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**INCLUSION,
EQUITY AND DIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITIES**



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INCLUSIÓN, EQUIDAD Y DIVERSIDAD EN LAS UNIVERSIDADES CONTEMPORÁNEAS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes inclusion, equity, and diversity as fundamental pillars for the transformation of higher education in the contemporary context. Their importance lies in the fact that these dimensions not only respond to principles of social justice but also strengthen educational quality, innovation, and the formation of citizens capable of thriving in diverse societies. The study aimed to examine how higher education institutions implement inclusive access policies and support programs for historically marginalized populations, as well as to analyze the representation of diversity in key areas such as teaching, research, and university leadership, considering factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, disability, and cultural diversity. Methodologically, a descriptive-analytical qualitative approach is employed, based on a systematic review of recent academic literature (2021–2026). The analysis is conducted using content analysis, thematic categorization, and comparative studies, allowing for the identification of trends, best practices, and common challenges across different contexts. Among the main findings, it is evident that, although there has been progress in inclusive policies, gaps persist in representation and equitable participation. It is also highlighted that inclusion must go beyond access, incorporating strategies that ensure retention and academic success. Finally, significant challenges are identified, such as institutional resistance, the difficulty in evaluating the impact of policies, and the sustainability of programs, which require a structural and ongoing commitment.

Keywords:

Educational inclusion, equity, diversity, higher education, inclusive policies, social justice.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la inclusión, la equidad y la diversidad como ejes fundamentales para la transformación de la educación superior en el contexto contemporáneo. Su importancia radica en que estas dimensiones no solo responden a principios de justicia social, sino que también fortalecen la calidad educativa, la innovación y la formación de ciudadanos capaces de desenvolverse en sociedades diversas. El objetivo del estudio fue examinar cómo las instituciones de educación superior implementan políticas de acceso inclusivo y programas de apoyo dirigidos a poblaciones históricamente marginadas, así como analizar la representación de la diversidad en ámbitos clave como la docencia, la investigación y el liderazgo universitario, considerando factores como género, origen socioeconómico, discapacidad y diversidad cultural. Metodológicamente, se emplea un enfoque cualitativo de tipo descriptivo-analítico basado en una revisión documental sistemática de literatura académica reciente (2021-2026). El análisis se desarrolla mediante técnicas de análisis de contenido, categorización temática y comparación de experiencias, lo que permite identificar tendencias, buenas prácticas y desafíos comunes en distintos contextos. Entre los principales resultados, se evidencia que, aunque existen avances en políticas inclusivas, persisten brechas en la representación y participación equitativa. Asimismo, se destaca que la inclusión debe ir más allá del acceso, incorporando estrategias que aseguren la permanencia y el éxito académico. Finalmente, se identifican retos relevantes como la resistencia institucional, la dificultad para evaluar el impacto de las políticas y la sostenibilidad de los programas, lo que exige un compromiso estructural y continuo.

Palabras clave:

Inclusión educativa, equidad, diversidad, educación superior, políticas inclusivas, justicia social.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, inclusion, equity, and diversity have become fundamental pillars for the transformation of higher education. Contemporary universities not only have the responsibility to train highly skilled professionals but also to contribute to building more just, democratic, and inclusive societies. In this context, addressing the historical inequalities that have limited access to and retention in higher education for diverse social groups is essential. Factors such as socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, disability, and other conditions of vulnerability have significantly influenced educational opportunities, creating gaps that still persist in many regions of the world.

The importance of this topic lies in the fact that diversity within universities represents not only an ethical principle but also an academic and social value. Numerous studies have demonstrated that diverse educational environments foster critical thinking, innovation, and the development of intercultural competencies—essential elements in a globalized world. In this sense, promoting inclusion and equity not only implies expanding access but also guaranteeing adequate conditions for the learning, participation, and academic success of all students. Thus, higher education institutions face the challenge of designing comprehensive policies that respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Internationally, several studies have analyzed how universities are responding to these challenges, providing conceptual and methodological tools that allow for understanding and evaluating institutional practices. Within this framework, the work of Mistry & Sánchez Gómez (2026) represents a significant advance by proposing the INSTADINE rubric, designed to evaluate diversity and inclusion practices in higher education. This tool offers a systematic approach that facilitates the identification of strengths and areas for improvement within institutions, promoting the adoption of evidence-based strategies. Its contribution is particularly relevant, as it allows for the establishment of comparable standards and fosters a culture of continuous evaluation regarding inclusion.

Fagun (2025) analyzes the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education in the United States, highlighting the need to structurally integrate these dimensions into institutional policies. He notes that while significant progress has been made in terms of access, challenges persist regarding the retention and academic success of students from historically marginalized groups. In this regard, he emphasizes the importance of implementing academic, financial, and psychosocial support programs to reduce dropout rates and improve the educational experience for these students.

From a global perspective, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) emphasizes that equity and inclusion are key elements for

the transformation of higher education, especially in the post-COVID-19 context. According to this organization, the health crisis highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable students. In regions such as Asia-Pacific, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization stresses the need to strengthen public policies and institutional strategies to guarantee equitable access to higher education, considering factors such as the digital divide, economic limitations, and geographical barriers.

Mosier et al. (2023) also address a key aspect of the debate on inclusion in higher education: the relationship between commitments to diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion, and the financial sustainability of institutions. Through their analysis, the authors argue that it is possible to advance these objectives without compromising economic stability, provided that strategic approaches are adopted, and the value of inclusion is recognized as a long-term investment. This approach is fundamental to dismantling the perception that inclusive policies represent an additional expense, highlighting instead their potential to strengthen the quality and relevance of higher education.

Similarly, Clayton (2021) offers a relevant perspective based on experiences during the pandemic, highlighting how communities of practice in higher education have facilitated the sharing of knowledge, strategies, and best practices regarding inclusion and equity. These initiatives have demonstrated the importance of inter-institutional collaboration and collective learning in addressing common challenges, as well as the need to maintain these spaces for dialogue and reflection in the future.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that inclusion, equity, and diversity are complex processes requiring a comprehensive and sustained approach. Contemporary universities have begun implementing various strategies to address these challenges, including inclusive access policies, scholarship and financial aid programs, academic and psychological support services, and initiatives aimed at promoting respectful and discrimination-free learning environments. However, despite the progress made, significant challenges remain that must be addressed to ensure truly inclusive higher education.

In this context, it is essential to critically analyze how higher education institutions are implementing these policies and programs, as well as to evaluate their impact on reducing educational inequalities. This analysis allows us to identify best practices, as well as areas for improvement that can be strengthened through the development of more effective and contextualized strategies.

Therefore, this article aims to examine how contemporary universities are implementing inclusive access policies and support programs aimed at historically marginalized groups, as well as to analyze the scope and challenges of

these initiatives in building more equitable, diverse, and inclusive educational environments.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach to examine the policies, practices, and challenges related to inclusion, equity, and diversity in contemporary universities. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of institutional processes, as well as the social and educational dynamics that influence the implementation of strategies aimed at historically marginalized groups.

Regarding the methodological design, a systematic literature review was employed, based on the collection, selection, and analysis of recent and relevant academic literature in the field of higher education. The sources used included indexed scientific articles, reports from international organizations, specialized books, and empirical studies published between 2021 and 2026, in order to ensure the currency and relevance of the information. The selection criteria considered the direct relationship with the study's categories of analysis: inclusion, equity, diversity, educational access, institutional representation, and challenges in policy implementation.

The analysis process was structured in three phases. In the first phase, sources were searched and organized in academic databases and specialized repositories, prioritizing those that addressed experiences and studies in university contexts. In the second phase, a critical and analytical reading of the selected documents was carried out, identifying key concepts, theoretical approaches, methodologies used, and main findings. Finally, in the third phase, the information was categorized according to the study's thematic axes, which allowed for the establishment of relationships, comparisons, and trends related to inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education.

For the analysis of the information, content analysis was used, which allowed for the systematic interpretation of the contributions from different sources, identifying patterns, similarities, and differences. This process facilitated the construction of categories such as gender representation, socioeconomic background, cultural diversity, inclusion of people with disabilities, institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and university leadership. Likewise, the main challenges identified in the literature were specifically analyzed, such as institutional resistance, the difficulty in measuring the impact of inclusive policies, and the sustainability of implemented programs.

Additionally, a comparative approach was incorporated, allowing for the contrasting of different experiences and models for implementing inclusion policies in diverse geographic and educational contexts. This enriched the analysis and helped identify best practices, as well as

factors that either promote or hinder the success of institutional strategies.

In terms of validity and rigor, the triangulation of sources was ensured, integrating theoretical, empirical, and institutional perspectives, which allowed for a more complete and well-founded view of the phenomenon under study. Likewise, the use of reliable and up-to-date sources was prioritized to guarantee the quality of the analysis and the soundness of the conclusions.

Finally, it is important to note that, as this is a study based on a document review, one of its main limitations lies in its reliance on previously published information, which may restrict access to undocumented experiences or more recent data in some contexts. Nevertheless, this methodology is suitable for the purpose of this article, as it allows for a broad, critical, and well-founded perspective on inclusion, equity, and diversity in contemporary universities.

DEVELOPMENT

Inclusion, equity, and diversity in contemporary universities are reflected not only in the access of students from diverse backgrounds, but also in their representation within key areas of university life, such as teaching, research, and institutional leadership. In this regard, it is essential to analyze how variables such as gender, socioeconomic background, disability, and cultural diversity are being considered in shaping these areas, as well as the progress made and the limitations that still remain.

Regarding gender representation, while significant progress has been made in women's access to higher education, inequalities persist, particularly in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as well as in academic leadership positions. The presence of women in management positions, rectorships, and decision-making roles remains limited in many institutions, highlighting the need for more effective policies to promote gender equity. Furthermore, it is important to consider the inclusion of diverse gender identities, ensuring safe and discrimination-free environments for all.

On the other hand, socioeconomic background continues to be a determining factor in students' access to, retention in, and academic success at university. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds face multiple barriers, such as financial limitations, less access to educational resources, and difficulties adapting to the demands of the university environment. In response, many universities have implemented scholarship programs, financial aid, and academic support strategies. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends largely on their continuity and the existence of comprehensive policies that address not only access but also retention and graduation.

With regard to people with disabilities, universities have made progress in implementing physical and technological accessibility measures, as well as adapting teaching

methodologies. However, significant challenges remain in eliminating attitudinal barriers and in training faculty to address functional diversity. True inclusion of this group involves not only guaranteeing access to infrastructure, but also promoting an institutional culture based on respect, empathy, and equal opportunities.

Cultural diversity is another key element in analyzing inclusion in higher education. In a globalized context, universities receive students from different countries, cultures, and traditions, which enriches the academic environment but also poses challenges in terms of integration and coexistence. Incorporating intercultural perspectives into curricula, as well as fostering spaces for dialogue and mutual respect, are fundamental strategies for harnessing the potential of this diversity. Likewise, it is important to recognize and value the knowledge of Indigenous communities and historically excluded cultural groups, integrating it into knowledge production.

In the field of research, diversity also plays a crucial role. The inclusion of researchers from different backgrounds and with different perspectives contributes to the generation of more comprehensive, relevant, and representative knowledge. However, inequalities in access to funding, academic networks, and publication opportunities continue to affect certain groups, limiting their full participation in scientific production. Therefore, it is necessary to promote policies that foster equity in research, including support and recognition mechanisms for disadvantaged researchers.

Regarding university leadership, diversity in management teams is essential to ensure inclusive and representative decision-making. A lack of diversity in these spaces can perpetuate exclusionary power structures and limit the implementation of effective equity policies. In this sense, universities must adopt strategies that promote the participation of underrepresented groups in leadership positions, fostering more democratic and equitable governance.

Despite progress in implementing inclusion, equity, and diversity policies, universities face several challenges that hinder their consolidation. One of the main obstacles is institutional resistance to change. In many cases, traditional structures and entrenched organizational cultures make it difficult to adopt new inclusive practices and approaches. This resistance can manifest as a lack of commitment from administrators, insufficient resource allocation, or the perception that these policies are not a priority.

Another major challenge is measuring the impact of inclusion and equity policies. Evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives is complex, as it involves considering multiple variables and dimensions, both quantitative and qualitative. The lack of clear indicators and adequate monitoring systems hinders the identification of progress and areas for improvement. In this context, tools such as the INSTADINE rubric represent a significant step forward,

providing frameworks that facilitate the evaluation of institutional practices.

Furthermore, the sustainability of these programs is a fundamental challenge. Many inclusion initiatives depend on external funding or temporary projects, which jeopardizes their long-term continuity. To ensure their sustainability, these policies must be integrated into the strategic planning of institutions and have stable and adequate resources. In addition, it is essential to promote an institutional culture that values inclusion as a core principle, beyond regulatory requirements or global trends.

Another important aspect is the need for training and awareness-raising within the university community. Implementing inclusive policies requires not only structural changes but also transformations in the attitudes and perceptions of students, faculty, and administrative staff. Training on diversity, equity, and inclusion is key to fostering a culture of respect and coexistence, as well as to ensuring the effectiveness of the strategies implemented.

Finally, it is important to recognize that inclusion, equity, and diversity are dynamic processes that require constant review. Universities must adapt to social changes and new societal demands, developing innovative approaches that respond to emerging challenges. In this regard, collaboration among institutions, ongoing research, and the exchange of best practices are key elements for moving toward a more inclusive and equitable higher education.

While universities have made progress in incorporating policies and practices geared toward inclusion, equity, and diversity, significant challenges remain. Equitable representation in teaching, research, and leadership, as well as overcoming obstacles such as institutional resistance, impact measurement, and program sustainability, are fundamental aspects for consolidating these processes and ensuring a fairer and more accessible higher education for all.

Auerbach & Wilcox (2025) highlight the importance of actively involving students in the evaluation of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and practices within universities. Their proposal focuses on empowering students through the use of statistical and analytical tools that allow them to measure the actual state of inclusion in their institutions. This perspective not only fosters a culture of participation but also strengthens institutional transparency and accountability. In this sense, their contribution is key, as it positions students as active agents of change, contributing to the construction of more equitable educational environments from a critical and data-driven perspective.

Following on from the above, Casimiro-Urcos et al. (2025) emphasize the fundamental role of teachers' attitudes in promoting inclusive education, noting that inclusive pedagogical practices begin with a positive disposition toward diversity. Although their focus is on early childhood education, their findings are highly relevant to higher education,

as they demonstrate that teacher training and awareness are essential elements for ensuring equitable educational processes. Thus, the authors underscore that inclusion depends not only on institutional policies but also on everyday classroom interactions.

Hilton et al. (2021) analyzes various initiatives implemented in a university department to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, highlighting the importance of adopting structural and sustained approaches. The authors demonstrate that isolated actions have a limited impact, while comprehensive strategies, including curricular changes, staff training, and monitoring mechanisms, generate more significant transformations. Consequently, their study provides a practical framework for implementing effective institutional programs.

Likewise, Nunes (2021) argues that higher education is undergoing a paradigm shift in its approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion, moving from symbolic declarations to concrete actions aimed at institutional transformation. This shift implies greater integration of these principles into strategic decision-making and the organizational culture of universities. In this context, the author emphasizes the need to link discourse with practice, preventing inclusion from becoming merely a superficial commitment.

Along these same lines, Fernandez et al. (2023) propose ten key strategies for improving equity in academic institutions, highlighting the importance of committed leadership, the collection of disaggregated data, and the implementation of evidence-based policies. Their approach emphasizes that institutional change requires systematic planning and ongoing evaluation, as well as the participation of multiple stakeholders within the university community. Therefore, their contribution offers practical guidance for leading transformation processes in complex educational contexts.

On the other hand, Hollywood & Quinn (2025) present the results of a study conducted at a US institution serving minority students, highlighting both progress and challenges in the implementation of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. The authors emphasize that, despite significant efforts, gaps persist in students' perceptions and experiences, underscoring the need to evaluate not only the policies themselves but also their actual impact on the university community. Consequently, their research underscores the importance of considering the voices of the groups they serve.

In addition, Ramdas et al. (2025) conducted a comprehensive review of faculty attitudes toward diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, identifying factors that influence the adoption of inclusive practices. These factors include prior training, professional experience, and institutional support. The authors conclude that without a positive attitude from faculty, inclusive policies are unlikely

to translate into real changes in the classroom, reinforcing the need to invest in teacher professional development.

Regarding pedagogical strategies, Corsino & Fuller (2021) review various educational approaches used to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as problem-based learning, intercultural education, and student-centered teaching. Their analysis demonstrates that these methodologies can significantly contribute to creating more inclusive learning environments, provided they are implemented consciously and contextually. Thus, their contribution highlights the importance of pedagogical innovation as a tool for inclusion.

Ovink & Murrell (2022), for their part, address the challenges faced by diversity projects in universities, noting that the implementation of these initiatives is often hampered by institutional tensions and structural limitations. The authors argue that inclusion requires a profound change in organizational dynamics, which involves questioning entrenched practices and redistributing power within institutions. In this sense, their work highlights the complexity of institutional transformation processes.

In the field of science, Goodwin & McKendree (2024) analyze the existing literature on diversity, equity, and inclusion in science education, highlighting the persistence of inequalities in the participation of certain groups. The authors emphasize the need to adopt interdisciplinary approaches and revise curricula to make them more inclusive and representative. In this way, their research contributes to making visible the existing gaps in traditionally exclusionary areas.

On the other hand, Fox et al. (2023) examines whether social justice initiatives driven from the highest levels of universities manage to permeate the entire institution. Their findings suggest that, while leadership is fundamental, it does not always guarantee effective changes at the operational levels. This highlights the importance of articulating strategies that involve all institutional actors, avoiding a top-down implementation that limits the reach of policies.

Regarding academic research, Colón-Aguirre & Bright (2022) highlight the importance of incorporating the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion into research processes, from design to dissemination of results. The authors point out that inclusive research not only broadens analytical perspectives but also contributes to the production of more relevant and socially responsible knowledge. Therefore, their contribution reinforces the need to integrate inclusion into all the core functions of the university.

Regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities, Wolbring & Lillywhite (2021) analyze the barriers this group faces in universities, highlighting that, despite advances in accessibility, significant inequalities persist. The authors emphasize that the inclusion of people with disabilities requires a comprehensive approach encompassing

physical, technological, and cultural aspects, as well as a sustained institutional commitment. Consequently, their study underscores the need to broaden the perspective of inclusion.

Critically, Tienda (2013) warns that diversity does not automatically guarantee inclusion, pointing out that the mere presence of diverse students does not imply their effective integration into university life. The author proposes that institutions must go beyond access and focus on promoting interaction, a sense of belonging, and equity of opportunity. This approach is fundamental to understanding the limitations of policies focused solely on admissions.

Finally, Magnus et al. (2024) analyze work related to diversity within universities, highlighting the tensions between institutional change efforts and existing structures of inequality. The authors point out that staff attitudes and organizational dynamics can either facilitate or hinder the implementation of inclusive policies. In this sense, their research underscores the importance of addressing both structural and cultural factors to achieve effective and sustainable transformation.

The contributions analyzed demonstrate that inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education require a comprehensive approach that involves all members of the university community. The importance of promoting active student participation in the evaluation of institutional policies is highlighted, as is the key role of faculty, whose attitudes and pedagogical practices directly influence the creation of inclusive environments. Furthermore, the need to implement structural and sustained strategies is emphasized, avoiding isolated actions that limit the impact of initiatives.

Similarly, it is evident that progress toward more inclusive universities implies a profound change in organizational culture, where leadership, strategic planning, and the use of data play a fundamental role. The importance of innovating in teaching methodologies and ensuring that academic research incorporates equity principles is also emphasized, thereby broadening the social relevance of the knowledge generated.

On the other hand, the contributions agree that significant challenges remain, such as structural barriers, persistent inequalities in specific areas of knowledge, and the difficulty of translating policies into real-world experiences of inclusion. In this regard, it is emphasized that diversity alone does not guarantee integration; therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the sense of belonging and the equitable participation of all groups.

These ideas reflect that the consolidation of inclusion, equity, and diversity in universities depends on the articulation between policies, practices, and institutional culture, as well as a continuous commitment aimed at generating profound and sustainable transformations.

CONCLUSIONS

Inclusion, equity, and diversity in contemporary universities are essential elements for ensuring a fairer, more relevant, and more equitable higher education that meets current social demands. Throughout this analysis, it has become clear that this issue not only reflects an ethical principle but also represents a necessary condition for strengthening educational quality, fostering innovation, and promoting more democratic societies. In this sense, its importance lies in the capacity of institutions to recognize and address the heterogeneity of their community, overcoming the historical inequalities that have limited the access and participation of diverse groups.

This study examined how higher education institutions are implementing inclusive access policies and support programs for historically marginalized groups. It also analyzed how diversity manifests itself in key areas such as teaching, research, and university leadership, considering variables such as gender, socioeconomic background, disability, and cultural diversity. This analysis identified significant progress but also revealed important gaps that still require attention.

From a methodological standpoint, the qualitative approach based on document review and content analysis allowed for the construction of a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study. The systematization of recent and relevant sources facilitated the identification of common patterns, trends, and challenges across different university contexts. Likewise, data triangulation and a comparative approach contributed to strengthening the validity of the analysis, enabling a broader and more critical understanding of inclusion policies and practices in higher education.

Among the most relevant findings, it is highlighted that inclusion cannot be limited to access, but must also encompass retention, academic success, and full student participation. In this sense, equitable representation in teaching, research, and leadership is positioned as a key element for institutional transformation. However, the analysis also reveals that diversity alone does not guarantee inclusion, which underscores the need to promote environments that foster a sense of belonging, interaction, and equal opportunities.

On the other hand, significant challenges were identified that hinder the consolidation of these policies, including institutional resistance to change, difficulty in measuring the impact of initiatives, and the limited sustainability of some programs. These obstacles demonstrate that the transformation toward more inclusive universities requires not only well-designed policies, but also a sustained institutional commitment, adequate resources, and an organizational culture that values diversity as a core principle.

Finally, the analysis concludes that inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education are dynamic and complex

processes that demand effective coordination between policies, practices, and institutional culture. To advance in this direction, it is essential to strengthen the evaluation of implemented strategies, promote the participation of all university stakeholders, and consolidate management models that guarantee the sustainability of initiatives. Only in this way will it be possible to build truly inclusive universities, capable of responding to current challenges and contributing to the development of more equitable societies.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions:

Parvin Houshyari: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, visualization, original draft writing, and writing, review, and editing.

Ethical statement:

The study was based on the analysis of documentary sources and publicly available data, and therefore did not involve the direct participation of human subjects. No personally identifiable information was handled.