

## **We're new to this. Diversity agendas in public Spanish universities according to their leaders**

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## **We're new to this. Diversity Agendas in Public Spanish Universities according to their Leaders**

The debate about diversity in Spanish universities is fairly recent, and indeed non-existent from the perspective of leadership. This paper examines the descriptions and justifications given by leaders of public universities in Spain with regard to institutional diversity agendas, as well as actions taken or planned to include traditionally excluded collectives within higher education. A total of 32 public university leaders were interviewed from 5 universities. Results show different interpretations of diversity agendas, with them being explained in different ways and being perceived as having different purposes (naturalization, difference, and inequality). Each interpretation is differentiated by its reach, motivation, stance with regard to the institution, target groups, and proposals. Reports overlap and share three common agendas. This demonstrates a lack of clarity around conceptions of diversity and shows the impact of assuming different standpoints when exercising leadership to evaluate a given agenda.

Keywords: Spain; higher education; leadership; diversity; excluded groups.

Existing research on diversity highlights the elitist and exclusive ambiance created in higher education, incapable of responding with policies that guarantee equality and democracy in terms of access, participation, and progress among marginalized groups (Bowl, 2016; Stefani, 2018). Different national, historical, and cultural contexts shape contrasting grounds under which this discrimination operates (race, social class, age, gender, sexual orientation, background, ethnicity, religion, language, or political persuasion), and different institutions use a variety of terms to reference or silence certain collectives (vulnerable, with protected characteristics, under-represented, traditionally excluded) (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2011).

In the specific case of Spain, recent reports show that despite positive evolution thanks to the country's own history, universities are not functioning as mechanisms of

democratization and social mobility. This can only be demonstrated with regard to certain conditions, since in Spain there are no registers for ethnic minorities or racial groups. However, the figures do show, for example, that in Spain the likelihood of graduating after the age of 25 is lower than in other countries in the EU-23 bloc or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) (0.4% and 1.4% respectively). Furthermore, those with parents who do not possess university qualifications and have a low income or economic difficulties are also less likely to complete a higher education in this country (Conferencia Rectores Universidades Españolas [CRUE], 2019). Moreover, attendance at Spanish universities of students with disabilities is estimated to be low in relation to the population without any disability (1.7% of all university students). These students also show less progression when enrolled (Fundación Universia, 2016). Despite these data, the debate about diversity in Spanish universities has been going for barely a decade, although there has been an upsurge in the use of this concept among university leaders, who increasingly bandy this term about when naming specific services for students. However, the tentative progress being made in diversity agendas in Spain can be attributed more to legislative development in the European and national context. Two paths have shaped the course of this progress: protection for the rights of people with disabilities, and the promotion of equality between women and men (Benet-Gil, 2020; Márquez, 2019).

The present study seeks to contribute to the debate on diversity policies at universities through the perspectives of their leaders. We refer to leaders as political actors with the ability to promote improvements at an academic, organizational, and social level. This is possible because they have political responsibilities in the governance structure of the institution or because they represent an establishment in the collegiate bodies. In both cases, although to different extents, they contribute discourses

which could then become mainstream (Allan et al., 2006). They have the power to institutionalize concepts and categories, and to legitimize them, prioritizing them over others, which in turn become silenced. Debate on diversity in universities has been initiated by leaders themselves but has barely been broached in Spain. Such debate has contributed to outcomes in the international context and allows for comparisons to be drawn between the different political agendas (Squire, 2017). Research into diversity and leadership has highlighted the contributions made by leaders of underrepresented groups within institutions (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006), indicating that “who they are”, their identity, is relevant and influences “what they do” (Eagly & Chin, 2010). However, fewer studies have analyzed their conceptions about diversity and how they justify the agendas rolled out by their institutions (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002; Chin, 2010; Squire, 2017). The present study analyzes what it means to the leaders of five public universities in Spain to develop diversity policies at their universities. We formed the following research questions: How do institutional agendas describe diversity? Which arguments are used to justify this?

### **Diversity in higher education**

The challenge for universities to show a diverse representation among their student body is constant. This is reflected in a global and local way through the examination of whether traditionally excluded groups (in terms of social class, ethnic origin, age, gender, educational antecedents, or disability, amongst others) are able to access the institution (Haring-Smith, 2012; McNair, 2016). With regard to Spain, particularly notable findings relate to disability (Fundación Universia, 2016; Moriña, 2015). Some authors indicate that these data do not always recognize privilege among some groups relative to others. They acknowledge that these figures could be influenced by institutional silence surrounding stories of discrimination or social problems (Acher,

2007; Gibson, 2015, Squire, 2017), which leads to the unequal position of some groups relative to others being accounted for and hidden.

In the current literature we also find data for student attendance that provide evidence of the institution's openness and excellence, in addition to its capacity to bring in clientele. Universities project an avant-garde image and offer a setting for all of its students to enjoy cultural experiences. However, it has also been indicated that this diversity does not exist among professors or non-teaching staff (Kimura, 2014). Hence, various studies on diversity outline the benefits of interacting with "diverse individuals" (traditionally excluded groups) in terms of acquiring skills, overcoming prejudices, promoting leadership oriented towards the common good, or personal and social responsibility (French, 2017; Hurtado & Deangelo, 2012; Pérez-Serrano & Capdevilla, 2013).

In this regard, Iverson (2008) states that behind the promotion of these types of discourses there is an underlying conception of the difference between a neoliberal orientation, excellence, and management. The goal of this is to make diversity profitable, presenting it to the university as an open and plural market. Goldstein and Meisenbach (2017) refer to this same effect as the "business-case for diversity". Specifically in the context of the USA, they argue that behind affirmative-action measures promoting the presence of non-traditional groups at universities, factors operate that in reality serve as "an argument for the integration of minority students to help enhance the education and professional preparation of predominantly White student populations, thus prioritizing White interests over historically marginalized racial groups and perpetuating White entitlement" (p. 15). Along these same lines, Aguirre and Martinez (2006) discuss "window dress diversity", referring to the creation of symbolic opportunities to project an image of diversity or 'put diversity on show'.

These discourses form part of a management agenda (Archer, 2007). The presence of traditionally excluded students does not lead to either compression or elimination of inequality. Instead, it creates tolerance, which spices up the university community and makes it more exotic (Ahmed, 2018). Bowl (2016) states that in the context of competition between universities, the language of diversity is useful because it evokes harmony and warmth, and serves to recruit students of all creeds, cultures and nationalities – albeit those who are economically favored – without the university committing to equality.

In reaction to these standpoints, diversity from social justice discourse alludes to a model whose strong commitment on behalf of the university is to eradicate any form of inequality. It is clear that university campuses have not managed to overcome discrimination toward certain groups despite an increase in their access to higher education. These groups include racial and ethnic minorities, women, and students with disabilities or unfavorable socioeconomic circumstances (O'Donnell, 2016). Along these lines, research has evidenced that diversity discourse can reproduce, rather than redress, social problems, dominant power structures, and unequal and privileged resource distribution (Ahmed, 2007; Archer, 2007; Thomas, 2018). One of the keys for working in this regard at university campuses is noted by Kezar and Quaye (2008). They indicate that progress has been successfully made in university diversity agendas through the creation of councils, committees, and working groups. These are constituted by, and work as, a more democratic resource network, entailing leaders who create management coalitions.

From this perspective, the development of diversity agendas not only consists of promoting the presence of diverse “others”, but must also demonstrate the value of emphasizing understanding, interpretation, and commitment frameworks with groups in

positions of inequality (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002). In practice, this not only means talking about diversity but also dedicating resources and budgets to “create diversity”. When leaders make their commitment to diversity explicit and link it to the fight against inequality, they assert the presence of marginalized groups in policy and recognize them as a cultural public (Ahmed, 2007; Squire, 2017).

### **Leading diversity at university**

The way in which leadership is conceptualized within educational science, specifically in the context of higher education, has evolved from 1930 up until the present day. The classic work conducted by Bensimon et al. (1989) documented a large part of this evolution, which was reviewed two decades later by Kezar et al. (2006). These authors characterize changes to leadership theory as a revolution that crosses different scientific disciplines. Leadership is now being interpreted from alternative paradigms such as the socio-constructivist, critical, and post-modern paradigms. These differ from early positivism in both their themes and their methods. Thus, theories centered on the figure of a leader as individualistic, hierarchical, deterministic, and with universal pretenses, have been transformed by recent studies. These studies explore and interpret (and occasionally challenge) the relationships, processes, and mutual influences of variables such as power, culture, or the organization (Gordon et al., 2010).

In the US, studies that challenge the White masculine hegemonic image of leaders in higher education are of special interest in this evolution (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Revérter-Bañón & Medina-Vicent, 2017; Santamaría, 2014). From this perspective, not only is the presence of leaders belonging to traditionally excluded groups prioritized – considered mono-cultural in comparison to students (Stefani, 2018) – but the importance of exercising leadership linked to their conceptions, capacity for multicultural understanding, and social justice is indicated. These works have suggested

new theoretical models such as “applied critical leadership” (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016) and inclusive leadership (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018). From these models, the diversity agenda is understood as an equity agenda in that it encapsulates policies directed toward reducing inequalities and promoting access and achievement in traditionally excluded groups. Examples of this are the emphasis on high expectations for all of the student body; social inclusion and education around the history, values, and knowledge of under-represented groups; development of a critical conscience regarding inequalities in the educational community, and; institutionalization of an organization that empowers students and traditionally neglected communities (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). Transformational and distributed forms of leading intersect in the execution of these policies, re-conceptualizing the issue from a prism of equity and social justice.

Research on these models argues that, beyond traits that are considered to be “successful”, what is actually understood as leadership and how it is practiced is defined according to criteria such as gender, culture, ethnicity, race, age, personal experiences, or the position of power occupied by the individuals within the organization and the way in which their conceptions model these practices (Arsenault, 2004; Chin, Desormeaux & Sawyer, 2016; Kezar, 2000).

The evolution described, from the theoretical stance of leadership, appears to have been replaced. Nevertheless, the images linked to these models remain present in higher education and influence beliefs (and along with them, attitudes, concepts and practices) about who is or could be leader, what it means to lead, and what type of practice this entails (Allan et al., 2006). These traditional visions currently lean on social, political, and economic trends that are neoliberal in nature and, at the same time, lean on the theoretical counter-movements they spawn, such as academic capitalism or



managerialism (Kezar et al., 2006). These define trends with concrete ideas about diversity and about the educational policies and practices that create a complex balance between equality work at universities, and the striving for excellence between universities (Bowl, 2016).

### **Diversity agendas according to university leaders**

This study analyzes the descriptions and justifications given by university leaders with regard to the diversity agendas developed by their institutions. The research is grounded in Critical Theory about Diversity (Herring & Henderson, 2012), which points to the inconsistencies and limitations of the concept analyzed outside the dynamic structures of power and inequality. From a critical perspective, authors such as Ahmed (2007; 2012), Bowl (2016) and Squire (2017) explain that when it comes to ‘doing’ diversity within higher education institutions in a way that is disjointed from the heuristic of inequality, the meaning becomes confused and can even become void of any sense of equity and justice. To understand the diversity discourses used by university leaders, we have utilized the trilogy proposed by García-Cano et al. (2018) and Herring and Henderson (2012):

- Diversity as Individualization and Naturalization (or “Colorblind diversity”). This descriptive discourse is blind to inequality and celebrates the interaction of individuals, without acknowledging disparities between these groups in terms of power, status, wealth, and access.
- Diversity as Differences between Groups (or “Segregated diversity”). Despite recognizing differences between groups and the need for inclusion measures, this discourse continues to maintain differences and separate the dominant groups from the dominated groups.

- Diversity as Inequality (or “Critical diversity”) explained by the complex unequal state of resources and opportunities within groups with different backgrounds on university campuses. Discourse on inequality is situated in the contemporary context of systematic inequality, considering that differences and different situations should be central to current policy.

These contributions – together with more critical research into leadership (Allan et al., 2006; Gordon et al., 2010), which accepts, following Foucault, that power is exerted (not possessed) and that this power is constructed and circulated through discourse – provide a theoretical grounding for this study with a view to interpreting the different narratives of university leaders about the agendas of their respective institutions.

## **Context**

The five universities involved in the present study are located in the autonomous community of Andalusia, Spain. They are all public institutions, financed by the Administration, and have a similar governance system in place but different trajectory and size (See Table 1). In Spain, there are 82 universities in total (50 public and 32 private). Andalusia is representative of the national university system, since it has one private and ten public universities.

According to the institutional definition of public universities in Spain given by the European model, they maintain a high degree of autonomy over academic matters, management, and financial resources, which are specified in the definition of specific regulations for each university (Castro & Gairín, 2013). However, the specification of the regulations is based on legislation at different levels: international, European, national, and regional (in this case Andalusia).

With regard to diversity, Spanish universities include within their legislative framework the national and international standards drawn up over the past few decades, giving shape to the content of the fundamental right to education and its inclusive nature. The United Nations, for example, through various general declarations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and up to the current 2030 Agenda and the Incheon Declaration (2015), or those focused on more specific collectives [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979; United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007; recognizing the rights based on their Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (United Nations High Commissioner, 2011)] have stressed education as a fundamental universal right, essential to the development of other rights, highlighting the responsibility of education institutions (including higher education institutions (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2019) in guaranteeing this right (European Commission, 2016; European Commission/European Council, 2015; European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2018), inviting universities to consider inclusion an unwavering aspiration and priority area of action within their social responsibility as education institutions. One example of how this is put into practice is the current Erasmus+ program for Higher Education Institutions developed by the European Commission (2020). In this program, inclusion is considered a specific objective and evaluation criterion in different strategic areas of action.

Along this same line, recommendations have been made within the national legislative framework. Although these are not always issued from the same stance, they generally reiterate the importance of managing diversity and considering it within the educational context in general and at university level in particular. In this respect, various pieces of educational legislation enacted, from Organic Act 8/1985, July 3rd,

regulating the Right to Education to Organic Act 8/2013, December 9th, for the improvement of educational quality, specify how diversity should be managed and which collectives should be the focus of this management (chiefly people with disabilities, although as of the Organic Act 1/1990, October 3rd, on the General Organisation of the Education System, other collectives were incorporated, such as students who join the education system later). Other laws, such as Act 51/2003, of December 2nd, regarding equality of opportunities, non-discrimination, and universal accessibility for persons with disabilities, or Organic Act 3/2007, of March 22nd, for the effective equality of women and men, which aim to guarantee equal opportunities rights for people with disabilities or between women and men, respectively, have also included universities as institutions that should incorporate “design for all” into their academic areas, along with training, teaching, and research with regard to gender equality and discrimination.

These references, alongside Organic Act 4/2007, of April 12th, governing Universities and Royal Decree 1393/2007, of October 29th, governing Official University Education, transposed to Andalusia in the form of Act 12/2011, of December 16th, which amends Andalusia’s Universities Act, regulate diversity management measures concerning the following collectives: students with economic difficulties, those with family responsibilities, victims of terrorism and gender violence, using a system of study grants and financial assistance; policies aimed at guaranteeing equality of opportunities for persons with disabilities; and the creation of specific programs on gender equality. The Royal Decree also requires universities to include teaching related with values of respect for fundamental rights, equality between women and men, and the principles of non-discrimination and universal accessibility for persons with disabilities. Finally, the Statute of University Students (approved within Royal Decree

1791/2010, of December 30th) contains multiple references to student inclusion, mostly centered on disability. Specifically in Andalusia, Act 4/2017, of September 25th, governing the rights and Management of Persons with Disabilities in Andalusia, is especially relevant, establishing obligations for universities in Andalusia toward students with disabilities.

According to these international, national, and regional recommendations, universities have proceeded to roll out actions fundamentally linked to the non-discrimination of women and individuals with disabilities or economic difficulties. Such policies toward traditionally excluded groups depend on the specific organization of vice-presidents, which directs functioning through services and units that are specifically dedicated to these ends. However, services or units aimed at students, teaching innovation, international relations, or development cooperation, among others, also have a crosscutting impact.

Governance systems at public universities in Spain are integrated into a governmental system, which is defined by principles of participation and institutional representativeness at all levels (teaching staff, students, and administrative and services staff). This guarantees that the decisions made by directors, in other words those who are democratically elected by the university community, or by those who are appointed by the aforementioned to positions of trust, do not act outside the scope of collegiate bodies where there is representation at all levels. Hence, assuming different capacities for decision-making and influence between diversity agendas, the leaders of 5 universities considered in the present study were (See Table 2):

- Directors on the university's governing body (Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor),
- Those with roles delegated by the aforementioned individuals (Specific Services Management),

- Institutional representatives who sit on collegiate bodies (Student Leadership and representatives of Administrative and support staff).

## **Method**

An interpretivist epistemological perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was used to analyze the descriptions and justifications given by leaders with regard to their respective institution's diversity agenda. We are interested in discourse understood as social practice (Hicks, 1995) which, in the case of leaders, is hegemonic and naturalized within the institution because it transcends the public domain and is constructed through their different stances (Allan et al., 2006).

We opted to conduct semi-structured interviews and we adapted the guide depending on the interviewee's role (Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor or Specific Services Management). Interviews were carried out between October 2018 and January 2020, each lasting a maximum of 2 hours. They were all conducted by one of the researchers, although the interview script questions, articulated according to three thematic areas, was previously agreed by the research team: (1) General ideas about diversity and guidelines within the institution; (2) policies, practices and experience in their management; (3) proposals for the management of diversity within education. Different questions were explored, and the aspects considered to be relevant (depending on the individual being interviewed as determined by the interviewer) were detailed. The ordering of questions was altered according to each individual case. However, various questions were formulated in the same way in all interviews: "When you hear the phrase diversity at university, what do you think about?" and "how do you rate the diversity policies at this university?" During administration, time was set aside to allow for broad and detailed responses. Information was triangulated at various moments in order to go beyond "official" and superficial accounts (Blatter et al., 2016). The

following strategies were applied: During interviews, existing institutional documentation was alluded to in order to contrast data on policies; during the analysis process, triangulation was performed between informants, institutional documentation, and the different accounts provided by the informant during the interview.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed literally in order to code them, categorize them, and identify dominant themes. ATLAS.ti. v.8 software was used. Initial coding was open and emergent, and followed the research questions: What is the university doing about the management of diversity? And, why do they act in this way? This initial coding was conducted by the same researcher who performed the interviews. Following this, codes were assigned through inter-coder agreement on behalf of the team. Codes were then defined and exemplified and, where relevant, re-organized and re-coded (Miles et al., 2014). The final step in the interpretive examination was conducted by the entire research team. It consisted of establishing directional relationships through typological categorical inferences in relation to three orientations: Naturalization, difference, and inequality.

The study was approved by the ethical committee of the university that was responsible for research. Consent was obtained from all interviewees, and anonymity was guaranteed.

## **Findings**

The leaders describe and justify diversity agendas with arguments that overlap three orientations and all the participating groups, though the frequency with which units of analysis were coded varied depending on the group analyzed. Far from essentialist pretenses, these variations suggest the following trends: Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors and Specific Services Management are oriented toward difference (with double the proportion of frequencies found than for inequality discourse and quadruple that of

naturalization); amongst Student Leaders the prevailing agenda is inequality (with 141 frequencies relative to 79 discourses around difference and 23 relative to naturalization); whilst similar orientations were found in Administrative and support staff for difference (77 frequencies) and naturalization (73) relative to inequality (42).

To organize and summarize the main discursive fields present in the three orientations identified, the results have been structured into five dimensions: reach of policies, motivation to which practices respond, stance with respect to the institution, proposals, and conception of diversity. These dimensions are interpreted differently in the discourses of each agenda, giving rise to the constructs shown in Table 3 and described below.

### *Agendas from the naturalization perspective*

The first of the orientations identified alludes to a process that has already been achieved and the actions it proffers. The mere presence within institutions of services tasked with developing policies and measures for gender equality or disability are, fundamentally, considered to be examples of this achievement. It deals with discourse that tends to naturalize as opposed to question the very existence of services, their functioning or impact: “It hadn’t occurred to me to see it in this way. (...) to consider what difficulties exist for it to be established, because I think that it is already established” (A\_SSM\_W\_12-04-2018).

The practices described are essentially directed toward students, as it is understood that they are “the diverse ones” and those who might be the object of attention. In contrast, no mention is made of teaching staff or staff from non-academic areas. Diversity is viewed as individual traits, quirks, something natural, inevitable, and intrinsic to the individual, independent of (or blind to) structural inequalities and their consequences within the university. A university conception prevails: “Open to the



entire world. Not limited to anybody or for reasons of sex, age, or qualification”

(D\_Staff(2)\_W\_17-09-2019).

A product of the consideration of diversity as individuality and singularity is a prevailing conservative agenda, which urges ‘more of the same’. These leaders are shown to be prudent when it comes to the development of new protection plans, programs, or regulations for groups with specific needs: “When you start to boil things down, sometimes, you exceed the regulation, no? And, in the end everything is so regulated that there is no room for anything that falls between the lines. And that is the problem” (C\_SSM(2)\_W\_02-05-2019). This non-action is supported by the well-meaning conception that positive diversity and supposed principles of equal treatment already exist. This leads to homogenous responses: “In principle we do not have any parameter that tells us that we have to treat some better and others worse, so, in principle we normally treat everybody in the same way” (A\_Staff\_M\_15-03-2018).

Specifically, four discursive arguments were found to justify the political agenda. First, “fatigue” is mentioned when referring to certain topics within the university community as being repetitive in their handling. Further, such topics are not deemed necessary, as the problem is perceived either as not existing or as having already been overcome. Allusions to policies for equality between males and females is of special importance:

I believe [it] dedicates a lot of time to equality, (...) these days, it tries to have the same number of men and women in these roles, as many male lecturers as female, male students as female students, and I’m telling you, access there is the same for everybody (D\_Staff(2)\_W\_17-09-2019).

Second, it alludes to the important bureaucratic workload and cost represented by university management relative to other policy agenda priorities. These enable more

convenient results to be obtained for the purposes of the institution, such as through research or transference:

It seems to me that they are highly redundant policies, aside from a waste of resources that we lack to attend to other policies, not that they are more important, but, sometimes, they tend to be much more focused on what we have to do: transference, teaching, out-reach... no? You know? (A\_Staff\_M\_15-03-2018).

Third, it is argued that this refers to social problems which have now been overcome, which belong in the past (once again, with regard to equality between males and females), or that attention to this issue does not correspond to the proper functioning of the university (for example, when references are made to discrimination around sexual orientation, gender identities, or religious practices).

A few years ago, they requested us to have... I was in the center for Philosophy and Texts, a center for the Muslim community to pray. We had to say no because, as there is no chapel in the university, neither should there be a mosque or prayer center. We understand that they have needs, but we couldn't provide the solution (E\_Vice-Chancellor\_M\_31-10-2019).

In fourth and final place, from a naturalization standpoint, the university is classed as well meaning. It is described as a place without discrimination, and the university community is referred to as an agent of equality: "No way, nobody has complained about discrimination..." (D\_Staff(2)\_W\_17-09-2019). On the other hand, equal treatment is justified alluding to the right of students to not be treated differently or identified as members of a vulnerable group. In this way, a departure from protectionist models is proposed for the sake of equality, seeking to favor the autonomy and development of students themselves:

Boys and girls who have some kind of disability do not want to be treated as if they are special (...) they do not want to depend on a vice-chancellor that deals with

diversity but a vice-chancellor that attends to students: “we are all just students” (A\_Vice-Chancellor\_W\_04-04-2018).

### *Agendas from the difference perspective*

In the second field of discourse, descriptions of established political agendas prevail, which incorporate programs, practices, and regulations. These require specific attention that is technical and specialized in nature, directed toward satisfying the demands of concrete groups as a function of delimited criteria:

We also work with... for immigrants we have specific actions, we have specific actions with refugees; in fact, in our Inclusion Plan, they are in, and well, if you are referring to all possible equality groups, LGBTI, etc., we have our Equality Plan, there is a specific axis for inclusion of LGBTI. We have always had a lot of Moroccan students, so, for us the topic of religion is not part of it... it is not a problem (C\_Chancellor\_W\_14-01-2020).

This discourse responds to a conception of the university from a managerialist standpoint. It justifies diversity actions due to the benefits reported for the institution itself given that institutional image is enhanced when needs of the “clientele” are satisfied.

It has occurred to me that if everyone before me, as I give classes in third year, has made some type of adaptation, with very little extra effort, we can formalize this and say that we have a course adapted for blind people (...) if I put the mast down and said: Come all blind people who want to study IT at [university name], do we now know how to do it? (A\_Vice-Chancellor\_M\_04-04-2018).

In this way, a diverse student body that is representative of various groups becomes an attractive trait as an outward-facing feature, with high publicity potential capable of broadening the institutions’ client base. In order to draw attention to the convenience of specific and specialized services and programs, leaders allude to the

mandatory stance taken by the institution to comply with relevant legislation.

Consolidated legislative development in the European and national setting in relation to disability and equality between males and females determines, precisely, that the actions that define the political diversity agenda at universities are fundamentally oriented along three main lines. These are disability, equality between females and males, and scholarships for individuals with economic difficulties. All of these motives are referred to in this diversity agenda.

It is particularly important to highlight allusions to actions that consider the diversity-disability binomial. In fact, this aspect is especially valued for its greater consideration in this context and the breadth of services currently made available by the university to respond in a specialized way to these needs: “Accessibility, it is true that we work a lot with the Vice-Chancellor for architecture. Right. With the whole issue of door handles, ramps. (...). And yes, it is being worked on. I think in functional diversity yes” (D\_SSM\_W\_17-09-2019). When the actions carried out are evaluated, we find a standpoint taken by leaders that is indulgent toward the university. Difficulties are justified by motives that are considered to be external to their management powers. These include the absence of external funding to undertake architectural works to improve accessibility or, even, the lack of student involvement. Relative to the discourse of naturalization, in this case, emphasis is placed on the need to distinguish potential recipients in order to provide and highlight specialized treatment.

One of the problems we have is a hidden group and, logically, they have the right to state or not to what group they belong. This is a challenge. In fact, in our services, people have to come voluntarily to state what they need and there are people who do not want to identify themselves with something and this is a problem (A\_SSM\_M\_19-03-2018).

With regard to equality between males and females, an important set of measures has evidenced a degree of usage in academia. This could possibly be due to the legislative drive to design and develop equality plans at a national level. In exchange, actions relating to the LGBTI collective (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex) are more recent and largely focused on the development of name change protocols and protocols against abuse. These tend to follow the example of other universities, which could suggest a certain inertia and emulation of political action.

The legal imperative also appears as an argument to justify actions undertaken at a socio-economic level, including the availability of study grants. In this case, it alludes to university regulations, statutes, and strategic plans.

The economic crisis starting in 2008 is of special importance to leaders, in addition to its impact on the precariousness and economic struggles of their students. In this context, this relates to the system for grants and emergency aid to account for diversity management actions. Valuation of these actions is, again, indulgent toward the university:

The motto is “No student of the [university name] will leave their studies because of economic problems” and we have a fund that we call emergency grants.

Whatever situation occurs, whatever problem we detect that could lead to drop out due to an exclusively economic issue, we are there” (B\_Vice-Chancellor\_M\_04-06-2019).

In parallel to the extent to which measures comply with legislation and respond to concrete groups through specific and specialized services and actions, the leaders interviewed value the diversity agenda as an indicator of university excellence. Advances are interpreted as a way of being at the forefront of, or adjusting to, what other universities do. In this sense, actions such as the very existence of structures (for example, appointing a Vice-Chancellor for “inclusive policies” or “diversity

management”) are lauded: “CRUE just created the Sector Commission on Equality and Inclusion” (E\_Vice-Chancellor\_W\_30-10-2019). As a consequence, standpoints are primed that are lightly critical of the institution, valuing advances and the planning of actions: “We are on the right track, or that’s what I would like to think... [laughs]” (E\_Vice-Chancellor\_M\_31-10-2019). The university takes care of this aspect, and it is appreciated: “We have instruments, we have tools to help us overcome these aspects” (B\_Vice-Chancellor\_M\_04-06-2019). Further, the political will of governance teams is celebrated. We interpret this as more of a sign of their own complacent position with the institution: “I think that yes, there is political will and a feeling of making advances and creating a modern, inclusive, equal university...” (D\_Vice-Chancellor\_M\_12-09-2019).

### *Agendas from the inequality perspective*

The third discourse field describes the university diversity agenda as being in an initial phase. The actions performed by the institution are recognized but leaders, in particular student representatives, are seen to be critical of the development and ideas held by it. This argument is supported through recognition of the social inequality dynamics that permeate the university setting, and defines the different power positions and privileges of certain groups (for example, lower representation of individuals with disabilities, the absence of females in certain qualifications, and the economic difficulties faced by the working classes in paying tuition fees). It is recognized that the political agenda is undergoing a process. However, these respondents are shown to be non-conformist and demand that a critical review be undertaken of both the conceptions upon which individuals’ needs are defined and the responses they come up with: “But in reality, later on you look closer and the protocols work badly, things are not effective, they say that they are doing things to improve, but really they are a “monumental mess” (B\_Student\_M\_04-07-2019).

Legislative advances regarding the recognition of rights for specific groups serve as arguments to justify institutional actions from this model. However, we find inconsistencies in their interpretation. On the one hand, legislation is wielded to defend social advances and justify actions that have not yet been adopted as part of academic culture. For example, legislation urges the realization of curricular adaptations for students with disabilities when teachers have no intention of enacting them. In these cases, different leaders use legislation as a false alibi for diversity action, because: “If it is not legislated, it is very difficult” (D\_SSM\_W\_17-09-2019). On the other hand, we also find discourses that show a lack of confidence about the reach of the legislation itself, into university life and in its claims to transcend the issue: “That something is what it is on paper, but then, later, the reality is... it’s a struggle.” (D\_Staff(2)\_W\_17-09-2019). These respondents disapprove of services being made available or determined actions being performed purely to respond to legislative requirements. For these individuals, the application of legislation without it being contextualized or broken down turns it into a political exercise in institutional inertia. It is capable of regulating and making numerous protocols available but lacks the capacity to evaluate actions. This evaluation is seen frequently in relation to units tackling equality between males and females: “legally they were there (...) but ultimately there is a director of the equality unit who is at best a technician. That’s how it is” (D\_SSM\_W\_17-09-2019).

Whilst indulgence toward the university prevails in the aforementioned models, praising the political will of leaders with governance responsibilities, the present model finds a much more critical and benevolent position. Inequality discourses recognize the important effort exerted by those in charge – politicians and technicians of specific services – to drive social actions for equality. However, they understand that advances should not exclusively address the will of certain individuals but be converted into

consolidated policies subjected to review: “Let’s see, there are some regulations and some established protocols. But I think that this is largely on paper, then later at the moment of truth... (...)” (D\_Staff(2)\_W\_17-09-2019). Do-goodism, described as sensitization or tolerant awareness, is criticized based on the understanding that it leads to some people volunteering, generating potential inaction among others. As an alternative, priority is given to the rights of individuals when they are recognized and their needs are satisfied. Considerations of this aspect go beyond simple arbitrary and circumstantial attention: “It shouldn’t depend on the assertiveness of a teacher” (B\_Student\_M\_04-07-2019). Interviewed leaders represented themselves as activists in favor of diversity policies in a broad sense: “We all fight, but it doesn’t have to be a path with so much fight and so much struggle, but if not the issues are taken for granted (...) there is no need for them to be demanded” (D\_SSM\_W\_17-09-2019). Leaders are aware of the vast amount of work still to be done in order to transform institutional structures. They question both the pillars on which institutions are built and the habits that perpetuate the privilege of some groups over others:

There is outright rejection. Outright on the part of some sectors, I’m not saying it’s widespread, eh. Not in the [governance] teams, where there are always lots of doubts and so on, because there could be people who are really good, highly convinced, with a lot of ideological affinity, but with these issues it is not only a question of ideology, of identity, there is a lot on both sides, people for whom the sexist view, in a cultural sense, androcentric, patriarchal, impregnates their way of understanding reality, you know. (C\_SSM(2)\_M\_02/05/2019).

Coherent with this standpoint, respondents call for a proactive role of the university institution beyond bureaucratic procedure: “There are more obstacles because not everybody thinks that equality and diversity are that important. So, it is like something secondary. So, it is not a priority” (D\_SSM\_W\_17-09-2019). Leaders call



for positive action measures that paint a different type of university image, one that is more varied and capable of visualizing bodies that have never been present at the university. This serves to change not only representation but also perceptions about those who have never accessed it:

suddenly you realize that maybe a lecture hall doesn't have... what it has is a staircase on one side, it doesn't have a ramp, (...). This has happened to us and, suddenly, you say, has nobody thought that a person in a wheelchair might give a talk? (E\_SSM\_M\_31-10-2019).

In this last sense, relative to the aforementioned agendas, which were directed above all to students, in this case, actions are identified for the whole university community: "I haven't seen any PAS in a wheelchair, for example. Here in [city name], at least, I haven't even seen anybody with Down Syndrome in reception, for example, (...)" (E\_Chancellor\_M\_31-10-2019).

For all these reasons, the political diversity agenda from a stance of inequality calls for transformation within the institution with a social vocation:

The system is not inclusive, and so, if on top of this it already is not inclusive, what duty does the university have, if in theory they are public and are to promote social change, well let them do that (B\_Student\_M\_04-07-2019).

However, in addition to characterizing each of the diversity agendas, the findings also indicate overlaps and co-existences within the participants' discourse. This becomes evident when the same participant presents descriptions and justifications referring to different agendas but about different elements (reach, motivation, stance regarding the institution, target groups, or future proposals). This is illustrated with the case of a student who, on the one hand, refers to diversity as something natural, existing outside the processes of structural inequality (typical of the naturalization agenda) but

who, at the same time, recognizes and celebrates the university's specialized and specific policy of action (characteristic of the difference agenda):

It might come across as a bit naïve, but I think everyone has equal opportunity access. I don't think there are any obstacles, at least not in society [in this city], and specifically in the university (D\_Student(2)\_H\_26-09-2019).

(...)

Especially, since the latest senior management team has been in place, they have highlighted diversity even more, in terms of attention, visibility, understanding diversity in terms of disability or gender diversity, in other words, understanding all types of diversity, perhaps now more than ever, plus the campaigns that focus on groups like LGBT. (...). But it's certainly true that in recent years, with this new senior management team, there has been a greater drive (D\_Student(2)\_H\_26-09-2019).

## **Discussion**

The presence of various agendas confirms that actions are being undertaken based on different conceptions of diversity. These agendas in themselves do not imply a breakdown in existing social or institutional structures in favor of a more inclusive construction, in other words one that is socially more just (Ahmed, 2018; O'Donnell, 2016; Thomas, 2018). Further, the existence of these three standpoints demonstrates the maintenance in the university context of certain movements such as academic capitalism or managerialism. These were shown to be challenged by more contemporary theories of leadership and diversity in higher education (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018; Kezar et al., 2006).

Together with coexistence, this argument serves to highlight overlapping arguments on the part of the respondents themselves in relation to the three orientations. Although the main finding of this research has been to identify the tendency of dominant discourses (Van Dijk, 2009) with regard to diversity agendas in universities, under no circumstances should they be interpreted as immutable 'pure' discourses, or as

original crystallizations (Menéndez, 2002). On the one hand, this fact reveals the lack of conceptual clarity with respect to the term diversity. This has been shown in other studies in the Spanish context (Benet-Gil, 2020; Jiménez-Millán & García-Cano, 2019; Márquez, 2019), which in this case sought to find a way to define it and exercise leadership in it. On the other hand, the early stage at which diversity policies are still found within public universities in Spain is highlighted (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2019; Hernández & Álvarez, 2018).

Whilst being aware of the complexities and overlap of leaders' discourses regarding the three orientations, when they are analyzed as a function of the position occupied by the institution, trends are observed, which prioritize some agendas over others. This finding coincides with conclusions indicated by Kezar (2000). This author points to the position of leaders within the organization as an influential element in the definition of diversity management policies at university. The trends mentioned highlight a greater weight of discourse in relation to the difference agenda. This is seen in both a general way and specifically in relation to groups of policy leaders (Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors and Specific Services Management), whilst at the same time a greater weight of discourse is seen for the inequality agenda amongst student leaders. This finding reveals two issues of interest. On the one hand, differences were found between agendas as a function of the governance role enacted or being an estate representative. Whilst the former make decisions "about" what will happen to others, the latter enacts this "with" others, via more distributed leadership processes. In comparison with other hierarchical positions, this position could be impacting upon the increased awareness of the existence of unequal power dynamics between certain groups. On the other hand, the widespread prevalence of the difference agenda, especially within governance bodies, outlines interest in giving specialized attention to

relevant groups. This, in recent years, has led to a waterfall effect and the multiplication of specific services and governance structures that are “for diversity” and “inclusive” (García-Cano et al., 2017; Márquez, 2019). Both aspects could be indicators that Spanish universities have introduced policy changes in relation to diversity.

Nonetheless, as made explicit by Ahmed (2018), attempting to deal with the issue through specific services and stating, without critical consideration, that these services are destined for this purpose, creates the assumption that the issue “is already settled”. Discourses found in the difference agenda celebrate, to a certain extent, what is already being done. Comparing our results with those reported by the aforementioned author, such discourse is superficial, lenient with the institution, and projects a false image of diversity compliance. From a perspective that is more oriented toward equity and justice (Squire, 2017), this could prevent essential work from being done.

With regard to the content of diversity agendas, the results of the present study reveal some interesting elements. On the one hand, there are strong leanings in the legislation toward justifying, explaining, and promoting the undertaking of actions. This indicates the *top-down* direction of policies, from the moment of agreement and international, European, and national jurisprudence, up until their concretion and delivery in educational institutions (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2019). Barely any references exist in relation to local initiatives addressing student demands or referring to the achievements of social or civil movements beyond actions initiated at the behest of regulations.

On the other hand, with regard to groups at the receiving end of such actions, results point to students as priority agents to which we must pay more attention. Although mentioned in an incipient way in the discursive field of inequality, the debate fails to transcend allusions to other members of the university community such as

teaching or non-teaching staff. This issue determines the reference made to distance markers when defining diversity. These are signals or pointers that define and identify groups as “others” relative to the recognized “we”. In this sense, diversity discourse in public Andalusian universities has not yet permeated through to the exercise of leadership itself, but to those who engage in leadership and, fundamentally, guide the academic development of students. Thus, the debate is moving away from ponderings about the representativeness of governance leaders, whilst also distancing itself from analytical models that deepen understanding of how one’s own social experience (through gender, class, ethnicity, disability) crosses with and determines the exercise of diversity policies. Aspects have been indicated in studies at American universities with respect to racial differences (Chin et al., 2016; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Santamaría, 2014; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016; Squire, 2017), whilst in Spain, so far, only gender differences have been uncovered (Cuevas-López & Díaz-Rosas, 2015).

By designating students who could be the object of policies, there is an exceptional emergence of the concept of diversity associated with disability, and equality between males and females. As in other studies, results evidence that disability – as a diversity marker (indicator) – is serving as the main driving force behind inclusive policies at Spanish universities (Benet-Gil, 2020; Moriña, 2015). This projects agendas with two fundamental characteristics. First, they seek to identify diversity markers. In any case, these are selective and end up identifying the individual (whether in an individual or collective way), and direct the agenda toward individuals as opposed to the institution and its processes (seen in the present study in agendas that take a naturalization perspective). Second, they have a prevailing remedial and restorative nature toward the individuals and groups at the heart of the policies (as shown in the present study via the discourse in difference agendas). Both elements show that relative

agendas suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity in not being able to demonstrate the complexity of processes behind inequality between institutional members, nor do they show the point from which these processes may be tackled (Klein, 2016). From a critical perspective, our most recent research on inequality discourse provides stark evidence of the contradictions that can result from affirmative action policies. These insights, which still have little presence in the examination of inclusive policies at Spanish universities, would enhance our understanding of social and systematic processes from a more complex perspective. Further, such insights would facilitate analysis of the role of the institution, and organizational, cultural and social processes with regard to the emphasis placed on individuals and their deficits (Aguirre & Martinez, 2006; Goldstein & Meisenbach, 2017; Thomas, 2018).

## **Conclusions**

The present work shows that descriptions and justifications of approaches to diversity policy at public universities in Spain are not uniform. The autonomy of public universities in the country allows for such multiplicity of actions. These reveal differing conceptions not only about diversity but also, as a result, about the service and mission of the educational institution. The discourse of leaders in the present study describes and justifies diversity agendas, thus revealing standpoints about the potential of higher education as a social and symbolic resource to overcome social inequalities. Clearly, there is a higher prevalence of certain agendas over others, and this research identifies the traits inherent to each of them. Taken together, these findings contribute to the analysis of the current state of diversity policies at public Spanish universities in the current context of international competition. The justification, reach, and proposals of actions presented could serve to guide the university community and, in particular its leaders, through the different decision-making processes relating to diversity.

The present study faced certain challenges when arranging interviews with some leaders. Reasons given were always a lack of time and not a lack of interest in the research. These limitations could be overcome should we seek to replicate the process, striving also to avoid accounts that 'toe the party line' or are deemed to be desired on account of being given.

New lines of analysis are bringing to light findings that enable the direction of policies to be understood in greater depth. Examples include analysis of the specific trajectory of certain leaders regarding issues related to diversity, equity and social justice, alongside the pros and cons of one discursive field over another framed by their personal experiences and social factors, and the organizational culture within which they develop.

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Table 1. Description of study contexts

University	A	B	C	D	E
Founding	1.972	1.531	1.993	1.972	1.979
Faculties and Schools	10	26	9	19	19
Bachelor degrees	34	89	36	64	69
Official Masters Programs	46	108	38	72	50
Doctoral Programs	11	28	11	21	18
Undergraduate students	14.511	47.096	9.531	30.943	20.124*
Postgraduate students	3.323	8.862	1.132	4.845	2.258*
Academic and research staff	1.806	3.621	910	3.255	1.713
<b>Administrative and support staff</b>	760	2.345	460	1.995	830

Note: Data corresponds to the 2018/2019 academic year unless indicated with\*, which corresponds to the 2019/2020 academic year

Authors' own

Table 2. Identification code of the leaders interviewed (University, leadership level, gender, date of interview)

<b>Universities</b>	<b>Leadership level</b>	<b>Identification code</b>
A	Chancellor	A_Chancellor_M_21-10-2019
	Vice-chancellor	A_Vice-chancellor_M_04-04-2018
		A_Vice-chancellor_W_04-04-2018
	Specific Services Management	A_SSM_M_19-03-2018
		A_SSM_W_12-04-2018
	Student Leadership	A_Student_M_10-04-2018
	Administrative and support staff	A_Staff_W_08/10/2018
A_Staff_M_15-03-2018		
B	Vice-chancellor	B_Vice-chancellor_W_14-03-2019
		B_Vice-chancellor_M_04-06-2019
	Student Leadership	B_Student_M_14-03-2019
		B_Student_M_04-07-2019
	Administrative and support staff	B_Staff_M_09-04-2019
B_Staff_M_04-07-2019		
C	Chancellor	C_Chancellor_W_14-01-2020
	Vice-chancellor	C_Vice-chancellor_W_02-05-2019
	Specific Services Management	C_SSM(1)_M_02-05-2019
		C_SSM(2)_M_02-05-2019
		C_SSM(3)_M_02-05-2019
Administrative and support staff	C_Staff_M_02-05-2019	
D	Vice-chancellor	D_Vice-chancellor_M_12-09-2019
	Specific Services Management	D_SSM_W_17-09-2019
		D_Student(1)_M_26/09/2019
	Student Leadership	D_Student(2)_M_26/09/2019



	Administrative and support staff	D_Staff(1)_W_17-09-2019 D_Staff(2)_W_17-09-2019
E	Chancellor	E_Chancellor_M_31-10-2019
	Vice-chancellor	E_Vice-chancellor_W_30-10-2019
		E_Vice-chancellor_M_31-10-2019
	Specific Services Management	E_SSM_M_31-10-2019
	Student Leadership	E_Student_M_30/10/2019
E_Student_W_30/10/2019		
<i>Total</i>		32 interviews (20 males /12 females)

Authors' own

Table 3. *Discursive dimensions in university agendas according to their orientation: naturalization, difference and inequality*

Dimensions	Naturalization	Difference	Inequality
Reach of policies	Conservative: proportionate, achievement	In process: Specific and specialized	Incipient: Under constant review
Motivation to which practices respond	Weariness, bureaucratic burden and cost of resources. Alleged equal treatment	Avant-guard legislation and inertia (somebody else will do it)	Alternative models to those already existing. Imagining the university for bodies that have never been
Stance with respect to the institution	Complacent	Complacent. Benevolent	Critical
Proposals	Homogeneous treatment, inaction (unnecessary)	Excellence indicator. Continuity of action	Proactive actions for institutional and social change
Conception of diversity	Individuality, singularity	Differences between groups focused on disability, gender, income	Structural, permeability between society and the institution

Authors' own