

Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) in Higher Education Governance: A Conceptual Framework for Equity, Belonging, and Institutional Responsibility

By Benja Stig Fagerland & Gillian Warner-Söderholm[±]*

Higher education institutions continue to face persistent inequities despite decades of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) commitments. This conceptual article addresses a specific governance gap: DEIB language identifies important normative aims but often leaves under-specified how those aims become institutional responsibilities, organizational mechanisms, and accountability arrangements. Building on the conceptual lineage of Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) and synthesizing six complementary theoretical lenses - intersectionality, stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, social justice, the resource-based view, and the Burke-Litwin model of organizational change - the article develops a higher-education-specific CDR Governance-Embedding Framework. The framework links core governance principles to organizational mechanisms and institutional outcome domains. It is not presented as an empirically validated implementation model or universal recipe, but as an analytical architecture for examining how inclusion commitments are embedded, contested, reviewed, and sustained. By positioning CDR relative to CSR, ESG, DEIB, and inclusive governance, and by making its theory-to-framework derivation explicit, the article offers a conceptually bounded framework for research, governance reflection, and leadership education.

Keywords: Higher education governance, Corporate Diversity Responsibility, DEIB, institutional responsibility, conceptual framework

Introduction

Universities and colleges have long adopted diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) commitments in policy statements, strategic plans, and public communication. Yet the persistence of inequities in access, progression, leadership representation, and academic participation suggests that such commitments are often unevenly institutionalized. This is especially visible in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) pathways, in faculty recruitment and promotion, and in senior leadership structures, where stratified outcomes continue to mirror wider social hierarchies rather than the formal inclusion ambitions of institutions (Castle et al., 2024; Dewidar, Elmetekawy, & Welch, 2022; Corneille et al., 2019; Liu, Brown, & Sabat, 2019).

Recent higher education scholarship also shows that DEIB governance is unfolding in an increasingly contested environment. Legislative attacks on DEI

*Associate Professor, University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), Norway.

[±]Professor, University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), Norway.

initiatives, growing pressure on academic units to justify inclusion work, and tensions between excellence, autonomy, and inclusion have made equity governance more fragile and more strategically important. In this context, universities need governance arrangements that can legitimize, protect, and sustain inclusion commitments rather than leaving them vulnerable to political cycles or symbolic retreat (Harper, 2025; Moser et al., 2025; Rall et al., 2025).

In higher education, inclusion is not reducible to admissions or representation alone. It concerns who is heard in decision-making, whose knowledge is recognized, how support systems are designed, whether academic and professional staff encounter equitable progression conditions, and whether institutional cultures enable belonging across differences (Lindsay, 2003; Moríña, 2017; Taff & Clifton, 2022). A recurring problem in the literature is that universities frequently respond to inequity through isolated programs, short-term projects, or performative signaling rather than through integrated governance arrangements capable of producing structural change (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Hellerstedt, Uman, & Wennberg, 2024).

The central problem addressed here is therefore not an absence of diversity discourse. It is a governance-embedding gap. This gap overlaps with what institutional scholarship describes as policy-practice decoupling: formal commitments can become disconnected from organizational practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). The distinction here is analytical rather than terminological. Decoupling characterizes the condition; the governance-embedding problem asks where responsibility sits, which organizational mechanisms connect commitment to practice, and how those arrangements can be reviewed and revised. Non-embedding is not always an oversight: it can also be produced or maintained where embedding would redistribute resources, authority, voice, or academic standing. Existing scholarship offers well-developed accounts of inequity, belonging, participation, organizational change, and institutional responsibility, but these strands are rarely brought together to specify this governance architecture for the hybrid institutional conditions of higher education.

Accordingly, the purpose of this conceptual article is to develop and justify a CDR-informed governance-embedding framework for higher education. It addresses a guiding conceptual question: What governance architecture can connect DEIB commitments to identifiable institutional responsibilities, organizational embedding mechanisms, and reviewable outcome domains in higher education? CDR is not advanced as a wholly new standalone theory. Rather, it is reconstructed as an integrative governance lens that connects normative commitments to institutional design, leadership accountability, and learning-oriented review. The framework is developed through theoretical synthesis and contextual adaptation, not empirical testing.

Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) was first conceptualized and introduced by Fagerland in 2015 in the SHEconomy framework (Fagerland & Rambøl, 2015). Subsequent scholarship articulated CDR as a governance-oriented approach to embedding diversity and inclusion beyond compliance-based or symbolic measures (Fagerland & Drejer, 2018), while later work connected the concept to resilience and sustainability debates (Fagerland & Bleveans, 2025). The present article extends that lineage into higher education, where public mission,

collegial governance, academic autonomy, student participation, and external accountability require contextual adaptation rather than direct transfer from corporate settings.

The article makes three contributions. First, it positions a CDR-informed approach relative to CSR, ESG, DEIB, and inclusive governance, clarifying the specific governance-embedding problem the framework is designed to address. Second, it makes the framework's derivation explicit by showing how six theoretical lenses generate distinct but complementary governance implications that are translated into principles, mechanisms, and outcome domains. Third, it develops a relational, higher-education-specific framework that can support scholarly analysis, empirical examination, institutional reflection, and teaching without being presented as a universal implementation recipe. The argument proceeds from the governance-embedding problem and conceptual positioning, through framework development, to analytical illustrations, implications, and boundary conditions.

Conceptual Background: The Governance-Embedding Problem

Persistent Inequities and the Limits of Fragmented DEIB Work

Research across higher education has repeatedly shown that inclusion initiatives often coexist with durable forms of exclusion. Students from marginalized backgrounds may gain formal access while still encountering inaccessible curricula, weak support structures, biased assessment practices, or a lack of belonging. Similar dynamics affect academic and professional staff, who may face underrepresentation, opaque promotion structures, and institutional cultures that reward conformity to established norms (Dewidar, Elmostekawy, & Welch, 2022; Moríña, 2017; Yang, Wang, & Xiu, 2025; Wilson, Ghosh, & Jason, 2026).

The belonging literature is particularly important here. Large reviews show that belonging in higher education is multidimensional, involving connectedness to peers, staff, and institution, feeling safe, being valued, and embracing diversity; these factors are consistently linked to student engagement, wellbeing, retention, and academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2024; Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Nguyễn et al., 2026; van Kessel et al., 2025). At the same time, Dias-Broens, Meeuwisse, and Severiens (2024) show that belonging is measured inconsistently across studies, which strengthens the case for governance frameworks that connect climate evidence to institutional review rather than treating belonging as a vague aspirational term.

Studies of inclusive climate further suggest that seemingly local practices can have institution-wide significance. Supportive faculty behavior, transparent support services, inclusive policies, and identity safety cues in classrooms and course materials can strengthen belonging and reduce exclusionary experiences, especially for students with marginalized identities (Taff & Clifton, 2022; Howansky, Maimon, & Sanchez, 2022; Maimon, Howansky, & Sanchez, 2023). This implies that DEIB cannot be confined to high-level strategy alone; it also depends on

whether governance creates conditions under which inclusive climates can be sustained across departments, programs, and pedagogical sites. Evidence from Norway similarly suggests that inclusion and exclusion shape the experiences and mental wellbeing of academic staff, not only students, underscoring that climate and belonging are institution-wide governance concerns (Alhassan, Kuyini, Mangope, & Major, 2024).

Within this landscape, institutions commonly adopt initiatives such as bias training, targeted recruitment, diversity committees, or strategic diversity statements. These efforts may be valuable, but their impact is often limited when they remain detached from core governance processes. Diversity work can therefore become episodic, peripheral, or overly dependent on committed individuals rather than on stable institutional arrangements. Ahmed and Swan (2006) describe how diversity language can circulate as an institutional performance without necessarily transforming underlying relations. More recent work similarly warns that diversity initiatives can coexist with symbolic compliance or even exacerbate inequity when they are weakly embedded and poorly aligned with organizational routines (Baker et al., 2024; Hellerstedt, Uman, & Wennberg, 2024).

This challenge is especially important for higher education because universities must balance educational inclusion with academic freedom, disciplinary identity, resource constraints, and public expectations of fairness. When institutions treat DEIB as an add-on rather than as a governance question, inclusion work is often pushed to the margins of leadership, budgeting, staffing, and curriculum review. The result is a governance-embedding gap described above: values are voiced, but responsibility remains diffuse. Comparative work in indigenous and intercultural higher education in Latin America likewise shows that equity and diversity are mediated by institutional arrangements, public policy, and internationalization, rather than by representation alone (Didou Aupetit, 2015).

Governance, Responsibility, and Accountability in Universities

The idea that higher education institutions have social responsibilities is well established. Universities are expected to advance knowledge, support democratic participation, widen opportunity, and contribute to public good. Yet the governance implications of these responsibilities are often underspecified. Hayter and Cahoy (2018) argue that higher education institutions require dynamic capacities to respond to social responsibilities in strategic rather than merely symbolic ways. From this perspective, responsibility is not only a normative commitment; it is also an institutional capability involving structures, leadership practices, and coordinated action.

Governance in higher education differs from governance in many corporate settings. University leaders operate in environments where legitimacy depends not only on performance metrics but also on fairness, representation, procedural integrity, and the perceived compatibility of change with academic values. Leaders must navigate multiple sources of authority, including executive management, collegial bodies, external regulators, students, professional staff, and disciplinary communities. A governance framework for DEIB in universities must therefore

recognize tensions between autonomy and accountability, merit and equity, collegial participation and executive coordination, as well as local disciplinary logics and institution-wide commitments.

A growing body of higher education research further suggests that governing boards play a critical strategic role in legitimizing and protecting DEIB commitments, particularly under conditions of political contestation. Boards can act as institutional umbrellas that authorize, shelter, or constrain inclusion agendas, while also reflecting tensions between representation, institutional reputation, and competing governance logics (Cho & Cesar-Davis, 2022; Brekken, Bernick, Gourrier, & Kellogg, 2021; Rall, Morgan, & Commodore, 2019; Rall et al., 2025). This board-level dimension matters because DEIB governance in universities is shaped not only by executive leadership and middle management, but also by who holds formal governing authority, whose interests are represented, and how legitimacy is publicly constructed.

Leadership scholarship reinforces this point. Diversity and equity change in higher education depends not only on formal declarations but on strategic diversity leadership, shared equity work, and organizational restructuring that aligns mission, incentives, and accountability across levels of the institution (Adserias, Charleston, & Jackson, 2017; Williams, 2013; Kezar, Holcombe, Harper, & Ueda, 2023; Zhao et al., 2024).

These tensions help explain why higher education often oscillates between ambitious DEIB rhetoric and uneven implementation. Accountability can become metric-heavy and detached from lived experience, while inclusive aspirations can remain normatively compelling yet operationally weak. A useful conceptual framework must therefore connect responsibility, legitimacy, and organizational embedding without collapsing into either abstract normativity or narrow managerialism. This is the analytical space in which a CDR-informed framework becomes useful.

What a CDR-Informed Approach Adds Beyond Related Constructs

The case for a CDR-informed approach rests on a specific conceptual gap rather than on a claim to replace existing constructs. CSR foregrounds institutional responsibility but is not designed primarily to specify how equity is embedded in university governance. ESG strengthens transparency and external scrutiny but can privilege reporting logics over institutional processes and lived inclusion. DEIB names the substantive aims of equity, inclusion, and belonging but does not in itself locate governance responsibility or specify embedding mechanisms. Inclusive governance foregrounds participation and representation but often says less about capability alignment, organizational learning, and accountable follow-through. A CDR-informed approach is useful to the extent that it connects these concerns within one governance architecture.

The distinct contribution is therefore integrative and organizational: it links normative aims to sites of responsibility, mechanisms of institutional embedding, and domains of review. This makes it possible to examine not only whether an institution endorses inclusion, but how that commitment is resourced, coordinated,

contested, monitored, and revised. Table 1 summarizes this positioning by comparing the primary focus, strengths, and limitations of adjacent constructs and specifying the added analytical role of a CDR-informed governance lens.

Table 1. What a CDR-Informed Approach Adds Beyond Related Constructs

Construct	Primary focus	Typical strength	Main limitation in higher education	What a CDR-informed approach adds
CSR	Institutional responsibility and ethical conduct	Highlights obligations beyond narrow performance	Not designed primarily to specify how equity is embedded in university governance	Narrows responsibility to the governance architecture of inclusion
ESG	Reporting, accountability, and external scrutiny	Strengthens transparency and measurable oversight	Can privilege reporting logics over institutional processes and lived inclusion	Links accountability to internal governance, learning, and decision-making
DEIB	Substantive goals of equity, inclusion, and belonging	Names the normative aims of institutional change	Does not in itself specify governance sites, leadership responsibility, or organizational embedding	Translates DEIB goals into principles, mechanisms, and accountable institutional responsibilities
Inclusive governance	Participation, representation, and procedural fairness	Emphasizes voice and decision-making inclusion	Often under-specifies capability alignment, organizational learning, and implementation conditions	Retains inclusive governance as one principle while adding strategic embedding, capability alignment, and reflexive review
CDR-informed framework	Institutional responsibility for embedding DEIB	Connects justice, legitimacy, innovation, and organizational change	Context-dependent and not a universal implementation recipe	Provides a higher education-specific governance architecture for embedding and reviewing DEIB commitments

Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.

Origins and Higher Education Adaptation of CDR

The relevant question for this article is not whether a corporate governance concept can be imported into universities unchanged, but what must change when it is reconstructed for institutions whose legitimacy rests on public mission, collegial authority, academic freedom, student participation, and external accountability. The CDR lineage established in the Introduction therefore functions here as a point of departure rather than as a claim of invention (Fagerland & Rambøl, 2015; Fagerland & Drejer, 2018; Fagerland & Bleveans, 2025).

In this setting, a CDR-informed approach is treated as a governance architecture for embedding DEIB in strategy, structures, climate, review processes, and institutional learning - not as a branded corporate template.

Conceptual Approach and Framework Development

Problem-Driven Conceptual Synthesis

This article is a conceptual framework paper based on problem-focused theoretical synthesis and context-specific adaptation rather than original empirical data. In line with guidance on conceptual research, the design starts from a clearly specified problem and makes explicit the role played by each theory in constructing the argument (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020). The paper combines theory synthesis with theory adaptation: it integrates literatures that explain different parts of the governance-embedding problem while reconstructing CDR for the institutional conditions of higher education.

The literatures drawn on were chosen for the analytical work they perform rather than for exhaustive coverage. Each had to explain one link in the movement from patterned inequity and normative commitment to governance responsibility, organizational embedding, and reviewable outcome domains. Each theoretical lens was therefore required to perform a distinct task: diagnose a dimension of the problem, yield a governance implication, and justify an element of the framework. Table 2 makes this translation explicit. The aim is analytical coherence and explanatory coverage, not effect estimation or a systematic-review claim.

The illustrative scenarios are analytical probes rather than data. Following the logic of theory elaboration in conceptual research (Jaakkola, 2020), they make tensions in higher education governance visible without functioning as empirical validation. Their role is to show how the framework directs attention to responsibility, mechanism, and institutional consequence in recognizable governance dilemmas while preserving the conceptual status of the article.

The framework is intentionally bounded. It is not claimed to be exhaustive or universally applicable across institutional and national contexts. Its purpose is to provide a clear conceptual architecture that can guide future empirical work, comparative analysis, and context-sensitive institutional adaptation.

Theoretical Foundations and Integrative Mechanism

The six theoretical lenses perform distinct analytical jobs rather than operating as a loose collection of perspectives. Intersectionality diagnoses how inequity is patterned across overlapping axes of identity and power (Crenshaw, 1989; Armstrong & Jovanovic, 2015). Stakeholder theory locates the multiple constituencies to whom universities are responsible and clarifies why voice cannot be reduced to executive preference or market logic (Freeman, 2010). Legitimacy theory explains why alignment between institutional claims and lived practice matters for credibility, trust, and social acceptance (Suchman, 1995). Social justice supplies normative criteria for evaluating fairness in access, participation, and resource distribution (Rawls, 1971). The resource-based view is used narrowly to consider the institutional conditions under which heterogeneous knowledge and perspectives can contribute to learning and problem-solving; it does not make inclusion contingent on demonstrated performance returns (Wernerfelt, 1984). The Burke-Litwin model is adopted as a map of organizational sites and levels at which commitments become embedded, not as the causal path model proposed in its original formulation; the framework borrows its organizational architecture, not its directional predictions (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Their integration is therefore functional: no single lens spans the full movement from diagnosis of inequity to organizational embedding and review.

Recent higher education scholarship sharpens several of these links. Research on women of color faculty in STEM shows that single-axis approaches routinely miss compounded barriers in mentoring, promotion, workload, and leadership advancement, underscoring why governance frameworks must attend to intersectional patterns rather than generic diversity categories (Ireland et al., 2018; Corneille et al., 2019; Liu, Brown, & Sabat, 2019). At the same time, reviews of gender identity representation in STEM higher education research reveal that most studies still rely on binary measurement, which limits how institutions diagnose exclusion and design inclusive responses (Ross, 2025).

Belonging research also extends the governance logic of the framework. If belonging is shaped by safety, recognition, connectedness, and inclusive climates, then institutions cannot treat it as a purely individual outcome; it becomes an organizational responsibility mediated by policy, pedagogy, leadership, and review mechanisms (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Allen et al., 2024; Taff & Clifton, 2022). This is one reason a governance architecture is useful: it links structural equity concerns to everyday educational environments in which inclusion is actually experienced.

Taken together, these theories support an analytical sequence rather than a causal model. Structural inequities are expressed as exclusion and unequal participation; these patterns are interpreted institutionally as stakeholder, legitimacy, and justice pressures; response at that register requires organizational embedding rather than isolated initiatives; and the consequences of such embedding are matters for review and empirical examination. A CDR-informed framework is therefore justified not because it invents a wholly new theory, but because it specifies the governance architecture that connects these analytical levels.

Higher education changes the meaning of these lenses rather than serving as a neutral application site. Stakeholder plurality is mediated by collegial authority and student participation; legitimacy is tied to public mission and academic values; accountability must coexist with academic freedom; and organizational change is distributed across boards, executives, faculties, departments, and professional services (Hayter & Cahoy, 2018; Wise, Dickinson, Katan, & Gallegos, 2020; Williams, 2013). Contextual adaptation is therefore part of the theoretical work: the framework asks how responsibility can be embedded without collapsing hybrid university governance into a corporate command model.

Framework Derivation

The framework is derived through a theory-to-framework translation rather than by simple aggregation of concepts. The first layer consists of core governance principles: commitments required for a credible response to structural inequity while preserving institutional legitimacy and public mission. The second layer consists of organizational mechanisms: the sites within institutional architecture where those commitments must be embedded if they are to shape practice. The third layer consists of institutional outcome domains: areas in which the consequences and credibility of a CDR-informed approach can be reviewed without reducing inclusion to narrow performance metrics. Table 2 makes this derivation transparent by linking each theoretical lens to the problem diagnosed, governance implication, framework element, and an illustrative higher education question.

The value of this derivation is that it makes the framework theoretically generated rather than merely assembled. The elements are analytically distinct but relational. The four outcome domains are specified by the synthesis as a whole rather than attributed one-to-one to individual theories, because they are the domains in which the credibility and consequences of governance embedding become open to empirical examination.

Table 2. Theory-to-Framework Derivation

Theoretical lens	Problem diagnosed	Governance implication	Framework element(s) most directly informed	Illustrative higher education question
Intersectionality	Inequity is patterned across overlapping identities and institutional hierarchies	Governance must identify structurally differentiated exclusion	Principle: systemic equity; Mechanisms: inclusive climate and voice; reflexive learning and review	Whose experiences remain invisible in policy, curriculum, and career progression?
Stakeholder theory	Universities are accountable to multiple constituencies	Institutions need participatory and responsive governance	Principle: inclusive governance; Mechanisms: inclusive climate and voice; structural accountability	Who is included in decisions that shape inclusion and belonging?

Theoretical lens	Problem diagnosed	Governance implication	Framework element(s) most directly informed	Illustrative higher education question
Legitimacy theory	Credibility depends on alignment between institutional claims and social expectations	Equity work must be credible, transparent, and accountable	Principle: institutional revisability; Mechanisms: strategic embedding; structural accountability; reflexive learning and review	Do public commitments to inclusion match lived institutional practice?
Social justice	Fairness concerns access, participation, and distribution of opportunities	Governance must evaluate rules and routines in normative as well as technical terms	Principle: systemic equity; Mechanisms: structural accountability; capability and incentive alignment	Which institutional arrangements systematically advantage some groups over others?
Resource-based view	Diverse perspectives can strengthen learning and adaptive capacity	Inclusion should be linked to institutional learning and innovation	Principle: innovation through diversity; Mechanism: capability and incentive alignment	Under what institutional conditions can heterogeneous perspectives contribute to educational problem-solving, and what is foreclosed when they are not?
Burke-Litwin model	Commitments can remain disconnected from organizational systems and levels	Principles must be located in organizational sites and made revisable through feedback	Principle: institutional revisability; Mechanisms: strategic embedding; structural accountability; reflexive learning and review	Where must equity commitments be embedded, and where can review revise the arrangements that carry them?

Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.

The CDR Governance-Embedding Framework for Higher Education

Framework Architecture

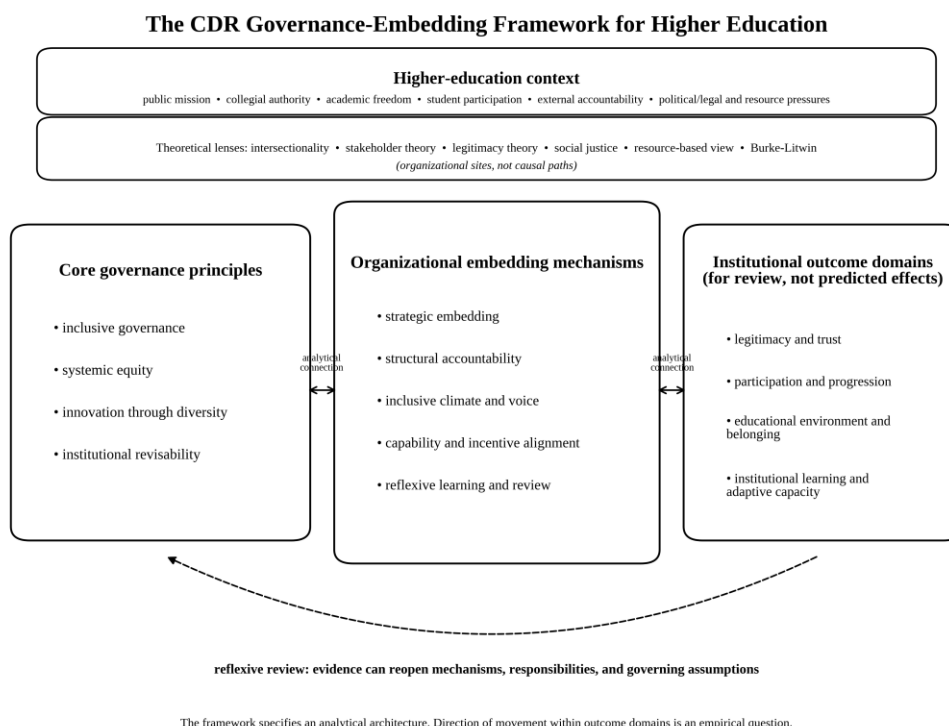
The framework is organized as three linked but non-causally ordered layers: core governance principles, organizational mechanisms, and institutional outcome domains.

The framework is an analytical architecture rather than a technocratic blueprint. It examines how higher education institutions connect DEIB commitments to governance by linking normative principles to organizational embedding. This makes it possible to ask not only whether an institution endorses inclusion, but where responsibility sits, how practice is coordinated, how contradictions are handled, and what counts as credible institutional follow-through.

Figure 1 presents the framework within the institutional conditions of higher education and shows the six theoretical lenses used in its derivation. The three core layers are connected analytically rather than as a one-way causal chain: reflexive review is intended to feed evidence back into principles, mechanisms, and

subsequent institutional decisions. The direction of movement within the outcome domains is an empirical question, not a prediction of the framework.

Figure 1. The CDR Governance-Embedding Framework for Higher Education



Source: Authors' conceptualization.

Core Governance Principles

The first principle is inclusive governance. This principle concerns who participates in decisions, how voice is structured, and whether institutional processes enable meaningful representation across students, staff, and leadership levels. It treats inclusion as a matter of governance design, not simply demographic presence. Research on higher education boards and shared governance suggests that representation, stakeholder participation, and inclusive decision architecture affect whether equity agendas are authorized, protected, and regarded as legitimate (Wise, Dickinson, Katan, & Gallegos, 2020; Brekken, Bernick, Gourrier, & Kellogg, 2021; Rall et al., 2025).

The second principle is systemic equity. Rather than focusing only on interpersonal inclusion or descriptive diversity, this principle addresses rules, routines, and distributions that reproduce exclusion. It asks whether the institution confronts structural barriers in recruitment, promotion, curriculum, evaluation, and access to opportunity. Work on equitable evaluation and institutional transformation shows that transparent criteria, co-created review processes, and recognition of DEIB-related labor are central to moving from symbolic commitment to structural change (Posselt et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2024; O'Rourke, 2008).

The third principle is innovation through diversity. Here diversity is not framed instrumentally as a branding device, but as a source of broader institutional learning, intellectual pluralism, and problem-solving capacity. In universities, this matters because complex educational and societal challenges require multiple perspectives and inclusive knowledge production. Strategic diversity leadership scholarship and work on university social responsibility both suggest that diverse participation can strengthen institutional learning when it is supported by aligned structures, resources, and leadership commitment (Williams, 2013; Sturm, Eatman, Saltmarsh, & Bush, 2011; Hayter & Cahoy, 2018). This principle does not make equity conditional on demonstrable performance gains; it recognizes learning and capability as additional institutional consequences of inclusion rather than as its normative justification.

The fourth principle is institutional revisability. Universities operate in changing legal, political, demographic, and pedagogical environments, so governance arrangements must remain open to critique, evidence, and revision without abandoning commitments to fairness and academic integrity. Revisability is a governing commitment: it concerns whether the institution can reopen rules, responsibilities, and assumptions when they generate exclusion or lose legitimacy. It is therefore distinct from the later outcome domain of institutional learning and adaptive capacity, which concerns what can be observed about institutional capability over time (Harper, 2025; Moser et al., 2025).

These principles should be read together rather than independently. Inclusive governance without systemic equity may widen participation while leaving structural barriers intact. Systemic equity without institutional revisability may harden interventions that no longer fit institutional realities. Innovation through diversity without justice criteria can become instrumental. The principles therefore provide the normative and strategic logic of the framework as a whole.

Organizational Mechanisms

The framework specifies five higher-order mechanisms through which governance commitments become institutionally embedded. The first mechanism is strategic embedding. This refers to whether DEIB commitments are visible in mission, strategy, resource allocation, and executive responsibility. Equity cannot remain an ancillary office or occasional initiative; it must be anchored in institutional direction and formal leadership responsibility. The second mechanism is structural accountability. This includes governance committees, role clarity, reporting relationships, appointment structures, review processes, and institutional systems for monitoring progress. It concerns how responsibility is distributed and how decisions are made visible and contestable. The third mechanism is inclusive climate and voice. This mechanism captures departmental culture, psychological safety, staff and student feedback, and opportunities to raise concerns without penalty. It recognizes that formal policies are insufficient when institutional climates silence critique or narrow belonging. Reviews of belonging and inclusive climate in higher education consistently show that receptive faculty, support services, identity safety cues, and inclusive policies are major facilitators of belonging for students,

faculty, and staff (Allen et al., 2024; Taff & Clifton, 2022; Wilson, Ghosh, & Jason, 2026).

This point is reinforced by experimental and classroom-based studies showing that identity safety cues can improve students' sense of belonging, perceptions of instructors, and attendance. The implication is not that small classroom signals can substitute for institutional reform, but that governance arrangements should create conditions in which such signals are supported, expected, and aligned with broader institutional commitments (Howansky, Maimon, & Sanchez, 2022; Maimon, Howansky, & Sanchez, 2023).

The fourth mechanism is capability and incentive alignment. This refers to recruitment practices, professional development, workload recognition, promotion criteria, and incentive systems. If institutions expect inclusive teaching, mentoring, and leadership, then these forms of labor must be recognized, developed, and rewarded. Studies of inclusive faculty development, diversity-infused professional learning, and equitable performance evaluation suggest that inclusion work becomes more durable when it is built into development pathways and review criteria rather than left as invisible or voluntary labor (Smith et al., 2024; Tang, Chaemchoy, & Siribanpitak, 2025; Kim, Kong, & Tirotta-Esposito, 2023).

The fifth mechanism is reflexive learning and review. Universities need mechanisms through which inclusion-related data, lived experience, and stakeholder feedback lead to adjustment. This includes equity review processes, transparent communication of findings, and willingness to revise structures that are producing unintended exclusion.

These mechanisms also interact. Strategic embedding without capability alignment produces aspiration without delivery. Structural accountability without reflexive learning can devolve into compliance routines. Inclusive climate without executive follow-through may surface concerns without changing institutional conditions. The analytical value of the framework lies in revealing these dependencies. Table 3 translates the five mechanisms into typical institutional expressions, governance risks when a mechanism is absent, and questions that can guide institutional review without turning the framework into a scoring instrument.

Table 3. Organizational Mechanisms, Governance Risks, and Review Questions

Mechanism	Typical institutional expressions	Governance risk if absent	What institutional review could look for
Strategic embedding	Mission language, formal strategy, budget priorities, senior leadership mandates	DEIB remains peripheral, episodic, or dependent on individual champions	Where are DEIB commitments visible in strategy, resource allocation, and executive responsibility?
Structural accountability	Committee mandates, reporting lines, appointment criteria, review systems	Responsibility is diffuse and commitments are difficult to monitor or contest	Are roles, decision pathways, and review responsibilities explicit enough to make choices visible and contestable?

Mechanism	Typical institutional expressions	Governance risk if absent	What institutional review could look for
Inclusive climate and voice	Climate surveys, listening forums, psychological safety, student and staff consultation	Problems remain hidden and marginalized voices do not shape institutional learning	Can staff and students raise concerns, and is there visible follow-through on what is heard?
Capability and incentive alignment	Recruitment design, leadership development, promotion criteria, workload recognition	Inclusive labor is undervalued and implementation depends on unpaid or invisible work	Do recruitment, development, workload, and promotion systems recognize the inclusive work the institution expects?
Reflexive learning and review	Equity audits, feedback loops, periodic framework revision, public updates	Institutions collect data but fail to learn from it or adapt structures	Do review findings lead to documented adjustment of policies, structures, or decision routines?

Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.

Institutional Outcome Domains and Boundary Conditions

The framework does not reduce outcomes to simple numerical targets, although representation and retention remain relevant evidence. Instead, it identifies four institutional outcome domains in which the consequences and credibility of governance embedding can be examined: legitimacy and trust; participation and progression; educational environment and belonging; and institutional learning and adaptive capacity. The direction of movement within each domain is an empirical question, not a claim built into the framework.

These outcome domains are contingent rather than automatic. The framework is most relevant where institutions are prepared to treat resistance, contradiction, and uneven implementation as evidence for governance review rather than as noise to be managed away. Embedding can itself become a technology of containment when formal review absorbs criticism without allowing findings to alter the arrangements that produced it. The framework therefore treats reflexive learning and voice as meaningful only when they can revise practices, structures, responsibilities, and, where warranted, the governing assumptions themselves. Where review cannot change the arrangements under examination, the architecture is functioning as containment rather than learning.

A further boundary condition concerns institutional diversity. Research-intensive universities, small specialized institutions, and teaching-oriented colleges may all require different governance arrangements. The framework should therefore be used as an analytical architecture for contextual adaptation, not as a one-size-fits-all template.

Applying the Framework: Four Analytical Illustrations

The following illustrations function as analytical probes rather than empirical findings. Each isolates a different failure or tension in governance embedding and shows how the framework directs attention to responsibility, mechanism, and institutional consequence.

In one illustration, a university adopts a new DEIB strategy but leaves implementation to a central diversity office without embedding it in budgeting, dean-level mandates, or performance review. A CDR-informed reading would identify a gap in strategic embedding and structural accountability. The institution has articulated principles but has not established clear sites of responsibility. The framework would therefore direct attention to the risk of uneven implementation across faculties and dependence on isolated champions.

In a second illustration, faculty members resist a new inclusive curriculum initiative on the grounds that it threatens disciplinary autonomy. The framework treats resistance not simply as an obstacle to be managed, but as evidence that may expose a conflict among equity, academic freedom, disciplinary judgement, and institutional legitimacy. Deliberation may therefore justify revising the initiative itself as well as its implementation. A framework that can only absorb objection without changing course would reproduce the symbolic governance it is intended to diagnose.

In a third illustration, staff and students report exclusionary experiences through climate surveys, yet results are not communicated back and no departmental follow-up occurs. The framework identifies a failure of reflexive learning and voice. Feedback has been collected, but the institution has not converted voice into review, accountability, or organizational learning. This is a common institutional pattern in which consultation occurs without visible response.

In a fourth illustration, a university increases demographic diversity in leadership appointments while leaving promotion criteria, mentoring structures, and workload distribution unchanged. A CDR-informed analysis would suggest that representational gains have not yet been translated into systemic equity. The institution may become more visibly diverse while retaining practices that reproduce unequal progression and invisible labor.

Across these illustrations, the framework clarifies that inclusion is not a discrete intervention. It is a governance accomplishment requiring coordination across strategy, structure, climate, capability, and learning.

Discussion

Conceptual Contribution to Higher Education Literature

The principal contribution of this article is a governance-embedding account of how DEIB commitments can become institutionally consequential in higher education. Rather than presenting CDR as a new standalone theory, the paper reconstructs an existing governance concept for a hybrid institutional setting and

specifies its analytical logic through the relationship among principles, organizational mechanisms, and institutional outcomes. The contribution therefore lies in conceptual clarification, relational integration, and contextual adaptation.

A critical test of the framework is whether institutional embedding becomes the managerial capture that diversity scholarship has long warned against. Embedding is not treated here as an unqualified good: formal structures can absorb critique, routinize compliance, or preserve existing distributions of authority. The framework's defence against that risk lies in its relational logic and in institutional revisability - especially whether voice and reflexive review can alter the arrangements being reviewed rather than merely report on them. This is why mechanism failure is itself analytically meaningful rather than a simple implementation deficit.

For higher education scholarship, this relational approach bridges literatures that are often separated: inclusive education, organizational change, leadership studies, and institutional governance. It creates a vocabulary for discussing DEIB not only as a moral aspiration, but as a question of how institutions are organized, reviewed, and rendered accountable. It also resonates with calls to reframe higher education around democratic responsibility, civic engagement, and the common good rather than narrow instrumental performance alone (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2021).

Taken together, the framework advances three linked conceptual claims. First, equity commitments acquire institutional force only when normative principles are coupled to identifiable governance sites and responsibilities. Second, the five organizational mechanisms are complementary rather than substitutable: weakness in one mechanism can produce characteristic failure modes even when other mechanisms are present. Third, the outcome domains - legitimacy and trust; participation and progression; educational environment and belonging; and institutional learning and adaptive capacity - remain contingent on contextual fit and reflexive review rather than following directly from formal policy. Each claim can be examined empirically in comparative, longitudinal, or case-based research without changing the conceptual status of the present article.

Implications for Institutional Leadership and Teaching

For higher education leaders, the framework suggests that credible DEIB work requires more than symbolic commitment. It requires governing arrangements that specify responsibility, create channels for voice, and link inclusion to decision-making structures. This has practical implications for strategic planning, committee design, board composition, leadership development, promotion criteria, and institutional review. The board literature is especially relevant here: governing bodies can either widen or narrow the institutional space for DEIB by shaping legitimacy, oversight, and the distribution of strategic attention (Brekken, Bernick, Gourrier, & Kellogg, 2021; Cho & Cesar-Davis, 2022; Rall et al., 2025).

For teaching and learning environments, the framework underscores that climate and belonging should be treated as governance-relevant outcomes rather than as soft by-products. Systematic reviews and meta-analytic work indicate that belonging is associated with student wellbeing, retention, and academic outcomes,

while inclusive climates affect both students and staff (Allen et al., 2024; Gilani & Thomas, 2025; van Kessel et al., 2025; Wilson, Ghosh, & Jason, 2026). This makes it reasonable for institutions to connect climate review, staff development, mentoring, and curriculum design to broader governance and quality-assurance processes.

For policy and quality assurance discussions, the framework suggests that accountability should not be limited to headline metrics. Institutions need review processes that connect representation data with organizational mechanisms, stakeholder experience, and equitable evaluation. This implies a stronger relationship between internal governance review, quality enhancement, and equity-oriented institutional learning, including attention to mentoring, faculty evaluation, and departmental climate (Posselt et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2024; Le, Sok, & Heng, 2024; Gehreke, Schilling, & Kauffeld, 2024). This is also consistent with strategic work suggesting that institutional relevance and viability depend on how engaged learning and teaching are linked to broader institutional profiles and priorities (Baban, 2025).

For academic practice, the framework is also useful as a teaching resource. Because it connects governance theory, institutional mechanisms, and analytical illustrations, it can support teaching in higher education leadership, educational policy, organizational studies, and DEIB-focused courses. Its value lies in helping students and practitioners analyze tensions, responsibility, and institutional trade-offs rather than treating inclusion as a decontextualized list of good practices.

Conclusions

This conceptual article addressed a persistent problem in higher education: the gap between institutional DEIB commitments and the governance arrangements required to make those commitments credible, sustained, and accountable. In response, it developed a CDR-informed governance-embedding framework that links normative principles to organizational mechanisms and institutional outcome domains.

The framework does not claim to replace DEIB, CSR, ESG, or inclusive governance, nor does it present itself as an empirically validated implementation model. Its contribution is to clarify how equity commitments can be translated into identifiable sites of responsibility, embedded through interdependent organizational mechanisms, and examined through institutional outcome domains. This makes CDR analytically useful in higher education while preserving the concept's provenance and acknowledging the need for contextual adaptation.

The central argument is that inclusion becomes institutionally meaningful when it is embedded in strategy, structures, climate, capability, and reflexive review. For universities, this is not only an administrative concern. It is part of how institutions enact public mission, maintain legitimacy, and create educational environments in which participation and belonging are more equitably distributed.

Limitations and Future Research

The article has several limitations. First, it is conceptual and literature-derived; it does not empirically test the framework across institutional types or national systems. Second, its value depends on contextual adaptation. A CDR-informed approach may take different forms in research-intensive universities, teaching-oriented institutions, or highly centralized systems. Third, although the framework is designed to avoid narrow managerialism, tensions between accountability, measurement, autonomy, and instrumentalization remain and require empirical investigation. These limitations define the framework's boundary conditions rather than weaken its conceptual purpose.

Future research should examine how the framework travels across institutional contexts and policy regimes. Comparative studies could investigate how governance structures, board composition, and legislative environments shape the embedding of DEIB commitments in different systems of higher education. Case-based work could explore how the five mechanisms interact in particular faculties, disciplines, or leadership settings. There is also scope for developing evaluative tools that remain learning-oriented rather than compliance-driven and for testing whether board diversity, inclusive climate, and equitable review systems strengthen legitimacy, belonging, and institutional resilience over time (Brekken, Bernick, Gourrier, & Kellogg, 2021; Rall et al., 2025; Allen et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024).

A parallel pedagogical research agenda follows from the framework. Future work can examine how it supports reflective analysis of institutional dilemmas in leadership and governance education, including whether it helps learners distinguish symbolic commitment from embedded responsibility. Additional work should also examine whether more intersectionally precise data practices - including non-binary and gender-affirming measurement in STEM and faculty research - change how institutions diagnose inequity and design inclusion strategies (Ross, 2025).

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