligns with prior research showing that diversity governance in HEIs often takes the form of "compliance without capacity" where formal structures are not matched by operational support. This reflects the concept of symbolic compliance (Oliver, 1991), where diversity roles are established to signal compliance with external norms, but they lack the institutional backing necessary to enable substantive change. As a result, diversity, tolerance, and equity initiatives may remain underfunded and understaffed, which can limit their practical impact.

Grassroots initiatives, particularly those led by students, play an important role in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion and can contribute to meaningful change (Martin et al., 2011; Nemetz & Christensen, 1996). These initiatives often emerge organically from students and faculty. This is consistent with social movement theory, which suggests that bottom-up efforts may complement top-down mandates (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). In many cases, students and academic volunteers may act as catalysts for broader cultural change within universities. They reflect the values of younger generations and respond to evolving societal challenges. Previous studies highlight various initiatives that support inclusive university cultures. These include cross-cultural campus events (Smith, 2009) as well as workshops and conferences that promote tolerance and support transgender academics and students (Mor Barak, 2019). Such bottom-up practices may influence formal university policies. They can also help strengthen the institution's overall commitment to inclusivity, as reflected in the examples identified in our interviews.

Our research indicates that a variety of tolerance, equality, and diversity practices exist in HRM areas in academia, but their implementation is sometimes unsystematic

and often focuses on awareness building. Equal treatment measures are particularly noticeable but approaches to diversity management are more individual. While formal structures and policies are in place, their effectiveness is limited by the lack of full integration of these values into people management practices.

This points to the need to further develop and strengthen systemic support for TED practices in academia. It is worth noting that management policies (including HRM) influence perceptions of procedural justice and send a signal about the organization as a whole (Wu& Chaturvedi, 2009). Conscious identity beliefs that are concrete (Cox & Blake, 1991) and clearly define standards of procedure and distribution (Roberson & Stevens, 2006; Wu & Chaturvedi, 2009) can support clearer understanding and allow for the development of a positive diversity climate (Kidder et al. 2004). Otherwise, 'cosmetic diversity measures' may result in greater hostility and intergroup processes (Kossek & Zonia, 1993). As a consequence, excessive or inadequate diversity management may trigger threats to the identity and legitimacy of diversity due to weak procedural and distributive justice mechanisms.

The contribution of the study should therefore be understood primarily as empirical and practical, with a more limited conceptual implication. Empirically, it documents how TED policies are interpreted and implemented by managerial key informants across 20 Polish HEIs, showing recurring patterns of ambiguity, under-resourcing, and decoupling. Practically, it identifies areas where universities may strengthen resources, data collection, training, HRM integration, and grassroots support. Conceptually, it refines rather than replaces existing theory by suggesting that the "academic diversity paradox" is best treated as a possible manifestation of policy-practice decoupling and symbolic compliance, not as a fully established theory or causal model.

7. Conclusions

This study suggests that tolerance, equality, and diversity are not clearly distinguished in practice. These concepts are treated as overlapping and interchangeable, reflecting conceptual ambiguity in academic discourse. This lack of clarity may undermine effective diversity management. As a result, practices do not consistently foster belonging, respect, and security, and they may be insufficient to prevent exclusion and discrimination. This is relevant to recruitment, access to training, promotion, pay, decision-making, work–life balance, and protection from unfair dismissal.

Universities have made progress in raising awareness of equal treatment and introducing some diversity-related practices. However, the current approach remains fragmented. The focus is mainly on awareness-building and compliance with external requirements. It is less focused on a comprehensive strategy integrating tolerance, equity, and diversity into HRM and institutional policies. This highlights the need to move beyond isolated actions. Universities should develop systematic frameworks that embed diversity as a lived institutional reality.

TED practices in HEIs are often under-resourced and fragmented, which can be interpreted as reflecting "compliance without capacity" and symbolic compliance rather than meaningful institutional support. While grassroots initiatives, especially student-led, play an important bottom-up role in promoting diversity and inclusion, their impact remains limited without structural backing. Overall, the lack of a systemic and integrated approach to TED in HRM reduces effectiveness, undermines procedural justice, and weakens the long-term legitimacy of diversity policies.

The results indicate observed tensions between institutional regulations and diversity culture in universities. In this study, these tensions are best understood as gaps, decoupling, and inconsistent implementation rather than as definitive evidence that diversity regulations produce outcomes opposite to their aims. Several factors contribute to this pattern: differing understandings of tolerance, equality, and diversity; individual-level implementation; limited resources; and varying engagement of academic communities in applying equality and diversity practices. For this reason, the "academic diversity paradox" is treated here as an emerging and context-dependent dynamic that requires further empirical verification.

Although triangulation (data, investigators, and context) strengthened the credibility of the study, a few methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted exclusively in the Polish higher education context; therefore, the transferability of the findings to other national systems, regulatory regimes, and academic cultures should be treated cautiously. Second, the use of purposive sampling and key informants in managerial or leadership roles introduces a potential selection bias and means that the analysis primarily reflects managerial interpretations of TED. The perspectives of non-managerial academic staff, administrative employees, and students are not included, which may limit the range of views on TED practices. Third, because respondents occupied formal roles connected with equality or diversity, their accounts may be affected by self-presentation bias and by a tendency to emphasize institutional achievements. Finally, the interpretative nature of template analysis means that findings are still partly shaped by researchers' subjectivity in coding and theme construction, despite attempts to ensure consistency through team discussion.

The results of this study may provide insights that can help researchers, practitioners, and academic leaders to manage more effectively in the context of building a diverse and inclusive organization.

In order to address the observed tension between institutional regulations and academic culture, HEIs should take more concrete initiatives to balance formal diversity policies with fostering a more organic academic culture of inclusivity. First, it is recommended that academic managers take steps to better distinguish and understand the concepts of tolerance, equality, and diversity. These values should be systematically implemented in all aspects of the university, turning individual initiatives into an integral part of the organizational culture. Second, a broader and more flexible diversity framework should

be developed at universities that allows for institutional autonomy, better adaptation to the specific characteristics of the academic community and its culture of inclusivity. The idea is to place emphasis not only on gender and disability, but also on other dimensions of diversity, such as age, health status, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, creed, irreligion, political belief, union affiliation, gender identity, family status, lifestyle, form, scope and basis of employment, or interests. Third, university authorities should provide resources, both financial and human, to manage diversity, encourage grassroots initiatives, and provide training in this area. It also seems necessary to conduct annual anonymous evaluation surveys to determine how the academic community assesses the situation in this regard.

Future research could focus on testing and quantifying the identified themes to better understand pathways toward effective initiatives and practices that support an equitable and diverse academic culture. While the present qualitative approach does not allow for inter-institutional quantitative comparison, it provides a foundation for future large-scale studies. Such studies could examine patterns of policy implementation and their relationship with cultural outcomes across broader, more representative samples of HEIs.

Authors' contribution

Ł.S.: article conception, theoretical content of the article, research methods applied, conducting the research, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation. **S.P.:** article conception, theoretical content of the article, research methods applied, conducting the research, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation. **E. G-G.:** theoretical content of the article, data collection, draft manuscript preparation. **T.K.:** theoretical content of the article, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation.

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During the research process to writing the article, the authors did not use AI.

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