

Leading for Equity in Monoracial Contexts: Examining DEIA, Leadership, and Institutional Change at a University in Botswana

Research Overview

This study examines how diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) are conceptualized and operationalized within a monoracial higher education context in Botswana, offering a critical contribution to global conversations on inclusive education. Positioned within the broader discourse of bridging cultures and co-creating knowledge, the research highlights how local sociocultural dynamics intersect with global leadership frameworks to shape institutional approaches to equity. Drawing on a Fulbright-supported project conducted at a science and technology university, the study centers the voices of students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders to understand how inclusion is defined, experienced, and enacted.

Importantly, this research challenges dominant Western-centric DEIA paradigms by foregrounding localized understandings of marginalization that extend beyond race to include gender, disability, socioeconomic status, age, and geographic location. Through this lens, the study contributes to a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of how institutions can align global visions of equity with culturally responsive, locally informed practices.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to examine how members of a university community in Botswana define and experience DEIA; (2) to identify institutional strengths, gaps, and challenges in fostering inclusive environments; and (3) to develop actionable, culturally responsive recommendations that support sustainable institutional transformation. Additionally, the study investigates the role of leadership—particularly transformational and adaptive leadership—in shaping the extent to which DEIA initiatives are meaningfully implemented or constrained.

By situating this inquiry within a monoracial context, the study seeks to expand existing literature on equity in higher education, which often centers multiracial or Western settings, and to illuminate how leadership practices must adapt to different cultural, political, and institutional realities.

Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design conducted over an intensive 3.5-week period. Data collection included anonymous surveys (170 students, 67 staff, 28 faculty), one-on-one interviews, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and observational fieldwork. Additionally, video-recorded interviews were used to capture lived experiences and were incorporated into a public lecture and mini-documentary, further reinforcing the co-creation of knowledge through narrative and visual methodologies.

Quantitative survey data provided insights into demographic representation and institutional perceptions, while qualitative data illuminated deeper sociocultural dynamics, including power relations, trust, and hesitancy in engaging with DEIA discourse. The study was informed by multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks, including transformational learning theory, Kolb's experiential learning, adaptive leadership, and Sealey-Ruiz's Racial Literacy

Development framework. Central to this framework is the concept of critical love, defined as an ethical commitment to caring for the communities in which one works, which served as a guiding principle for both data collection and interpretation.

Results and Discussion

Findings reveal a complex and, at times, contradictory landscape of DEIA within the institution. Students identified admissions processes (56%) and campus engagement opportunities as key areas of institutional strength, while faculty and staff pointed to community outreach and gender equity initiatives as evidence of progress. These findings suggest that localized innovations are already contributing to inclusive practices that align with broader global priorities in higher education.

However, the data also highlight significant structural and cultural challenges. Faculty and staff reported limited resources and funding for DEIA initiatives (up to 73%), lack of diverse representation, insufficient institutional data, and ineffective policies as major barriers. Students identified academic pressure (61%), transportation challenges (48%), and financial constraints (27%) as critical factors impacting their educational experience and sense of belonging.

A particularly salient finding centers on the role of sociocultural norms in shaping institutional engagement with DEIA. Fear of backlash and limited psychological safety emerged as significant constraints, particularly in relation to sensitive topics such as LGBTQIA+ inclusion and gender-based concerns. Institutional decisions to omit certain demographic questions from surveys further illustrate the tension between advancing inclusive research practices and navigating cultural and political sensitivities.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating these tensions. While leadership efforts have facilitated initial progress, the findings suggest that more intentional, adaptive, and culturally responsive leadership practices are necessary to sustain meaningful change. The study underscores the importance of moving beyond symbolic commitments toward structural transformation, including the establishment of dedicated DEIA infrastructure, the implementation of mentorship programs, and the integration of inclusive practices into the academic experience.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of co-creating knowledge with local stakeholders rather than imposing external frameworks. This approach not only enhances the legitimacy of DEIA initiatives but also ensures that they are responsive to the lived realities of the university community. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how institutions can bridge local and global perspectives in ways that are both ethically grounded and practically effective.

Keywords

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Higher Education Leadership; Monoracial Contexts; Institutional Change; Cultural Responsiveness