Editorial

Integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in business education

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Abstract

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have emerged as critical imperatives in business education, reflecting a growing recognition of their interconnectedness in fostering fair, representative, and inclusive environments. This Editorial explores the multifaceted landscape of DEI in business education, including its importance, implementation challenges, advancement strategies, and best practices. It also discusses the role of business schools as change agents as well as the intersection of DEI with innovation and sustainability in business education. The integration of DEI principles into curricula is emphasised, as it prepares future leaders to navigate complex organisational environments and drive sustainable growth. Finally, this Editorial calls for business schools to amplify their impact through collaborative efforts and partnerships and drive collective action toward shared DEI goals, contributing to a more sustainable and equitable world for all.

Keywords: Business Education, Business Schools, DEI Principles, Sustainability

Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is not a new concept in the broad sense, as the principles of recognising and valuing diversity, promoting equity, and fostering inclusion have been advocated for across decades (Abrams, 2022). Aiming to create a fair and inclusive environment for all individuals regardless of background or identity, DEI has thus emerged as a guiding framework for addressing systemic inequities and promoting fairness, representation, and belonging across various dimensions, including race, gender, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status (Schneider et al., 2024). The concept has gained traction in various sectors, including business, academia, government, and civil society, as organisations seek to foster diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments that reflect the richness of human experiences and perspectives. The widespread adoption of DEI reflects a growing recognition of the connectivity of its elements and the need for integrated approaches to address structural barriers and promote social justice.

The rise of DEI can be attributed to several factors, including demographic shifts, social movements, and evolving expectations of stakeholders (Freeman & Koçak, 2023). On the one hand, changing demographics, globalisation, and migration have led to increasingly diverse populations, highlighting the importance of recognising and valuing diversity in all its forms. On the other, social movements such as that of the civil rights, feminism, LGBTQ+, and disability or diversability have raised awareness of systemic injustices and mobilised efforts to promote equity and inclusion (Epstein et al., 2024). Notably, stakeholders hold that DEI is a critical imperative for business success. As corporations operate in increasingly diverse and interconnected global markets, the ability to harness the full spectrum of human talent has become not only a moral requirement but also a strategic advantage.

As the business landscape continues to evolve, fueled by technological advancements, globalisation, and shifting societal norms, the need for inclusive leadership and diverse perspectives has never been greater (Waldman et al., 2024). In consideration of this, business schools play the pivotal role of shaping future leaders and decision-makers who will drive organisational success and societal progress by fostering an environment that embraces DEI. Indeed, stakeholders of business schools, including students, employees, consumers, investors, and regulators, have become more vocal in demanding greater transparency, accountability, and commitment to DEI (Epstein et al., 2024). This has led to increased scrutiny of diversity and inclusion practices, as well as pressure on institutions to take concrete actions to address disparities and promote fairness and representation. Consequently, the principles of DEI are deeply intertwined with and critically important for business education.

At its core, business education aims to prepare individuals to navigate complex organisational environments, make informed decisions, and drive sustainable growth (Theofanous et al., 2024). By embracing DEI as a foundational principle, business schools have the opportunity to not only educate future business leaders with these capabilities but also to catalyse positive change in organisations and communities worldwide. However, the application of DEI within institutional settings, including business education, has only gained prominence relatively recently (Schlobohm & Johnson, 2024). As such, to fulfill their DEI mission effectively, business schools must recognise and address the systemic barriers that limit access and opportunity for

underrepresented groups, thereby ensuring that their DEI efforts are truly inclusive and impactful.

This Editorial explores the multifaceted landscape of DEI in business education, particularly the challenges, opportunities, and best practices that shape this critical domain. It also delves into the tangible benefits and importance of DEI for business schools, students, faculty, corporations, and society at large. The structural inequities and cultural barriers impeding progress in this area are also examined, along with strategies for advancing DEI within the business education ecosystem.

The Imperative for DEI in Business Education

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, DEI has transitioned from an aspirational ideal to a non-negotiable requirement, as studies consistently demonstrate that diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones in terms of creativity, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities. In business schools, particularly, bringing together individuals with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences cultivates an environment that encourages critical thinking, collaboration, and respect (Evans & Jackson, 2023).

Business schools have a responsibility to prepare students to operate ethically and responsibly in an increasingly institutional setting world. In this institutional setting, embracing DEI principles not only promotes social justice and equality but also instills values of empathy, compassion, and respect for human dignity – qualities that are essential for ethical leadership and corporate citizenship. Given that the pursuit of DEI is not solely a matter of corporate profitability but also a fundamental ethical obligation (Riedel et al., 2023), integrating DEI into the business education curriculum not only benefits individuals and organisations but also fulfills an ethical duty to contribute to a more just and equitable society.

From a societal standpoint, the imperative for DEI in business education extends beyond the confines of corporate boardrooms and executive suites. As agents of change and catalysts for progress, business schools have the power to drive social mobility and economic opportunity for historically marginalised groups by providing equitable access to high-quality education and empowering individuals from diverse backgrounds to succeed (Schlobohm & Johnson, 2024).

Challenges and Barriers to DEI in Business Education

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of DEI in business education, numerous challenges persist, hindering progress in this critical domain. One of the primary barriers is the presence of systemic inequities that perpetuate disparities in access and opportunity. Specifically, socioeconomic factors, racial biases, gender stereotypes, and other forms of discrimination limit the participation and success of underrepresented groups in business education. Despite efforts to DEI, these systemic inequities continue to shape the composition of student bodies, faculty demographics, and leadership positions within business schools (Wu et al., 2023).

Cultural resistance is also a significant barrier to DEI in business education. Resistance to change remains prevalent within some segments of the academic community due to cultural norms, implicit biases, and entrenched power dynamics, thereby perpetuating exclusionary practices and limiting the willingness of institutions to embrace DEI initiatives (Liu et al., 2023). Overcoming such cultural resistance requires a concerted effort to challenge ingrained beliefs, foster open dialogue, and cultivate a culture of inclusivity and belonging within business schools.

The lack of representation among business schools' faculty, students, and leadership presents another formidable challenge to DEI. Historically marginalised groups, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities, continue to be underrepresented in business education (Baffour et al., 2023). The absence of diverse role models, mentors, and leadership figures can inhibit the recruitment and retention of diverse talent, extending cycles of exclusion within the business education community.

Ballard et al. (2020) mentioned that structural barriers such as limited financial resources, outdated policies, and institutional inertia are impeding efforts to advance DEI in business education. Business schools often face competing priorities and resource constraints that compel them to prioritise short-term gains over long-term investments in diversity and inclusion. Bureaucratic hurdles, tenure requirements, and traditional reward structures may disincentivise faculty and administrators from actively promoting DEI initiatives (Abrams, 2022).

Conveying these complex challenges ultimately requires comprehensive and sustained efforts to dismantle systemic inequities, challenge cultural norms, increase representation, and overcome structural barriers (Ainscow, 2020). Not only that, it is also important to foster inclusive environments that empower marginalised communities and listen to their voices in decision-making processes

Strategies for Advancing DEI in Business Education

Addressing the barriers to DEI in business education requires a multifaceted and proactive approach. While specific approaches may vary depending on an institution's context and priorities, the following stages of strategies have been commonly cited in recent literature on DEI in business education (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Strategies for Advancing DEI in Business Education

Sources: Ainscow (2020), Razaki et al. (2022), Freeman and Koçak (2023),
Wu et al. (2023), Probert (2023), Schlobohm and Johnson (2024).

Assessment and Diagnosis

The first step in achieving DEI in business education involves ongoing thorough assessments of the current state of DEI within an institution (Freeman & Koçak, 2023). To do so, business schools should establish mechanisms for collecting data, measuring progress, and evaluating the effectiveness of DEI initiatives over time. Relevant data may include student demographics, faculty representation, campus climate, policies and practices, DEI-related outcomes, and stakeholder feedback. Based on the results of these systematic assessments, schools can track progress, identify areas for growth, adjust strategies as needed, effectively allocate resources, and continuously strive to meet DEI targets. Transparent reporting and regular assessments can therefore help foster a culture of continuous improvement, create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, and ensure that DEI remains a priority across all levels of the institution.

Goal Setting and Strategy Development

Once the assessment is complete, business schools can establish clear goals and objectives for advancing their DEI. This involves defining specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals that align with their mission, values, and priorities (Razaki et al., 2022). Subsequently, the schools should develop a comprehensive DEI strategy that outlines the actions, initiatives, and resources needed to achieve these goals effectively. Support for the DEI strategy ensures sustained progress and commitment throughout the institution.

Leadership and Governance

As established by Ainscow (2020), leadership commitment and support are critical for the success of DEI initiatives in business schools. As such, dedicated leaders, committees, or task forces should be appointed to oversee DEI efforts and ensure accountability at all levels of the institution. Thus, business schools should establish policies, procedures, and governance structures that prioritise and embed DEI into the institution's culture and decision-making processes.

Recruitment and Retention

Achieving DEI in business education requires recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty, staff, and student body (Wu et al., 2023). Business schools should develop proactive recruitment strategies that target underrepresented groups, eliminate biases in hiring and admissions processes, and create inclusive environments that support the success and retention of diverse individuals. Strategies may encompass mentorship programs, affinity groups, and support services tailored to the needs of underrepresented populations. To add more, diversity training, community-building activities, and cultural competency workshops can enhance the inclusivity of recruitment and retention efforts.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, many business schools began to establish diversity programs, centers, and initiatives dedicated to promoting DEI (Freeman & Koçak, 2023). These programs provided resources, support, and advocacy for underrepresented students, faculty, and staff, and served as focal points for research, education, and outreach on DEI-related topics. Moving forward, business schools should take a step further and incorporate DEI concepts into their curricula via inclusive course content, multi-perspective case studies, and in-depth student research of DEI-related topics (Probert, 2023). The use of inclusive teaching approaches to encourage active learning, critical thinking, and collaboration among students from various backgrounds should also be taken into consideration. Given that business schools' curriculum and pedagogy have a significant impact on the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes of future business leaders (Schlobohm & Johnson, 2024), the incorporation of DEI elements in the classroom would prepare these future leaders to navigate diverse and multicultural business environments.

Furthermore, business schools can implement tailored student engagement initiatives, such as affinity groups, cultural centers, networking events, and support services, to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion among students from diverse or underrepresented backgrounds. More broadly, diversity training and cultural competency programs can be extended to all students.

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Another effective strategy for advancing DEI in business education is community engagement and partnerships. Business schools should collaborate with external partners to promote DEI initiatives, address systemic barriers to access and opportunity, and foster meaningful connections between academia and the broader community

(Freeman & Koçak, 2023). Engaging with external stakeholders, including businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and community organisations allow business schools to leverage external resources and expertise, amplifying their impact and driving collective action towards shared DEI goals.

The Role of Business Schools as Change Agents of DEI

As centers of learning and innovation, business schools occupy a unique position of influence within the broader ecosystem of education, industry, and society. They have a responsibility not only to educate future business leaders but also to serve as catalysts for positive change in the DEI domain. One key role of business schools as change agents of DEI is to shape the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of future business leaders (Fuentes et al., 2021). Through curriculum, research, and extracurricular activities, business schools have the opportunity to instill positive DEI values and mindsets in their students, preparing them to become advocates for social justice within their respective organisations and communities. For instance, schools can educate students about the importance of DEI and its relevance in the business world and society at large. As discussed earlier, business schools can also integrate DEI topics into their curriculum, courses, and learning experiences to raise awareness of issues related to DEI. Such efforts provide students with the knowledge and skills to navigate diverse and multicultural environments (Fuentes et al., 2021), especially within a supportive learning environment that fosters empathy, understanding, and appreciation for diversity.

Business schools serve as beacons of best practices and inspire others to follow suit by embodying the principles of DEI. Therefore, another role of business schools is to lead by example and demonstrate their commitment to DEI through their policies, practices, and culture (Ballard et al., 2020). This includes promoting diversity and inclusion among faculty, staff, and students, modeling a supportive and inclusive campus environment, and implementing equitable hiring, promotion, and tenure processes. Educators should be encouraged to demonstrate respect, openness, and appreciation for diversity in interactions with students and colleagues, as well as to address bias and discrimination whenever it arises. The goal is to create a culture of inclusion where all individuals feel valued, respected, and supported.

Recognising and showcasing the achievements of individuals from different backgrounds are also needed in business schools, regardless of their identity. They should highlight role models and success stories that reflect the diversity of the student body and inspire students to pursue their goals and aspirations. Moreover, support and resources should be offered to students from underrepresented or marginalised groups to ensure their success and well-being. To cater to the needs of diverse student populations, schools should provide tailored mentorship, counseling, and advocacy services as well. These initiatives create inclusive support networks and affinity groups where students can connect with peers who share similar experiences and identities, which is crucial in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Moreover, business schools play the role of conveners and facilitators of dialogue and collaboration on DEI-related issues. They can create opportunities for open, constructive, and honest discussions and learning about DEI topics, where students,

faculty, and staff are able to share their perspectives, experiences, and questions within a safe and respectful space. Activities, exercises, and case studies that challenge students to empathise with individuals from diverse backgrounds and understand the impact of their words and actions on others can further foster empathy and perspective-taking skills. Apart from students, bringing together stakeholders enables business schools to facilitate meaningful discussions, share best practices, and identify innovative solutions to complex DEI challenges. Through partnerships and collaborations, business schools can amplify their impact and drive collective action toward shared DEI goals (Merzel, 2022).

Finally, the key role business schools play in community engagement allows them to extend the reach and impact of their DEI initiatives beyond the confines of academia. Offering experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, service-learning projects, and community initiatives, allows students to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities. These experiences help students develop a deeper understanding of DEI while cultivating empathy and cultural competence. Business schools can also harness their external stakeholder networks and collaborative influence to advance DEI awareness, education, and advocacy in the broader community. This includes organising public events, workshops, and conferences on DEI-related subjects, teaming up with local organisations to deliver DEI training and resources, and championing policy reforms that foster DEI at local, regional, and national tiers (Kossek et al., 2024).

DEI for Innovation and Sustainability in Business Education

Diversity of thought, experience, and perspective fosters creativity and innovation in business education in multiple ways. First, when teams consist of individuals with different backgrounds, identities, and viewpoints, they are more likely to approach problems from multiple angles and generate a wider range of ideas (Lim et al., 2023). This diversity in perspectives can lead to innovative solutions in business schools that may not have been considered in homogeneous groups.

Second, when students or faculty feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing their perspectives without fear of judgment or bias, they are more likely to collaborate, experiment, and take risks, leading to innovative outcomes. This means inclusive environments where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their ideas are conducive to innovation in business education (Epstein et al., 2024).

Third, promoting equity allows business schools to access a wider range of talent and unlock the full potential of their workforce (Baptista et al., 2023). When underrepresented or marginalised individuals are given equal access to education, training, funding, and mentorship, they can fully participate in the innovation process and contribute their unique talents and perspectives. Thus, equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support is essential for driving innovation in business education.

In turn, innovation helps mitigate DEI challenges within business schools and their broader community (Sunasee, 2023). Institutions can use technology, data analytics, and design thinking to create innovative solutions that encourage DEI in recruitment,

hiring, training, and advancement procedures. These innovative approaches can help overcome systemic barriers and create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. In short, DEI is closely intertwined with innovation in business education. Embracing DEI through fresh approaches can result in more creative, impactful, and long-term solutions to demanding institutional and societal challenges. Recognising the connections between DEI and innovation allows business schools to leverage the power of diversity to generate positive change and achieve greater success in today's dynamic and interconnected environment.

In terms of sustainability, its intersection with DEI in business education represents a powerful convergence of values and principles that are essential for addressing the complex challenges facing society and the environment. At its core, sustainability is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Schlobohm & Johnson, 2024). This encompasses not only environmental stewardship and resource conservation but also social responsibility and economic viability. Similarly, DEI is about creating environments where all individuals, regardless of their background or identity, have equal access to opportunities and resources and are valued and empowered to contribute fully to their organisations and communities (Foderaro, 2023).

One way in which DEI intersects with sustainability in business education is by recognising the importance of diverse perspectives and voices in addressing sustainability challenges (Naeem & Neal, 2012; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Business schools that embrace DEI create environments conducive to creativity, innovation, and collaboration. This enables students to devise comprehensive and contextually relevant solutions to sustainability issues. Furthermore, promoting equity and social justice ensures that the school's sustainability endeavors benefit all members of society, especially those most vulnerable to environmental and social risks.

DEI and sustainability are also interconnected through their shared commitment to ethical leadership and corporate citizenship. Business schools play a crucial role in educating future leaders who are not only technically proficient but also ethically and socially responsible. In this regard, integrating DEI principles into the business curriculum equips students to face ethical dilemmas involving stakeholders with diverse perspectives and make decisions that harmonise the interests of all stakeholders, including future generations and marginalised communities (Razaki et al., 2022). Furthermore, DEI and sustainability are mutually reinforcing in their emphasis on systemic change and collective action. Both DEI and sustainability require transformative shifts in organisational culture, policies, and practices to address the root causes of inequity and unsustainability. With a commitment to DEI, business schools can cultivate inclusive leadership and decision-making processes that are essential for driving sustainability initiatives and building resilient, adaptive, and socially responsible organisations and communities.

Overall, integrating DEI into business education yields several benefits for innovation and sustainability. By fostering inclusive and equitable environments, business schools draw a diverse pool of students, faculty, and staff passionate about sustainability and dedicated to propelling positive change in their careers and communities. This brings a wealth of sustainability-related perspectives, experiences, and insights, which promotes effective decision-making and innovative solutions pertaining to sustainability

challenges at the school level. Embracing DEI also exposes students to a wide range of viewpoints and approaches to sustainability, fostering creativity and critical thinking in addressing complex environmental and social issues. Thus, business schools prepare future leaders to build sustainable and socially responsible businesses that contribute positively to society and prioritise DEI in their sustainability efforts.

Consumers, investors, employees, communities, and other stakeholders increasingly expect businesses to not only prioritise sustainability but also to demonstrate a commitment to DEI in their operations and supply chains. By adopting DEI, businesses prove their dedication to addressing the needs and concerns of these stakeholders, thereby building trust and fostering collaboration. Moreover, businesses that place DEI at the center of their sustainability endeavors appeal more to talented individuals, thus enhancing their reputation and brand value. Such businesses can, therefore, identify potential risks, anticipate challenges, and develop more resilient and adaptive sustainability strategies that mirror the needs and interests of diverse stakeholders.

In conclusion, business schools should incorporate the intersection of DEI and sustainability in their curriculum to empower students to tackle the systemic injustices that fuel environmental degradation and social inequality. In doing so, business schools would prepare future leaders to not only build more inclusive and equitable societies and economies, but also to tackle sustainability challenges while promoting DEI. Ultimately, DEI in business education contributes to the construction of a more sustainable and equitable world for all.

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