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**RESEARCH PAPER
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Institutionalizing inclusion in higher education

A comparative study of universities in Germany and Luxembourg

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ABSTRACT

Investigating the institutionalization of inclusive higher education, the study focuses on how such policies and programs have evolved in Germany and Luxembourg. Embedded in transnational discourses on academic excellence, democracy, and inclusion, the latter bolstered by global ratification of human rights charters (UN-CRPD), the analysis draws on neo-institutionalist theory and the sociology of values to examine the on-going tension between universities' commitments to academic excellence and their obligations to recognize diversity and to promote equity, justice, and inclusion. While diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs refer to human rights, they often serve as part of strategies to bolster university reputations in competitive markets. Increasingly worldwide, contemporary political backlash has challenged the legitimacy and scope of DEI agendas. Raising questions about (de)institutionalization dynamics, we compare three research universities – Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, and the Université du Luxembourg – through document analysis of DEI strategies and programs. These publicly funded organizations represent varying models of university governance. While these research universities have adopted DEI frameworks, the extent and orientation differ, shaped by organizational type and age, national and local context, and strategic priorities. The findings contribute to our understanding of persistent competing logics and values of excellence and inclusion in higher education.

Keywords
- University
- Higher Education
- Diversity and Equity
- Inclusion Policies
- Inclusion
- Institutionalization
- Europe

Mots-clés
- Université
- Enseignement supérieur
- Diversité et Égalité
- Politiques d'inclusion
- Inclusion
- Institutionnalisation
- Europe

RÉSUMÉ

Institutionnalisation de l'inclusion dans l'enseignement supérieur. Étude comparative entre les universités allemandes et luxembourgeoises

Cette étude examine l'institutionnalisation de l'enseignement supérieur inclusif et se concentre sur l'évolution de ces politiques et programmes en Allemagne et au Luxembourg. S'inscrivant dans les discours transnationaux sur l'excellence académique, la démocratie et l'inclusion, cette dernière étant renforcée par la ratification mondiale des chartes des droits de l'homme (UN-CRPD), l'analyse s'appuie sur la théorie néo-institutionnaliste et la sociologie des valeurs pour examiner la tension permanente entre l'engagement des universités en faveur de l'excellence académique et leur obligation de reconnaître la diversité et de promouvoir l'équité, la justice et l'inclusion. Si la diversité, l'équité et l'inclusion (DEI) sont présentées comme des droits humains, ces programmes servent souvent aussi de stratégie de marque pour renforcer la réputation des universités sur des marchés concurrentiels. De plus

en plus, dans le monde entier, les réactions politiques contemporaines remettent en question la légitimité et la portée des programmes DEI. Soulevant des questions sur la (dé)institution-nalisation, nous comparons trois universités de recherche – l'Université Goethe de Francfort, l'Université Friedrich-Alexander d'Erlangen-Nuremberg et l'Université du Luxembourg – à travers l'analyse documentaire des stratégies et des programmes DEI. Ces organisations représentent différents modèles de gouvernance universitaire, de priorités de financement et d'internationalisation. Si ces universités ont adopté des cadres DEI, leur portée et leur orientation diffèrent en fonction du type et de l'âge de l'organisation, du contexte national et des priorités stratégiques. Ces résultats contribuent à la compréhension des logiques concurrentes persistantes d'excellence et d'inclusion dans l'enseignement supérieur.

1. Introduction: Inclusion in contemporary societies? Challenges and advancements in disability rights and education

Inclusion remains a pivotal concern for contemporary societies navigating the complexities of globalization, digitalization, and rising individualism. In response to these challenges, democratic movements since World War II have advocated for an expanded human rights agenda aimed at ensuring equality for all individuals, particu-larly disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities (Quinn & Degener, 2002). A landmark development in this advocacy was the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006, which has significantly raised global awareness about the rights of people with disabilities. However, despite worldwide ratification, its impact has been uneven due to differing conceptualizations of disability, education, and inclusion, as well as ongoing segregation across various contexts (Biermann, 2022).

While anti-discrimination measures and the reduction of barriers to participation are central to the CRPD's agenda, issues related to identity politics and the demand for specific support services have not been as thoroughly addressed. A key question remains regarding the degree to which national disability policies, such as the U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, will continue to shape and reinforce socio-political models of disability. In the realm of U.S. higher education, diversity-related offices have expanded significantly over the past fifty years, driven initially by internal institutional developments and later by external pressures. This expansion reflects a gradual – and often contested – institutionalization of diversity (Gavrila, Overbey & Ramirez, 2025).

The mental health crisis has further complicated these discussions, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated pre-existing issues and led to increased demands for mental health support in universities (Madaus & Dukes, 2023). Furthermore, in 2025, the broader political climate in the U.S. has witnessed growing contestation around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, with significant retrenchment pressure, also in higher education (Gretzinger et al., 2025). In Germany and Luxembourg, such policies and programs are still developing.

1.1. The institutionalization of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in European higher education: Challenges and advancements

Universities, as meritocratic organizations, traditionally prioritize academic performance and scientific discovery. However, as highly diverse communities that serve broader societal needs, universities also aim to support the inclusion of diverse groups, promote equity, and foster a culture of inclusion. In many education systems, diversity is defined across a range of dimensions, including gifted students, students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), individuals from indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, immigrants, LGBTQI+ students, and socio-economically disadvantaged individuals (OECD, 2023). Like other organizational forms, such as corporations, universities face the challenge of balancing these often competing goals, and many of the policies and instruments designed to support diversity in (university) management show mixed effectiveness (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022).

This paper explores the institutionalization of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies in European higher education, situating these initiatives within broader transnational frameworks rooted in democratic values and human rights. Specifically, we examine how DEI policies are addressed and implemented in a small sample of universities in two neighboring Western European countries. These universities, renowned for their commitment to academic excellence, also strive to integrate DEI policies and programs. Our primary focus is on students with disabilities, and those requiring reasonable adjustments – particularly in relation to university curricula and campus conditions – and attemps to ensure more equitable access to learning opportunities. This focus is situated within the context of broader equity and inclusion strategies in these organizations.

By integrating a value-theoretical perspective within a neo-institutionalist framework, we explore the moral orientation and depth of DEI values, recognizing that universities are situated in a field of tension. On one hand, universities are driven by logics of academic excellence and global competitiveness. On the other hand, they are expected to promote social justice and equity, especially in the dimensions of DEI that directly impact their societal role. The study employs content analysis of key documents related to DEI over the past decade. In a three-step design, we identified relevant documents at the sampled universities, mapped them to various organizational levels and areas, and analyzed them using Scott's (2019) institutional pillars model, relating them to institutional logics and values.

Across Europe, inclusion has become a more prominent aspect of DEI initiatives over the past decade, with universities increasingly implementing diversity management policies (Griem, Kaldewey & Lim, 2024). However, in many cases, such initiatives are used primarily as branding tools rather than as meaningful organizational changes (Hark & Hofbauer, 2023). Continental European universities, especially those that are largely state-funded, often do not allocate the same level of resources to student services aimed at bolstering inclusion and well-being as do their Anglophone counterparts (Powell, 2012; Powell & Pfahl, 2018). Moreover, the stratified and selective nature of secondary education in many European countries, along with insufficiently successful inclusive education reforms in nations like Germany and Luxembourg, has left many universities still relatively early in the process of institutionalizing DEI programs (Klein & Schindler, 2006; Powell & Merz-Atalik, 2019).

At the same time, DEI policies have encountered growing criticism and political backlash, particularly from authoritarian governments. In the U.S., for example, the second Trump administration has sought significant deinstitutionalization of DEI programs in higher education (Gretzinger et al., 2025). McCambly and Mulroy (2024) argue that this contemporary backlash is part of a longer historical pattern of resistance to civil rights reforms that aimed to make higher education more accessible and equitable. This contested terrain underscores the importance of understanding the historical foundations and institutional configurations of DEI, including within Europe, where efforts must be renewed to maintain and expand these programs in the face of growing right-wing resistance.

Since World War II, European higher education systems have undergone significant transformations, expanding access for working-class students and women, implementing EU-wide anti-discrimination legislation in the 1990s, and responding to intertwined global trends of international competition and collaboration. The Bologna Process, for example, played a pivotal role in redefining European higher education, promoting mobility, and enhancing regional identities (Kushnir, 2025). More recently, DEI agendas have been shaped strongly by gender equality movements, migration, and transnational advocacy, particularly the global disability rights movement, which led to the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), explicitly calling for inclusive (higher) education (Powell, Edelstein & Blanck, 2016). Yet, national implementation across Europe remains uneven, with persistent resistance to certain DEI categories and ongoing inequalities, especially in access and participation for people with disabilities (Kleemola et al., 2025). This group continues to experience institutionalized discrimination at all levels of education, with significant variations in implementation in different contexts (see, e.g., contributions in Köpfer, Powell & Zahnd, 2021).

As Dolmage (2017) argues, disability is often constructed as the "antithesis" of higher education, which typically prioritizes ability and performance while stigmatizing perceived weakness, despite the rhetoric of diversity. Narrow definitions of inclusion often focus solely on providing support for individuals with disabilities, chronic illness, or psychological issues, emphasizing formal equality. In contrast, broader conceptualizations – such as those rooted in intersectionality (see Nichols & Stahl, 2019) – call for systemic reforms to combat ableism, proactively remove barriers, and promote equity within higher education organizations. These broader approaches, however, often clash with prevailing meritocratic and excellence-driven cultures in academia.

Research indicates that the institutionalization of DEI policies is often less a direct result of legal mandates than a product of how universities select and implement policies and programs across various dimensions of diversity. Action plans frequently focus on mitigating certain disadvantages without disrupting the university's competitive and prestige-driven logics (Hark & Hofbauer, 2023; Münch, 2013).

Given these challenges, this study adopts a meso-level, theory-driven empirical perspective on universities as both arenas and organizational actors in the (de-)institutionalization of inclusion. This approach provides insight into how universities reflect and influence diverse societies that continue to grapple with entrenched inequalities in education and other institutional spheres (Engel, 2019, 2023, 2024; Powell, 2024). It enables an analysis of the processes and dynamics of institutionalization and

deinstitutionalization (Casale et al., 2024), as well as the conflicts surrounding the implementation of DEI strategies. The current research landscape on DEI in higher education reveals a complex interplay of progress and persistent challenges. There is a pressing need for a more inclusive approach to measuring DEI, one that transcends traditional meritocratic frameworks and considers systemic transformation within historical and spatial contexts (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018), including the organizational conditions for inclusion (Moser, 2017).

1.2. DEI policy development and implementation at three European universities

Initial findings from our exploratory study recount the development and implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies at Goethe Universität Frankfurt (GU), Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) in Germany, and the Université du Luxembourg (UL). The universities were selected through convenience sampling, balancing considerations of accessibility, feasibility, and research ethics. Despite the pragmatic sampling approach, these institutions represent distinct types: GU is a comprehensive public university, founded in 1914 as a private initiative and later granted the status of a *Stiftungsuniversität*, which provides it with more autonomy in recruitment and budgeting. GU serves around 43,000 students. FAU, a public comprehensive university with roots dating back to 1743, has a similar student population and is based in two cities. Both universities are large, research-intensive, and well-established, with a strong regional student base. Their strategic foci emphasize innovation, internationalization, and societal engagement, reflecting their involvement in both national and global academic competition.

In contrast, the Université du Luxembourg, established in 2003 as the sole national university in Luxembourg, aims to establish itself as a competitive, international research university within a multilingual, highly diverse, and knowledge-driven economy and society (Harmsen & Powell, 2018). With approximately 7,000 students – split evenly between domestic and international – the university represents Luxembourg's efforts to build a strong academic presence on the global stage.

Given these variations, we expect to see differences in the development and implementation of DEI policies across the three organizations. For example, GU's greater autonomy in recruitment strategies may lead to more targeted DEI efforts, while FAU, reflecting the German higher education system generally, may face more constraints. At UL, the smaller size and unique status as the only research university in a small state might enable more flexibility in the implementation of DEI strategies. Moreover, both GU and FAU operate within the larger framework of a federal polity, influencing the way DEI policies are adapted within the broader national context.

All project members had roles at these universities, which provided privileged access to DEI programs and discussions over an extended period. The project commenced with document analysis to reconstruct the key ideas and commitments behind the universities' specific DEI programs. This was followed by content analysis of various university arenas in which DEI strategies are implemented – spanning students, staff, and faculty; teaching; research; and community engagement ("third mission"). A comparative perspective enabled us to contrast the experiences and strategies of these three organizations.

2. Theorizing DEI with neo-institutionalism and the sociology of values

Theoretically, our analysis is grounded in a neo-institutionalist framework, which situates higher education organizations within society and emphasizes their response to pressures from multiple levels and within organizational fields (Meyer & Powell, 2020). We apply Scott's (2019) model, which identifies the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars that characterize the institutionalization of DEI policies. To further enrich our analysis, we draw on the French sociology of values (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Alvesson & Spicer, 2019), which provides a lens for understanding how DEI policies are shaped, justified, and institutionalized. This sociological approach focuses on "conventions" and examines how actors justify, contest, or seek to transform institutional arrangements by mobilizing different "orders of worth" (Diaz-Bone, 2011, 2018).

This dual-theoretical approach allows us to map the structural dimensions of institutionalization while also interpreting the justificatory practices through which institutional change – or lack thereof – is negotiated. Social institutions are cultural arenas in which innovation, agreement, and conflict influence the legitimate vision of reality and the distribution of resources. While original institutional theory focused on the functions and social construction of existing institutions and organizations, it lacked sufficient attention to processes, historical variations, and related mechanisms (Engel, 2019). In contrast, subsequent neo-institutional theory applied to higher education research has emphasized mechanisms and processes across three levels of analysis: the global diffusion of institutional models (e.g., the global research university model, DEI policies and programs), national and local persistence (e.g., barriers and inaccessibility in higher education), and institutional reproduction (e.g., innovation within expanding higher education systems) (Meyer, 2017; Meyer & Powell, 2020; Baker & Powell, 2024).

We next outline this theoretical foundation, followed by a historical overview of the evolution of DEI policies and programs, particularly in relation to their normative and organizational dimensions within European higher education. Despite the distinct contexts, histories, and governance structures of the three universities (GU, FAU, and UL), all have adopted some form of DEI strategies in recent decades. We expect these differences to significantly influence the scope, form, and orientation of DEI institutionalization within each organization, particularly in terms of resource allocation and recruitment strategies.

Neo-institutionalism can be understood as a theory of society in which organizations are embedded within a web of rules, regulations, norms, and values (Scott, 2019; Friedland, 2017). Building on Meyer and Rowan (1977), neo-institutional theory also highlights the concept of "loose coupling" – the idea that the core activities of an organization, those essential to its functioning, are not always aligned with the activities that serve to bolster its legitimacy. In universities, for example, societal legitimacy is based on their roles in knowledge production, the transfer of knowledge (especially through teaching), and societal engagement, all framed by the competitive values of academic excellence (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2024). Meanwhile, internal norms may concern organizational hierarchy, efficiency, or equality, which can diverge from the pressures for societal legitimacy.

Moreover, organizations often imitate the values, standards, and structures prevalent within their broader organizational fields, a process referred to as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This trend toward convergence can be observed at the global level, reflecting transnational forces such as global networks and international organizations. The world polity approach, for example, examines these isomorphic pressures through the transnational processes driven by these global entities (Il-Tschung, 2024).

While neo-institutionalism offers valuable insights into the structures and behaviors of organizations, it has been critiqued for its treatment of values. Rooted in social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), neo-institutional theory does not inherently posit that organizational development is value-driven, nor does it assume the existence of distinct "value spheres." However, in order to fully understand the internal dynamics and conflicts within organizations, it is necessary to re-embed values into the analysis of organizations. As Friedland (2017) suggests, values are not merely individual attributes or externally imposed moral frameworks, but are embedded within organizational communication and associated with the "goods" and "facts" that give meaning to organizational practices. In this sense, values serve as key sources of legitimacy and contribute to the construction of institutional identity (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2015). They shape the "organizational vocabulary" and play a critical role in sensemaking within organizations (Friedland, 2017).

Values, as Friedland emphasizes, become visible and comprehensible only through meaningful, repeated practices expressed in a language of "goods," which refer to specific ways of being in the world. In this framework, values are seen as an "institutional substance" (Friedland, 2017), intricately linked to emotions and affect, and thus powerfully influencing (de-)institutionalization processes.

Building on this, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) have developed a sociology of values that highlights the role of values in mediating the relationship between individuals and organizations. While classical sociology often treats values as diverse and rooted in distinct social groups, Boltanski and Thévenot identify a limited set of "conventions" or "orders of worth." These conventions are socio-culturally anchored logics of action that guide collective behavior, especially in situations of uncertainty (Diaz-Bone, 2011, 2018). As shared interpretative frameworks, conventions help evaluate people, actions, objects, and circumstances, offering coordination guidelines during critical moments.

In the context of higher education and DEI policies, two conventions are particularly relevant: the Civic and Industrial Conventions. These align with the "social case" and "business case" arguments, respectively, as identified by Johns, Green and Powell (2012).

1. Civic Convention (Social Case): This convention prioritizes solidarity, rights, and equality, with a strong emphasis on collective actors – such as social movements, political parties, and associations – and on collective interests. In the context of labor markets and universities, it promotes equal rights and opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This aligns with DEI policies that center on social justice and inclusive practices, advocating for roles like diversity managers and equal opportunity officers.

2. Industrial Convention (Business Case): This convention emphasizes efficiency, productivity, and rational planning. Unlike the individual-driven chaos of markets, the Industrial Convention values standardized procedures, scientific optimization, and the pursuit of measurable outcomes. Within universities, this orientation is often associated with excellence-driven strategies and performance management frameworks that focus on maximizing output and maintaining competitive standing.

Together, these conventions help explain how actors within organizations coordinate their actions and make decisions. They reflect the normative principles that guide behavior and collective judgment, particularly in contested or complex environments like the implementation of DEI policies within excellence-oriented academic institutions.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of these values within organizations is shaped by ideas, norms, and regulations; as in Scott's (2019) framework of three pillars:

– **Regulative Pillar**: This pillar focuses on rules, laws, and regulations that govern behavior within institutions. It relies on coercive mechanisms to ensure compliance. Universities, for example, may face penalties, such as loss of funding, if they fail to comply with relevant DEI regulations. In the United States, for example, contemporary efforts to de-institutionalize DEI policies at elite universities are shaped by this regulative dimension, where non-compliance may result in external sanctions.

– **Normative Pillar**: This pillar pertains to the norms and values that prescribe, evaluate, and mandate certain behaviors. It defines what is considered good or bad behavior, as well as the appropriate goals and standards. The normative pillar operates primarily through moral authority and the internalization of norms, which may lead to change when existing norms are questioned or replaced. Social roles play a critical part in shaping these norms, influencing behavior through internalized expectations or rational decision-making processes.

– **Cultural-Cognitive Pillar**: This dimension deals with the shared understandings that constitute social reality. It emphasizes the interpretative frameworks through which meaning is constructed and actions are made routine. The cultural-cognitive pillar is particularly resistant to change, as actors often take these shared beliefs for granted. For instance, gender equality has progressed considerably over the past century, particularly in education, through gradual shifts in cultural-cognitive frameworks. In contrast, disability equality remains less advanced, despite legal advances in the regulative dimension (e.g., UN CRPD). The cultural-cognitive barriers related to the medical, deficit-based models of disability are in tension with the meritocratic, "excellence" orientation of higher education, a conflict that complicates the implementation of inclusive policies (Dolmage, 2017; Przytulla, 2021).

In summary, neo-institutional theory, enriched by the sociology of values, offers a framework for understanding how DEI policies and practices are shaped, contested, and institutionalized in higher education. By examining the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions, we gain insights into how DEI can be promoted or hindered within organizations that operate under competing visions and pressures of excellence and equity.

3. Research on DEI policies in higher education

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies reflect transnational governance, informed by human rights principles and championed by the United Nations. These policies aim for cultural change and contribute to shaping national and institutional frameworks. However, DEI initiatives are often critiqued as being "emotional programs" (Griem, 2024; Neckel & Sauerborn, 2023), meaning they may be more symbolic than substantively transformative.

In the context of universities, DEI policies are often only loosely coupled with the core mission of knowledge production and teaching excellence. This disconnection can lead to conflicting priorities between the "business case" (focused on efficiency and competitive advantage) and the "social case" (focused on social justice and equality) for diversity (Johns, Green & Powell, 2012). Historically, DEI initiatives have focused primarily on individual potential, such as through the recruitment of diverse students and staff (Jorzik, 2024), rather than challenging deeper structural inequalities.

In many cases, DEI policies are framed externally as branding tools designed to enhance the university's public image – what Kühl (2014) refers to as the "Schauseite" or the public face of the organization. However, this branding often fails to result in meaningful legal or structural transformations in areas like teaching and learning processes, recruitment strategies, or broader university management practices (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2019; Seidel & Wielepp, 2014). Instead, these initiatives tend to remain shallow, closely tied to broader equality frameworks (Gaisch & Rammer, 2020; Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2019), and often shaped by the individual attitudes and personal commitment of the actors involved (Przytulla, 2021).

Research has shown that DEI concepts are interpreted in various ways, leading to a wide range of understandings and implementations (Mergner, 2025). As a result, these policies often exhibit a relatively low degree of institutionalization, frequently manifesting as loosely defined action plans rather than robust, actionable strategies (Henke, 2019). The lack of sufficient institutional embedding – coupled with the absence of coercive pressure, normative consensus, and ideational compatibility – limits the extent to which universities can evolve to become more accessible or realize the vision of the "universal design university," one that is accessible and fully inclusive for all students (Powell, 2012; Powell & Pfahl, 2018).

With these challenges in mind, we now turn to empirical evidence from our sample of research universities. By examining these cases, we aim to uncover the key mechanisms that are critical to institutionalizing DEI policies and practices. Through this exploration, we seek to understand the factors that can drive or hinder meaningful progress in making universities more inclusive, equitable, and accessible.

4. Studying mechanisms of inclusion in the context of university excellence in three research universities

Our study, conducted in 2023 and 2024, primarily employed document analysis (Krippendorf, 2022) to examine the gradual institutionalization of Diversity,

Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies and programs. The research involved three senior scholars and three student researchers across the selected universities, with collaborative work taking place during five joint workshops. The research design followed three distinct steps:

Step 1: Document identification and collection

Relevant documents were gathered through online research and print materials from the three universities (Knoblauch & Vollmer, 2022). These documents – focused on inclusion, equity, anti-discrimination, and diversity management – were collected in the Fall of 2023, with a total of 28 documents analyzed (12 from FAU, 10 from GU, and 6 from UL). The documents were categorized across six key areas: students, staff, teaching, research, third mission, and organizational development (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF DOCUMENTS (FAU, GU, UL)

	Title	Responsible	Date	Pages	Type of Document	URL
FAU1	Vielfalt gestalten mit Leidenschaft und Innovation Diversitätskonzept 2022-2027 [*Shaping diversity with passion and innovation Diversity concept 2022-2027*]	Gender and Diversity Office	Study year 2022/23	25 pages	Diversity concept	https://www. gender-und- diversity.fau. de/das-diversit aetskonzept -der-fau/
FAU2	Wissen bewegen – Rahmenkonzept und Prioritätensetzung für die Zukunftsentwicklung einer innovationsstarken Volluniversität Entwicklungsplan der FAU (Kurzfassung) [*Moving Knowledge – framework and priorities for future development of an innovative university Strategic framework FAU (short version)*]	FAU Rectorate	2022	17 pages	Strategic Framework	https://www. fau.de/fau/ zukunftskonz ept-und-ziele/
FAU3	Gleichstellungskonzept der FAU für den wissenschaftlichen Bereich 2023-2027 [*Concept for equality at the FAU in the sciences 2023-2027*]	Equity Officer, Gender and Diversity Office	2023	23 pages	Concept for equality	https://www. gender-und- diversity.fau. de/chance ngleichheit/gleich stellungskonzept- 2023-2027-2/
FAU4	Studieren mit einer Behinderung oder chronischer Erkrankung [*Studying with a disabilty or chronic illness*]		2023	/	Website	https://www.fau. de/education/ beratungs-und- servicestellen/ beratungs angebote/ studieren-mit- behinderung- oder-chronischer- erkrankung /#barri erefreiheit

FAU5	Gender & Diversity GESAMTBROSCHÜRE_ Print [*Gender & Diversity main brochure*]	Gender and Diversity Office	Jan. 2022	11 pages	Information brochure	https://www. gender-und-diversity.fau. de/ueberuns/ aufgaben/
FAU6	II. Selbstreport der FAU für das Diversity Audit „Vielfalt gestalten" 2016-2018 des Stifterverbandes für die Deutsche Wissenschaft [*II. Self-Report of FAU for the Diversity Audit "Designing Diversity" 2016-2018 of the Association for German Science*]	Gender and Diversity Office	Dec. 2018	23 pages	Self-report	https://www. gender-und-diversity.fau. de/diversity/ lenkungskreis-diversitaet/ audit/
FAU7	Zielvereinbarungen zur Erhöhung des Frauenanteils in der Wissenschaft zwischen der Universitätsleitung und den Fakultäten 2023-2027 [*Target agreements to increase the proportion of women in science between the university management and the faculties 2023-2027*]	FAU Rectorate, Faculties	2023		Target agreements (website)	https://www. gender-und-diversity.fau.de/ gender/unive rsitaetsinterne-ziel verein barungen/ zielverein barungen- 2023-2027/
FAU8	Code of Conduct – Familien freundliche FAU [*Code of Conduct – familyfriendly FAU*]	Family Service	June 2016	6 pages	Code of conduct	https://www. familien service. fau.de/ueber-uns/konsti tutionelle-rahmen bedingungen/
FAU9	Code of Conduct zu religiöser und weltanschaulicher Vielfalt an der FAU [*Code of Conduct concerning religious and ideological diversity at the FAU*]	Working Group Code of Conduct Religious and Ideological Diversity	Nov. 2021	6 pages	Code of conduct	https://www. gender-und-diversity.fau.de/ diversity/diversita etsdimen sionen/ religion-und-weltansc hauung/
FAU10	Richtlinie zur Prävention und zum Umgang mit Fällen von Diskriminierung, Belästigung und sexueller Belästigung [*Guidelines on the prevention and handling of cases of discrimination, harassment and sexual harassment*]	Gender and Diversity Office	June 2021	10 pages	Policy	https://www. gender-und-diversity.fau. de/buero-fuer-gender-und-diversity/ sexuelle-belaestigung/
FAU11	Handreichung – diskriminierungsfreie und inklusive Sprache [*Handout – non-discriminatory and inclusive language*]		n.d.	5 pages	Handout	Handreichung-zur-diskriminier ungsfreien-und-inklusiven-Sprache.pdf
FAU12	Erfolgreich kommunizieren: Empfehlungen für einen geschlechtersensiblen Sprachgebrauch [*Communicating successfully: recommendations for gender sensitive language use*]	Gender and Diversity Office	2019		Recommen-dation	Empfeh lungen_0524.pdf Erfolgreich kommuni zieren: Empfehlungen für einen geschlech tersensiblen Sprachgebrauch - Büro für Gender

GU1	Inklusion Gemeinsam Gestalten: Erster Aktionsplan Inklusion der Goethe-Universität 2020-2023 [*Creating inclusion collectively: first action plan inclusion of the Goethe University*]	GU Rectorate	August 2020	40 pages	Action plan	INKLUSION GEMEINSAM GESTALTEN
GU2	Zentraler Aktionsplan Chancengleichheit der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main 2019-2024 [*Central Action Plan Equal Opportunities Goethe University Frankfurt 2019-2024*]	GU Rectorate, Equity Office	2019	86 pages	Action plan	Aktionsplan_ Chancen gleichheit_Goethe_ Univer sitat__2__ Aufl ___201 9_2024.pdf
GU3	Early Career Researchers mit Familie* [*Early Career Reseachers with family**]	Gender and Diversity Office	2023	56 pages	Brochure	Early Career Researchers mit Familie*
GU4	Antidiskriminierungsrichtlinie der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main [*Anti-Discrimination Policy of Goethe University Frankfurt am Main*]	GU Rectorate	May 2020	8 pages	Guideline	antidis kriminierungs richtlinie-der- goethe-universitat- frankfurt-am- main-2019.pdf
GU5	Dual Career Service Frankfurt. Unterstützung für Doppelkarrierepaare [*Dual Career Service Frankfurt. Support for Dual Career Couples*]	Gender and Diversity Office	n.d.		Website	Goethe-Universität — Büro für Chancen- gerechtigkeit
GU6	Flyer Antidiskriminierungsstelle [*Flyer Anti-Discrimination Office*]	Gender and Diversity Office	2023	8 pages	Flyer	
GU7	Flyer Gleichstellungsbüro [*Flyer Equal Opportunities Office*]	Gender and Diversity Office	2023	2 pages	Flyer	Gleichstellungs buro_flyer_ 2020. pdf
GU8	Barrierefreies Studium. Leitfaden für Lehrende der GU [*Accessible Study Guidelines for Teachers at Goethe University*	Strong Study Start Program	2014	40 pages	Guideline	Leitfaden Barrierefreies Studium
GU9	Beruflichen Alltag gestalten – Barrieren überwinden. Arbeiten mit gesundheitlicher Beeinträchtigung oder Behinderung [*Shaping everyday working life – overcoming barriers. Working with an illness or disability*]	Inclusion Officer	March 2021	48 pages	Guideline	BERUFLICHEN ALLTAG GESTALTEN – BARRIEREN ÜBERWINDEN
GU10	Studium Inklusiv. Mit gesundheitlicher Beeinträchtigung oder Behinderung gut durchs Studium [*Study inclusively. Studying successfully with an illness or disability*]	Inclusion Officer	2021	44 pages	Guideline	STUDIUM INKLUSIV

UL1	Strategy Framework 2020-2039	UL Rectorate	2020		Framework	Mission, Strategie & Werte - Universität Luxemburg
UL2	Leitfaden für angemessene Vorkehrungen *CAR Reasonable Adjustments Guide*	UL Inclusion & Well-being Office	July 2023	36 pages	Guideline	CAR Brochure v.word_EN_da (English) CAR Brochure v.word_DE_da (German)
UL3	*Gender Equality Policy*	Board of Governors of the UL	May 2021	5 pages	Guideline	Information General (English)
UL4	*Multilingualism Policy*	UL Rectorate	May 2021	11 pages	Guideline	Multilingualism-Policy-English.pdf
UL5	*Code of Conduct*	UL Rectorate	May 2020	15 pages	Code of Conduct	200615-Code-of-Conduct-English-links-updated-2023.pdf
UL6	*Inclusion Brochure (Inclusion & Diversity Student Guide)*	UL Inclusion & Well-being Office	Febr. 2024	4 pages	Brochure	EN-Print - Inclusion vJW - Student Guide

A notable finding was that the understandings of inclusion and diversity varied considerably across the organizations, also due the differentiation in document types and years of publication. While the three universities addressed gender and disability issues prominently, there was (much) less focus on other dimensions such as social class and sexual orientation. FAU, for example, specifically mentions the needs of blind and hearing-impaired students and staff (FAU1), but social-economic differences were largely absent from the documents. Anti-discrimination policies were also mentioned, but most were more focused on counseling services for issues like sexual harassment (see Table 2).

Step 2: Content analysis

In the second phase of analysis, we focused on the contents of the selected documents to identify patterns of support and institutional responses to DEI issues. All three universities offered counseling and support services for stdents and staff with disabilities, as well as mechanisms for reporting discrimination. However, inclusion was narrowly defined, primarily addressing disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health issues. Social-economic background was not directly addressed in these policies.

Equity counseling was offered to both students and staff, though the focus was largely on care topics (e.g., GU5, GU7). FAU also provided counseling specifically for women in STEM fields (FAU3). GU and FAU offered support for staff in dual-career partnerships, and all three organizations provided training on gender and diversity sensitivity in teaching as well as promoting barrier-free practices (FAU1, FAU3, FAU4, GU1, GU9, UL2). UL also emphasized the potential of diversity to foster research innovation, with this theme present in several documents, including the university's mission statement (UL2, UL3, UL4, UL5). In contrast, GU and FAU mentioned diversity and gender as potential research topics without a direct focus on research-related outcomes.

Table 2. Content analysis: DEI policies in higher education at FAU, GU, UL

	Inclusion	Equity	Anti-Discrimination	Diversity Management
Students	*Individual support: students with disabilities and/or chronicle illness* FAU1, FAU6, GU2, GU10, UL3	*Strategy family-friendly university* FAU3, FAU8, GU7, UL3 *Gender and Diversity Office* FAU3, GU2, UL3	*Guidelines for prevention from discrimination* FAU1, FAU10, GU4, UL3	*Guidelines for prevention from discrimination* FAU1, FAU10, GU3, UL3
Staff	*Officer for Disability Issues* FAU1, GU10, UL3 *Guidelines for Reasonable Adjustments* FAU4, GU4, UL3	*Gender Equity Strategy* FAU 7, GU 2, UL 3 *Strategy family-friendly university* FAU3, GU2, UL3 *Dual Career Program* GU2	*Conflict Manager* UL5 *Mission Statement on Equality and Anti-Discrimination* FAU10, GU4, UL5 *Counselling* FAU 10, GU4, UL5	*Conflict Manager* UL5 *Mission Statement on Equality and Anti-Discrimination* FAU10, GU5, UL5
Teaching	*Information on barrier-reduced teaching* FAU1, GU8, UL4, *Training on Reasonable Adjustments* GU1, FAU4, UL3, UL4	*Mission Statement Gender & Diversity* FAU 1, FAU3, GU4, UL5 *Mission Statement on Multilingualism* UL4	*Diversity Competence Training* FAU5, GU2, UL3, UL6	
Research	*Center for Gender & Diversity Research* FAU1, GU7	*Workshops on Gender Bias* FAU3, GU7, UL 3 *Mission Statement on Multilingualism* UL4 *Research on Gender and Disability* FAU6, GU1, GU2, UL3, UL6		
Organizational Development	*Mission Statement on Inclusion* FAU1, GU1, UL1, UL2, UL5	*Gender and Diversity Office* FAU1, GU7, UL5	*Mission Statement on Diversity* FAU6, GU2, UL3	*University Strategy on Diversity Management* FAU1, GU2, UL3, UL6 *Diversity Concept* FAU5, GU2, UL4, UL6 *Anti-Semitism Commissioner* FAU 1

Regarding organizational development goals, UL's DEI efforts reflect significant integration into its newest mission statements and strategic development plans (UL0, UL2, UL4). GU's focus was on gender- and diversity-sensitive leadership culture (GU2), while FAU framed its DEI strategy as "successful diversity management" (FAU1). In terms of the "third mission" – the university's role in engaging with the external community – all three organizations highlighted collaborations with local partners (FAU1, GU1), with UL additionally emphasizing the role of international, cultural, and linguistic diversity in its outreach and funding strategies (UL1).

Step 3: Analysis through Scott's institutional pillars

In the third step, we analyzed the organizational documents through the lens of Scott's (2019) three institutional pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (see Table 3).

Table 3. Interpretative analysis: DEI policies in higher education at FAU, GU, UL

	FAU	GU	UL
Regulative Pillar	FAU1: UNCRPD, HRK UfA, DSW UfA FAU3: GG, AGG, BayHIG	GU1: UNCRPD, GG, HHG GU2: HGIG GU4: AGG	UL2: UNCRPD, ECHR, ESRPD, ULL UL3: ULL UL5: ULL
Normative Pillar	Gender and Diversity Office, Family Service, Working Group Code of Conduct Religious and Ideological Diversity, Diversity Concept 2022-2027, Equality Concept 2023-2027, Target agreements to increase proportion of women in science 2023-2027, Guidelines on the prevention of discrimination and harassment, Handout non-discriminatory and inclusive language	Gender and Diversity Office, Inclusion Officer, Action plan inclusion of the Goethe University 2019-2024, Anti-Discrimination Policy, Dual Career Service, Accessible Study Guidelines for Teachers, Study inclusive. Studying successfully with an illness or disability	Gender and Diversity Office, UL Inclusion & Well-being Office, Strategy Framework, Reasonable Adjustments Guide, Gender Equality Policy, Multilingualism Policy, Code of Conduct, Inclusion & Diversity Student Guide
Cognitive-cultural: Civic Convention	"We understand all learners and staff as diverse" FAU5 "Diversity raises the university's profile for greater social responsibility" FAU1	"The aim is to enable all people, regardless of any existing health restrictions, to participate in university life in a self-determined and active way that corresponds to their personal potential" GU1	"Reasonable adjustment serves to guarantee individuals' rights and equal chances" UL2 "Differences in backgrounds and experiences are a strength for our international, multilingual and interdisciplinary university" UL 5
Cognitive-cultural: Industrial Convention	"Diversity as a chance and potential" FAU1	GU "also benefits from the dedicated cooperation of its disabled employees" GU1 GU "assumes that a diversity-sensitive study and work environment has positive effects on the satisfaction of all members of the university and their loyalty to the university" GU2 "a supportive approach to heterogeneity will increase equal opportunities and improve the quality of research and teaching" GU2	"All activities should lead to more excellence" UL1 "Inclusion […] leads to a more attractive place to study" UL2 "Gender equality promotes the optimal use of talents" UL3 Language skills "will enhance employability for the university's graduates" UL4

Abbreviations:

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
Empfehlungen der Hochschulrektorenrektorenkonferenz (2009): Hochschule für Alle (Recommendation of the German Rectors' Conference for a University for All) (HRK UfA).
Deutsches Studentenwerk (2010): Hochschule für Alle (German Student Union: University of All) (DSW UfA).
Grundgesetz der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Germany's Basic Law) (GG).
Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz (General Equal Treatment Act) (AGG).
Bayerisches Hochschulinnovationsgesetz (Bavarian Higher Education Innovation Act) (BayHIG).
Hessisches Hochschulrahmengesetz (HHG).
Hessisches Gleichberechtigungsgesetz (HGIG).
University of Luxembourg Law (ULL).
European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).
European Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities (ESRPD).

In the regulative pillar (rules and laws), we found at UL that the university law establishes regulations for reasonable adjustments in learning (UL2). At the other universities, DEI-related issues are governed by national and international laws, such as the UN CRPD and the European Human Rights Convention. Furthermore, specific German and Luxembourg national legislation obtains (e.g., the HessHG and BayHIG for Hessia and Bavaria, respectively, and the UL Law in Luxembourg).

In the normative pillar (norms and values), the existing DEI strategies at these research universities are implemented within this pillar, focusing on creating offices, cultural practices, and supportive structures for diversity. However, these measures are often not translated into specific, measurable outcomes. Gender equality policies were the exception, with concrete goals documented within the three organizations (GU2, FAU3, UL3).

In the cultural-cognitive pillar (shared conceptions), we explored the underlying values driving the DEI strategies at each university, considering both Scott's framework and the conventions identified by Boltanski & Thévenot (2006). These include the Civic Convention (or "social case"). This value orientation prioritizes equal opportunities, individual development, and social responsibility. At GU, for instance, the university promotes a culture of respect and shared social responsibility, with a focus on a cosmopolitan environment (GU1, GU2). UL also emphasizes well-being, particularly related to disabilities (UL6). The Industrial Convention (or "business case") emphasizes innovation, performance improvement, and institutional competitiveness. The universities in our sample refer to innovation through DEI policies (FAU1, FAU5), the enhancement of institutional performance (GU1, GU2, UL1), and positioning themselves as attractive places to study and work (GU2, UL2, UL4).

5. Discussion: Depth of implementation and variations across organizations

As demonstrated throughout the study, the majority of DEI policies and programs at the three universities in our sample align with the normative pillar of Scott's institutional framework, with ideational and coercive mechanisms being less emphasized. While each university has established counseling and support facilities for students, faculty, and staff, the area of research remains largely unaffected by DEI policies. Only a few explicit measures, such as gender equality guidelines for faculty and staff recruitment, were identified. This suggests that while these policies may present an external image of the university addressing inequality, they largely stop short of exerting any significant coercive pressure, but rather normative pressure, such as targets in defined Key Performance Indicators (UL). This reflects the common narrative of "progressive opening and democratic modernization," as described by Hark & Hofbauer (2023), where DEI policies appear more symbolic than transformative. As Hark & Hofbauer argue, such policies often lack measurable goals and concrete developmental plans, relying instead on instruments such as information dissemination and counseling – actions that may highlight the issues but do not fundamentally challenge persistent barriers that would reduce existing inequalities.

Significant differences were observed in the depth of DEI policy implementation across the three research universities. The University of Luxembourg, the youngest organization in our study, incorporated DEI principles into its founding policies. In contrast, FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg and GU Frankfurt introduced DEI as separate concerns, often alongside other strategic goals. FAU stands out for having a specific anti-Semitism commissioner and for addressing diverse worldviews and religions within its DEI guidelines. This is possibly a reflection of its long-standing humanistic tradition, rooted in Enlightenment values, and symbolized by the famous Leonardo da Vinci "Vitruvian Man" figure it adapts to represent its diversity strategy.

Interestingly, inclusion policies at all three universities make reference to various regional, national, and international laws, indicating a newer tradition of seeking legitimacy through adherence to global human rights charters. DEI policies related to equity are generally supported by broad constitutional protections. Anti-discrimination and diversity management policies, however, are often not legally mandated but are more focused on providing information and counseling services. Only the University of Luxembourg has embedded a gender equality policy within its university law, while FAU and GU instead loosely reference laws beyond the organizational level, leaving significant room for internal interpretation and varying implementation.

In terms of the external functioning and internal values of the universities, a clear compromise is apparent between their focus on academic excellence and the push for DEI policies. This compromise is framed by the industrial and civic conventions. Universities seem to leverage DEI policies to present themselves as socially responsible, while simultaneously positioning diversity as a tool for enhancing organizational performance, innovation, and competitiveness. This reflects the common goal in higher education that greater inclusion will lead to better outcomes, as it benefits both individuals and the organization as a whole.

The coexistence of the civic and industrial conventions within DEI strategies suggests that these measures are aimed at reducing inequalities – though not necessarily achieving full equity. Rather, they serve to improve organizational standing while maintaining competitive goals. While DEI initiatives seek to address persistent inequalities, they are also framed in ways that enhance the university's attractiveness and performance.

5.1. Isomorphism across organizations

An isomorphic pattern emerged from the document analysis, as the three universities displayed similar approaches to DEI policy making, despite their different historical backgrounds. GU Frankfurt, with its more market-oriented and competition-driven structure (as a *Stiftungsuniversität*, privately founded), emphasizes recruitment flexibility. FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, with its deep-rooted historical ties to humanistic traditions, approaches DEI in a way that reflects its Enlightenment-era foundations. The University of Luxembourg, being a younger organization, has a strong focus on demonstrating itself as an international and fair place to work and study (Kmiotek-Meier, Karl & Powell, 2020). Despite these differences, the three organizations exhibit significant convergence in their DEI strategies, due to shared geographic and cultural factors.

5.2. The sociological dualism of DEI policies

Our findings also align with Fraser's (2003) concept of sociological dualism, where the implementation of DEI measures intersects with both cultural and economic spheres. This dualism is particularly evident in the persistent influence of New Public Management (NPM), which emphasizes efficiency and productivity within European higher education (Limbach-Reich, 2021). DEI policies, while framed as promoting inclusivity, are often seen as tools to enhance organizational efficiency rather than achieving full equity. The focus on efficiency and productivity through diversity measures suggests that universities perceive DEI as a means to optimize employee performance rather than as a strategy to actually equalize opportunities for underrepresented and marginalized groups.

In the realm of inclusion, DEI policies are often justified through the civic convention – emphasizing the moral imperative of equality and fairness. However, this raises questions about the impact of these policies. Do they truly address the systemic barriers faced by underrepresented groups, or are they primarily designed to project an image of inclusivity without substantive change? For example, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court recently ruled that compensation for disadvantages must be documented in school leaving certificates (BVerG, 22 November 2023), which raises concerns about the potential "outing" and "othering" of individuals in the process of addressing (the consequences of) educational inequalities.

5.3. Symbolic change vs. structural transformation

A key conclusion from our study is that DEI policies in higher education are often oriented towards symbolic change rather than structural transformation confirming (Hark & Hofbauer, 2023). DEI initiatives tend to focus on visible actions like counseling and awareness-raising, rather than implementing systemic barrier-reducing transformations. As a result, these policies may be more about appearing progressive and inclusive, rather than achieving substantial equity and inclusion. The weak institutionalization of DEI measures reflects this symbolic nature, with few policies backed by concrete targets or benchmarks. As Hark & Hofbauer (2023: 99) put it, these policies often represent "doing what looks good and costs little," highlighting the symbolic rather than substantive nature of many DEI measures in higher education. They are typically framed as initiatives that "look" inclusive, while in practice, they are limited in driving meaningful, long-term change.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, these DEI policies in higher education were mainly initiated from above rather than fought for from below, involving advisory roles without the comprehensive strategy and resources to make substantial, enduring changes. This reflects a deeper legitimacy conflict between the ideals of humanization vs. optimization and output increase (Dannenbeck et al., 2016; Moser, 2020). The implementation of DEI policies is constrained by a lack of resources, clear targets, and institutional support, which hinders their potential to drive real organizational change.

The comparison of the three research universities underscores the complex relationship between legal mandates, ethical norms, and cultural beliefs in shaping DEI policies, programs, and practices. Despite the crucial presence of DEI policies, their institutionalization remains weak, with loose coupling between the policies at the higher levels of the university (and beyond) and the organizational programs and practices necessary to achieve meaningful inclusion and equity in every lab and classroom.

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