

The Editorial by Trine Fosslund<sup>1</sup> and Driss Habti

## **University practices in an age of supercomplexity: Revisiting diversity, equality, and inclusion in higher education**

Diversity, equality, and inclusion are core values within higher education, but what do these values mean when students' and scholars' practices are enacted within what Barnett (2000) defines as a *supercomplex* world? Several opportunities are open for everyone, but at the same time it is evident that traditional, institutional logics of diversity and ways of understanding the world reproduce traditional dominance structures. Within this context, Barnett (2000) states that the university has an important function, offering completely new frames of understanding, a 'compounding supercomplexity', 'to help us comprehend and make sense of the resulting knowledge mayhem; and to enable us to live purposefully amid supercomplexity'. In an age of supercomplexity, "a new epistemology for the university awaits, one that is open, bold, engaging, accessible, and conscious of its own insecurity. It is an epistemology for living amid uncertainty' (p. 409). He added that higher education should prepare students for such supercomplex world 'in which we are conceptually challenged, and continually so' (p. 409).

In this editorial, we are revisiting perspectives on diversity, inclusion, and equality, as we think this represents the most important social responsibility within higher education institutions today. As we all are bombarded with information and our values are continually challenged, the need to develop our perceptions and knowledge of these core values within higher education is more important than ever. We think intersectionality is one important starting point because it is 'a theoretical framework rooted in the premise that human experience is jointly shaped by multiple social positions (e.g., race, gender), and cannot be adequately understood by considering social positions independently' (Bauer et. al., 2021, p. 1). Intersectional core categories often emerge, converge, and diverge in society as interwoven, mutually interfering, and shaping one another (e.g., Bhopal & Preston, 2012). In a systematic literature review on intersectionality in higher education research, Nichols and Stahl (2019) call for more vigorous research efforts to unpack the mechanisms of intersecting systems of inequalities that affect participation and outcomes of students and faculty. In a supercomplex world, it is important to constantly revisit and deconstruct how 'intersecting social identities' are

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reproduced as practices within diverse educational contexts—often with major impact on the lives of those experiencing higher education.

According to Byrd, Brunn-Bevel and Ovink (2019), universities are more than ever paying attention to diversity and inclusion. However, globalization, internationalization and massification of higher education require a re-examination of how such social identities as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and nationality, for example, connect and produce lived experiences of students, teachers, and researchers within higher education institutions (HEIs) and their supercomplex systems. Therefore, to provide more socially just campuses and education, intersectional powers need to be explored from both individual and institutional perspectives to analyse the challenging components of diversity, inclusion, and equality in HEIs. In the same vein, Bengtson and Barnett (2017) address the growing “darkness” within higher education to comprehend challenges, situations, reactions, aims and goals, which cannot easily be understood and solved by agendas of quality assurance and professionalization of higher education. They indicated that one of these dark educational aspects characterising everyday practices in HEIs are the emerging gender and ethnic conflicts, isolation and loneliness. Departing from this viewpoint, we argue that it is important to revisit—on a regular basis— aspects which enhance or undermine diversity, equality, and inclusion within a constantly changing higher education.

According to Hofstra et al. (2022), women and minority scholars have lower chances for upward career mobility and professorships, which demonstrate a clear structural inequality in academia. They observed that most resources do not help underrepresented groups any more than majority groups, so they seem unlikely to overcome the deficit. Guinier (2015) addresses the ways in which the idea of merit has been misapplied in the context of higher education. According to Guinier, conventional measures of merit do not predict performance, but track race and social class, and beneficiaries of affirmative action to out-perform their peers. The analytical approaches to engage in such questions need to be guided by the perceptions and lived experiences of the marginalised. The necessity to explore the growing complexity of higher education is touching the often-salient aspects of globalization and internationalisation in our postmodern time. The categorical definitions about ‘the other’ fosters inequality where people in higher education increasingly experience instability and insecurity in life, which is framed within what Beck characterises as ‘risk society’ (Beck, 2007).

Below, USC<sup>2</sup> lists the types of oppression, target groups, and non-target groups that can be seen as one of several possible starting points to discuss privilege and systems of power, gender and sexuality, race, and ethnicity — and to “unpack the invisible knapsack” that is heavier to carry for some according to diverse modes of oppression.

Table 1. Types of oppression.

Type of Oppression	Target Group	Non-Target Group
Racial	People of color	White people
Class	Poor, working class	Middle, owning class
Gender	Women, transgender people	Men
Sexual orientation	Lesbian, gay, bisexual	Heterosexual people
Ability	People with disabilities	People without disabilities
Religion	Non-Christian	Christian
Age	People over 40	Young people
Youth	Children and young adults	Older adults
Rank/status	People without college degree	People with college degree
Military service	Vietnam veterans	Veterans of other wars
Immigrant status	Immigrant	U.S.-born
Language	Non-English	English

Although a meta-reflection on the forms of power and suppression which are embedded in such categorization is appropriate here, e.g., what are the implication of categorising people as ‘people of colour’ instead of just people? However, such modes of oppression are present in society and can be individual (feelings, beliefs, values), interpersonal (actions, behaviours, and language), institutional (legal system, education system, public policy, hiring practices, media images) and a combination of these modes.

Practises where ‘otherness’ is actualised occurs more frequently, are ranging from daily encounters to contested matters of rights and politicization, with huge impact on academic life. This politicization is twofold: (i) it is a question of how individuals relate to each other in all sorts of everyday interactions, and (ii) the issue of how categorization has increasingly become an object of public discourse, also affecting everyday practices in higher education. When students and academics are confronted with the task of relating adequately to the ‘others’, to be open to new relationships, even when these others are defined according to well-known pre-

<sup>2</sup> *Diversity toolkit: a guide to discussing Identity, Power and privilege.* [https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/diversity-workshop-guide-to-discussing-identity-power-and-privilege/?\\_ga=2.107337602.1036146551.1517522964-2136606955.1511755738](https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/diversity-workshop-guide-to-discussing-identity-power-and-privilege/?_ga=2.107337602.1036146551.1517522964-2136606955.1511755738)

established categorical boundaries, they may face multi-layered challenges. Even if a supercomplex world is characterised by both uncertainty and openness, as well as boldness, it is quite likely that both students and academics feel insecure, and, instead of keeping a distance, they need to challenge their awareness and contextual challenges related to diversity, inclusion, and equality.

Higher education research has long been engaging with questions of social equality, social justice, social cohesion, and meritocracy (e.g., Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Mc Nair et al., 2020; Shavit et al., 2007). Such research has often underlined the structural imbalances and institutionalised nature of inequalities and racism that affect the lived experiences of some academics and students more than others (e.g., Bhopal & Maylor, 2014). Bearing in mind the possible methodological limitations, we need to consider researching and making sense of diversity and inclusion through innovative routes such as participatory perspectives, for example on experiences of ethnic minority community in higher educational institutions (Guinier, 2015). Such perspectives would provide grounds for a community of knowledge and learning to understand and to improve such experiences in academic professions. One example is the long inter-ethnic contacts in northern Norway, where boundaries have been confirmed, negotiated, and rejected throughout long timespan. The dynamics of boundary crossing were fuelled by locally produced experience, orchestrated by the state control and assimilation project. Particularly, the educational authorities down to local teachers argued that learning Norwegian language and forgetting Sami language was the only way for Sami people to emancipate themselves from poverty and discrimination (Thuen, 2012). Another example that gained much attention in Europe and elsewhere, with long colonial trajectories and boundaries, is the movement of Black Lives Matter in the USA (e.g., Haynes et al., 2021).

The questions of racism and social justice in higher education has remained the core of the debate. They embody a solid reminder how heartfelt intersectional power dynamics provide social disadvantages that are sometimes heavier to bear within a supercomplex system. This underscores the importance of rethinking diversity, inclusion, and equality within HEIs from interdisciplinary, multi-level, and relational perspectives. This may generate ground-breaking additions to the existing wide scholarship in more structured and professional way because diversity and inclusion matter. Diverse intersectional aspects are daily forming and reforming patterns, filtering practices and experiences as well as fuelling the engagement, accessibility, and consciousness that form our everyday activities and practices within universities.

Several scholars found that, in attempts to secure their own prestige and to appeal to students, highly selective HEIs mark their ethno-racial diversity and work hard to attract diverse classes (e.g., Berrey, 2015; Stevens & Roksa, 2011). Holland and Ford (2021) analysed the admissions webpages at 278 universities across the United States and found that selective institutions are more likely to represent their

diversity and to engage in practices that emphasize their traditionally under-represented minority student populations than less selective institutions, though it is the less selective institutions that have higher populations of these students. They argue that universities in different status positions in the same field value the same symbolic capital (diversity) differently. USC University of Southern California is one example of a university that more actively fosters the awareness of diversity, inclusion and equality among teachers and students. For instance, they presented a *Diversity toolkit: a guide to discussing Identity, Power, and privilege*<sup>3</sup> at their website, to fuel a productive discourse and deliberative attitude towards diversity and the role of identity in social relations. Though they observed that most individuals are both a target and an agent of oppression, due to diverse situations and internalized subordination and internalized domination, they indicated the following types of oppression often surge from patterns, and happen at all levels, reinforced by societal norms, institutional biases, interpersonal interactions, and individual beliefs. Societal/Cultural collective ideas about what is “right” and who is targeted depend on their viewpoint. Diversity, inclusion, and equality are embedded in university practices in a higher education that has countless formal, informal, and symbolic representations. Therefore, concerns related to intersectionality do not only point to those intersecting power relations that influence social relations and sense of belonging, but it also concerns building awareness of our practices within higher education as an academic and social environment.

However, moving from reflection to action in attaining and revisiting diversity, inclusion, and equality as a social and professional responsibility of HEIs, i.e., providing equal opportunities in learning, performance and upward mobility within educational and academic systems has been the subject of more critical debate in recent years in Europe (e.g., Brennan & Naidoo 2008; Sørensen et al., 2020) and elsewhere (e.g., Mc Nair et al., 2020; Shek & Hollister, 2017). Although intersectionality is an approach for understanding and explaining complexities in the social world, the “undesirable” contextual practices that these categories spark off often have real-life consequences. Such consequences are often familiar patterns of those barriers with potential significant effects on, for instance, students’ sense of belonging, or their perceptions of teaching and learning processes. This may lead to several actions that reduce some students’ chances to succeed in higher education. One way is to facilitate discussions and reflections on how a dominantly white culture affect our university and classrooms today. Questions concerning diversity, inclusion, and equality in higher education require strengthening the moral and social responsibility in our daily practices in university, what is often called *our critical praxis*. With roots back to Freire (1970), the concept of critical

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<sup>3</sup> [https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/diversity-workshop-guide-to-discussing-identity-power-and-privilege/?\\_ga=2.107337602.1036146551.1517522964-2136606955.1511755738](https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/diversity-workshop-guide-to-discussing-identity-power-and-privilege/?_ga=2.107337602.1036146551.1517522964-2136606955.1511755738)

pedagogy refers to the belief that teaching should challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the *status quo*. Freire encouraged students and teachers to challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate to help students achieve critical consciousness. Mahon, Heikkinen, and Huttunen (2019) suggest that educators should learn to ask critical questions and enact such a perspective in diverse educational contexts. This critical praxis is ‘a kind of social-justice oriented, educational practice, with a focus on asking critical questions and creating conditions for positive change’ (p. 464). They added that ‘[c]ritical educational praxis is about reflecting critically on the mechanisms of social action and arrangements in order that people can emancipate themselves from manipulation and exploitation’ (Mahon, Heikkinen, & Huttunen, 2019, p. 464).

This critical pedagogical praxis is reflexive, informed and morally committed in seeking to create spaces where, for instance, power relationships can be understood, challenged, and reoriented, and in which new possibilities for action emerge and be enacted in teaching and learning interactions. Such practice demands moral judgement, agency, and situational insight (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). Both institutions and faculty can promote and develop awareness on how, for example, “whiteness” is translated into work, encounters, and practices within higher education. Training of this kind can build awareness on inclusion, diversity, and equality, and provide insights into ways to prevent the damaging politics of identity, and the dynamics of power and privilege, as well as build greater self-awareness. Reflecting on Mahon and colleagues (2019), we argue that if there is a lack of productive discourse around issues of diversity and the role of identity in social relationships at micro-individual and meso-institutional levels, it might be harder for academics, facilitators, students, administrators, and leaderships to ask good questions and to participate in rethinking, deconstructing, and approaching the role of diversity, equality, and inclusion towards a change of the status quo.

We live in a supercomplex world and yet many of the same dominance structures often influence our biases and practices within HEIs taking symbolic, relational, and intersectional forms. Even if a new epistemology for the university awaits, one that is open, bold, engaging, accessible, and conscious of its own insecurity, there is an urgent need to revisit these conundrum values as an important part of the kaleidoscopic picture. Various forms of regulations, programmes, and trainings target HEIs to promote equality of chances to access education and employment. Nevertheless, there is clearly a need to keep up the momentum for their improvement. Promoting university’s social responsibility and epistemic justice for all towards a sustainable and equitable education and work environment is a core challenge (e.g., Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Hall & Tandon, 2021). According to Bengtson and Barnett (2017), HEIs that address and challenge these “dark sides” of university as a locus of learning and work are much more likely to foster university’s staff and leadership with a moral and inclusive attitude to

practice, and students who would ‘find renewed hope in the university as an institution for personal as well as professional imagination and growth’ (Bengtson & Barnett, 2017, p. 114). As Marginson (2016) argued, universities are supposed to be sources of knowledge, innovation, prosperity, global competitiveness, but also drivers of equity and equality of opportunities. Facing an epistemology for living amidst supercomplexity must therefore draw attention to how patterns of diversity, inclusion, and equality are embedded in higher education practices.

In this issue, four exciting papers address unique questions on university practices in an age of supercomplexity, where diversity, equality, and inclusion in higher education is a central part of the picture. Adams and Barnett’s paper *Heutagogy and criticality: towards a symbiotic relationship* addresses the interconnected, conflicting, and often hidden forces (natural and human) within higher education characterised by a double indeterminacy. They argue that this is present in systems and their interactions (complexity) and in discursive formations and their interactions (supercomplexity). They bring together two literatures largely held apart to realise their full pedagogical potential, with each entailing the other and state that heutagogy without criticality is aimless; criticality without heutagogy is groundless.

The second paper, *Frozen by threat or motivated to move: exploring emotions in development work within the university organisation* by Simola discusses emotions and their role in development work and change attempts within universities. This article investigates how emotions relate to the conditions of academic work, and the university as a forum for those initiatives. Emotions are defined as relational, culturally situated social forces connected with relationships, collective mentalities, and belief systems, and explores some cases on what affects the practices of development work. This demonstrate how this development work is situated within the hierarchies of power, group relations and identities within the academic culture and find that the emotional judgments and the position of the actors were crucial for the development process.

The third article *Confronting Becky: An Autocritographic Examination of White Women’s Gendered Racism in Higher Education* by Morgan discusses how white women are socialized to use their gendered subordination as a defence when confronted with racism. The author uses intersectionality as a baseline and build a framework intertwining idealized objectification standards and racial gatekeeping to reveal how white women use specific practices to gain and maintain power and restrict access from People of Colour. The piece uses an autocritographic approach, were a self-study methodology focused on telling and retelling stories. The author examines idealized objectified practices, active racism, and the role as a social justice educator at a south-eastern public university. Morgan’s findings revealed the everyday subtle ways that white supremacy maintains its presence and operation in our society and its ties to our socialized norms and expectations.

The fourth article *(Un)Voicing a Field's Expertise: A Two-Pronged Citation and Language Analysis* problematizes the field of Developmental Education (DE). The authors Suh, Wu, García, Oelschlegel, and Armstrong draw on a distinct and multidisciplinary body of research and scholarship to explore the facilitation of students' transition to college and support their postsecondary academic success. Through a combination of Citation Content Analysis and Transitivity Analysis, this study examined citation trends and verb transitivity to uncover the voices of the privileged as experts within an influential publication by the Community College Research Center. Their aim is to uncover how the authors (re)presented the DE field, literature, scholarship, its members, and its students.

This current issue also includes the journal's first book review, *Reimagining Development in Higher Education* by Maryna Lakhno, where she reviews the book *Higher Education for and beyond the Sustainable Development Goals* by McCowan (2019). This is a highly relevant book about different perspectives of working with sustainable development, which Lakhno has critically described and analysed. This book review and all four papers in this current issue address important aspects of sustainability and social responsibility within HEIs. Because academic journeys are reproduced within the frame of a super-complex "risk" society, critical questioning and social awareness becomes more important than ever. In this editorial we have highlighted the importance of moving from reflection to action in attaining and revisiting diversity, inclusion, and equality as a social and professional core responsibility of higher education institutions. Taking these aspects seriously — with the intention to provide awareness, mutual understanding and constructive conversations and practises seems like one of the main responsibilities for higher education framed by a supercomplex world.



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