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

Higher education institutions continue to face persistent inequities despite decades of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) commitments. Too often, these commitments remain fragmented, compliance-oriented, or symbolically expressed rather than embedded in governance, leadership, and organizational routines. This conceptual paper adapts Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) - first conceptualized and introduced by Fagerland in 2015 - for the specific governance conditions of universities. Drawing on intersectionality, stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, social justice, the resource-based view, and the Burke-Litwin model of organizational change, the article develops a CDR-informed framework that explains how DEIB commitments can be translated into institutional responsibility. The framework is organized around three layers: core governance principles, organizational mechanisms, and institutional outcomes. It clarifies what this approach adds beyond CSR, ESG, DEIB, and inclusive governance, and it illustrates the framework through short analytical scenarios from university settings. The article contributes a conceptually clear, higher-education-specific model that is analytically usable for research, governance reflection, and teaching.

Keywords: *higher education governance; Corporate Diversity Responsibility; DEIB; institutional responsibility; conceptual framework*

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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 et al. 2022; Corneille et al. 2019; Liu, Brown, and Sabat 2019).

Recent higher education scholarship also shows that DEIB governance is unfolding in an increasingly contested environment. Legislative attacks on DEI 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; Moriña 2017; Taff and 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 and Swan 2006; Hellerstedt, Uman, and Wennberg 2024).

The present article starts from the premise that the central gap is not the absence of diversity discourse in higher education. Rather, the gap lies in the absence of a clear governance framework that connects equity aspirations to institutional responsibility, leadership accountability, organizational design, and learning-oriented review. Existing language such as DEIB, inclusive education, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting each captures part of this terrain, but none fully specifies how equity commitments become embedded in the governance architecture of a hybrid higher education institution.

To address this gap, the paper develops a CDR-informed conceptual framework for higher education governance. In this article, Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) is not advanced as a wholly new standalone theory. Instead, it is reconstructed as a higher-order governance lens for translating DEIB commitments into institutional responsibilities, organizational mechanisms, and accountability arrangements. This reframing is important because it narrows the concept to what it can do analytically: it helps explain how diversity goals move from aspirational statements to embedded institutional practice.

Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) was first conceptualized and introduced by Fagerland in 2015 in the SHEconomy framework (Fagerland and Rambøl 2015). Subsequent scholarship further articulated CDR as a governance-oriented approach to embedding diversity and inclusion beyond compliance-based or symbolic measures (Fagerland and Drejer 2018), and recent work reiterates this conceptual origin while positioning CDR within broader debates on institutional resilience and sustainability (Fagerland and Bleveans 2025). That provenance matters, but this paper does not treat CDR as a proprietary model to be transferred into higher education unchanged. Universities differ fundamentally from corporations in public mission, collegial governance, academic autonomy, and legitimacy expectations. For that reason, the present article uses CDR in a contextually adapted way, as an interpretive and analytical framework for higher education rather than as a corporate template.

The article makes four contributions. First, it clarifies what a CDR-informed governance approach adds beyond related constructs such as CSR, ESG, DEIB, and inclusive governance. Second, it makes the provenance of CDR explicit by recognizing that the concept was initiated by Fagerland in 2015 while showing how it can be analytically adapted for higher education governance. Third, it offers a more explicit derivation of the framework by showing how six theoretical lenses

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jointly generate the model's principles, mechanisms, and outcomes. Fourth, it presents a structured, higher education-focused model that can be used both for scholarly analysis and for teaching in leadership, governance, and inclusion-oriented educational settings.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews literature on inequity, inclusion, and governance in higher education and positions a CDR-informed approach relative to related constructs. The methodology section then explains the conceptual design and theory synthesis. The results section presents the framework and its analytical logic. The discussion section explores the framework's contribution to higher education governance and illustrates its use through brief scenarios. The paper concludes with implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

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 et al. 2022; Moriña 2017; Yang, Wang, and Xiu 2025; Wilson, Ghosh, and 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 and 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 and Clifton 2022; Howansky, Maimon, and Sanchez 2022; Maimon, Howansky, and 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

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mental wellbeing of academic staff, not only students, underscoring that climate and belonging are institution-wide governance concerns (Alhassan et al. 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, and 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 persistent implementation gap: 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 (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.

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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 and Cesar-Davis 2022; Brekken et al. 2021; Rall, Morgan, and 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, and Jackson 2017; Williams and Tierney 2013; Kezar et al. 2023; Zhao et al. 2024). 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.

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

A central weakness in earlier versions of this manuscript was the risk that CDR could appear to be little more than a relabeling of existing constructs. This article addresses that concern directly. The value of a CDR-informed approach does not lie in claiming that it replaces CSR, ESG, DEIB, or inclusive governance. Its value lies in specifying the governance architecture through which equity commitments become embedded, resourced, monitored, and contested within higher education institutions.

CSR is useful in highlighting institutional responsibility, but it tends to be too broad to capture the specific governance demands of equity work in universities. ESG can strengthen accountability, yet it often privileges reporting logics over institutional processes and lived inclusion. DEIB defines the substantive goals of inclusion work but does not, on its own, specify how these goals are translated into governance responsibilities. Inclusive governance emphasizes participation and representation, but typically says less about organizational mechanisms, implementation sites, and accountability structures. A CDR-informed approach

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1 draws these strands together and locates them inside the governance realities of
2 higher education.
3
4 **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	Usually too broad 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	May 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 implementation mechanisms and organizational conditions	Adds 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

5 Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.
6
7 *Origins and Higher Education Adaptation of CDR*
8
9 CDR did not originate in this article. It was first conceptualized and introduced
10 by Fagerland in 2015 in the SHEconomy framework (Fagerland and Rambøl 2015).
11 This initial articulation matters because it establishes the term's conceptual
12 provenance and distinguishes the present article's task from one of invention. The
13 present contribution lies instead in specifying how that concept can be made
14 analytically precise for higher education governance. Academic work subsequently
15 developed CDR as a governance-oriented approach to embedding diversity,
16 inclusion, legitimacy, and organizational responsibility beyond compliance rhetoric

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(Fagerland and Drejer 2018), and more recent work reiterates that provenance while linking CDR to resilience and sustainability debates (Fagerland and Bleveans 2025).

For an education journal, the crucial issue is therefore not whether CDR has an identifiable origin - it does - but whether it can be productively adapted to the institutional realities of universities. This article argues that it can. Higher education institutions are hybrid organizations in which public mission, collegial decision-making, academic freedom, student participation, and external accountability intersect. A CDR-informed approach becomes useful in this setting when it is treated not as a branded transfer from the corporate sector, but as a governance architecture for embedding DEIB in strategy, structures, climate, review processes, and institutional learning.

This distinction between provenance and adaptation is also pedagogically valuable. Because the framework preserves the concept's original lineage while translating it into higher education terms, it can function not only as a research contribution but also as a teaching model for leadership, governance, and institutional responsibility in education.

Methodology

Conceptual Design and Analytical Strategy

This study is a conceptual paper based on theory elaboration and synthesis rather than empirical testing. The goal is not to validate a universal implementation model, but to specify an analytically coherent framework for examining how DEIB commitments can become institutionalized in higher education governance. The paper therefore follows a conceptual design appropriate for theory-building work in which the output is a clarified framework, not causal claims derived from original data.

The analytical strategy involved four steps. First, the paper identified a recurring problem in the literature: universities often address inequity through fragmented, symbolic, or compliance-oriented initiatives rather than through integrated governance arrangements. Second, six theoretical lenses were selected because they illuminate different dimensions of that problem: intersectionality, stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, social justice, the resource-based view, and the Burke-Litwin model of organizational change. Third, the article translated the combined insights of these theories into a three-layer framework consisting of core principles, organizational mechanisms, and institutional outcomes. Fourth, short illustrative scenarios were used to demonstrate how the framework can be applied analytically to higher education settings.

The use of scenarios follows vignette-based logic in conceptual work, but the scenarios here do not function as data and are not offered as empirical validation (Finch 1987; Hughes and Huby 2002). Their purpose is explanatory. They make the framework concrete enough to reveal institutional dilemmas while preserving the conceptual character of the article. This is important because higher education

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governance often involves competing values that are best clarified through analytically framed situations rather than through abstract definitions alone.

This design is intentionally bounded. The article does not claim that the framework is exhaustive or universally applicable across all institutional and national contexts. Instead, it aims to provide a clear conceptual architecture that can support future empirical work, comparative analysis, and context-sensitive institutional adaptation.

Theoretical Foundations and Integrative Mechanism

The six theoretical lenses are not assembled here as a loose set of parallel perspectives. They operate at different analytical levels and, when combined, generate a stronger explanation for why DEIB work in higher education must be understood as a governance question. Intersectionality identifies how inequity is structured across overlapping axes of identity and power (Crenshaw 1989; Armstrong and Jovanović 2015). Stakeholder theory explains why universities are accountable to multiple constituencies whose claims cannot be reduced to simple market logic (Freeman 2010). Legitimacy theory clarifies why institutional responses to inequity affect trust, credibility, and social acceptance (Suchman 1995). Social justice provides a normative basis for evaluating fairness in access, participation, and resource distribution (Rawls 1971). The resource-based view explains why diversity can enhance institutional learning, innovation, and adaptive capacity when properly embedded (Wernerfelt 1984). The Burke-Litwin model then helps translate these normative and strategic pressures into organizational mechanisms and sites of change (Burke and Litwin 1992).

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, and 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 et al. 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 and Davis 2019; Allen et al. 2024; Taff and 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 generate the following integrative mechanism: structural inequities produce exclusion and unequal participation; these patterns create stakeholder, legitimacy, and justice pressures for institutional response; meaningful response requires organizational embedding rather than isolated initiatives; and, when embedding occurs, institutions can strengthen both equity and

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adaptive capacity. A CDR-informed framework is therefore justified not because it invents a wholly new theory, but because it specifies the governance architecture that links these levels.

This integrative logic also explains why the framework is particularly relevant to higher education. Universities are sites of knowledge production, social mobility, public accountability, and professional formation. Exclusion within such institutions carries pedagogical, organizational, and societal consequences. A governance framework that can hold together justice, legitimacy, learning, and organizational change is therefore more appropriate than approaches that isolate one dimension at a time.

Framework Derivation

The framework is derived through a theory-to-framework translation rather than by simple aggregation of concepts. The first layer of the framework consists of core governance principles. These principles are generated by asking what higher education institutions must commit to if they are to respond credibly to structural inequity while preserving legitimacy and public mission. The second layer consists of organizational mechanisms. These mechanisms are derived by asking where, within the institutional architecture, such commitments must be embedded if they are to shape practice. The third layer consists of institutional outcomes. These are not presented as narrow performance metrics; rather, they identify the domains in which a CDR-informed approach should become visible if it is working.

The value of this derivation is that it makes the framework theoretically generated rather than merely assembled. It also clarifies that the framework should not be read as a checklist. The mechanisms are analytically distinct but institutionally interdependent. Leadership without systems, for example, often produces symbolic commitment. Systems without inclusive climate may generate compliance without belonging. Representation without accountability may increase visibility without changing decision-making power.

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1 **Table 2.** *Theory-to-Framework Derivation*

Theoretical lens	Problem diagnosed	Governance implication	Framework element generated	Illustrative higher education question
Intersectionality	Inequity is patterned across overlapping identities and institutional hierarchies	Governance must identify structurally differentiated exclusion	Systemic equity principle; voice and review mechanisms	Whose experiences remain invisible in policy, curriculum, and career progression?
Stakeholder theory	Universities are accountable to multiple constituencies	Institutions need participatory and responsive governance	Inclusive governance principle; stakeholder voice	Who is included in decisions that shape inclusion and belonging?
Legitimacy theory	Credibility depends on alignment between institutional claims and social expectations	Equity work must be credible, transparent, and accountable	Institutional outcomes around trust and legitimacy	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	Systemic equity principle; evaluative criteria	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	Innovation through diversity principle; capability alignment	How do inclusive teams improve educational problem-solving and institutional adaptability?
Burke-Litwin model	Change fails when commitments are not embedded in organizational systems	Principles must be translated into mechanisms and sites of accountability	Five organizational mechanisms	Where must equity commitments be embedded if they are to shape practice?

2 Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.
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Results

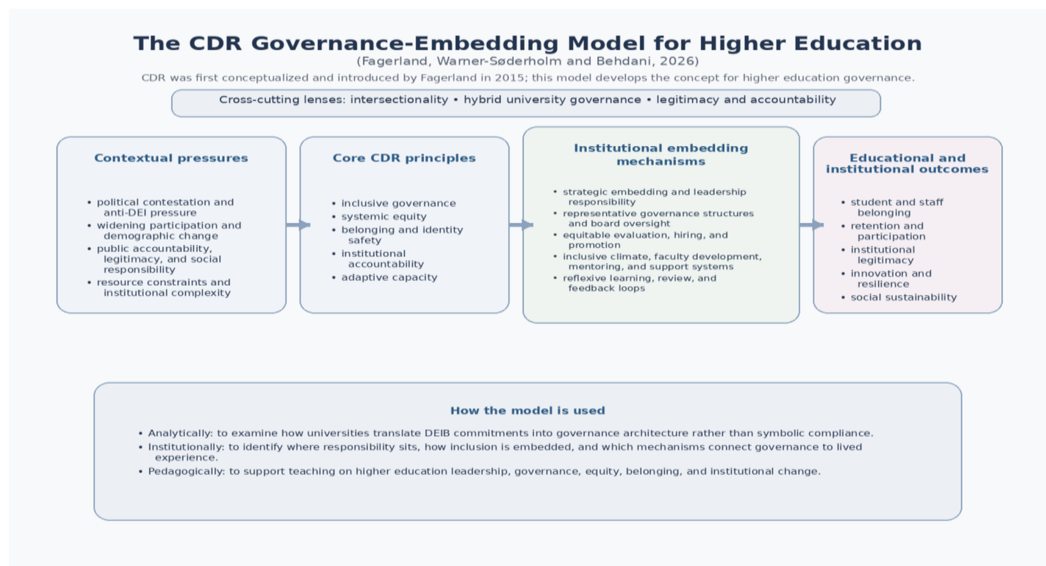
A CDR-Informed Framework for Higher Education Governance

The framework developed in this paper consists of three linked layers: core governance principles, organizational mechanisms, and institutional outcomes. The first layer specifies what institutions should orient themselves toward. The second identifies the main sites through which those commitments become embedded. The third clarifies what kinds of changes and accountabilities should become observable when the framework is institutionalized.

The framework deliberately avoids presenting CDR as a technocratic blueprint. Instead, it offers an analytical model for examining how higher education institutions translate DEIB commitments into governance. Its main strength lies in connecting normative commitments to organizational embedding. In doing so, it 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 conceptual model developed in this article. It adapts Corporate Diversity Responsibility (CDR) - first conceptualized and introduced by Fagerland in 2015 - to the governance conditions of higher education institutions. The model links contextual pressures, core governance principles, institutional embedding mechanisms, and educational as well as institutional outcomes.

Figure 1. *The CDR Governance-Embedding Model for Higher Education (Fagerland, Warner-Søderholm, and Behdani 2026)*



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 et al. 2020; Brekken et al. 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. 2019; 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 and Tierney 2013; Sturm et al. 2011; Hayter and Cahoy 2018).

The fourth principle is adaptive institutional capacity. Universities operate in changing legal, political, demographic, and pedagogical environments. A CDR-informed framework should therefore strengthen the institution’s ability to respond to critique, learn from feedback, and adapt governance arrangements without abandoning commitments to fairness and academic integrity. This capacity is particularly important where DEIB initiatives encounter backlash, shifting regulation, or fragmented sustainability demands (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 adaptive capacity may produce rigid interventions that fail to learn from institutional realities. Innovation through diversity without justice criteria can become instrumental. The principles therefore provide the normative and strategic logic of the model as a whole.

Organizational Mechanisms

To move beyond a flat list of enablers, the framework consolidates organizational embedding into five higher-order mechanisms.

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1 The first mechanism is strategic embedding. This refers to whether DEIB
2 commitments are visible in mission, strategy, resource allocation, and executive
3 responsibility. Equity cannot remain an ancillary office or occasional initiative; it
4 must be anchored in institutional direction and formal leadership responsibility.
5 The second mechanism is structural accountability. This includes governance
6 committees, role clarity, reporting relationships, appointment structures, review
7 processes, and institutional systems for monitoring progress. It concerns how
8 responsibility is distributed and how decisions are made visible and contestable.
9 The third mechanism is inclusive climate and voice. This mechanism captures
10 departmental culture, psychological safety, staff and student feedback, and
11 opportunities to raise concerns without penalty. It recognizes that formal policies
12 are insufficient when institutional climates silence critique or narrow belonging.
13 Reviews of belonging and inclusive climate in higher education consistently show
14 that receptive faculty, support services, identity safety cues, and inclusive policies
15 are major facilitators of belonging for students, faculty, and staff (Allen et al. 2024;
16 Taff and Clifton 2022; Wilson, Ghosh, and Jason 2026).
17 This point is reinforced by experimental and classroom-based studies showing
18 that identity safety cues can improve students' sense of belonging, perceptions of
19 instructors, and attendance. The implication is not that small classroom signals can
20 substitute for institutional reform, but that governance arrangements should create
21 conditions in which such signals are supported, expected, and aligned with broader
22 institutional commitments (Howansky, Maimon, and Sanchez 2021; Maimon,
23 Howansky, and Sanchez 2021).
24 The fourth mechanism is capability and incentive alignment. This refers to
25 recruitment practices, professional development, workload recognition, promotion
26 criteria, and incentive systems. If institutions expect inclusive teaching, mentoring,
27 and leadership, then these forms of labor must be recognized, developed, and
28 rewarded. Studies of inclusive faculty development, diversity-infused professional
29 learning, and equitable performance evaluation suggest that inclusion work
30 becomes more durable when it is built into development pathways and review
31 criteria rather than left as invisible or voluntary labor (Smith et al. 2024; Tang,
32 Chaemchoy, and Siribanpitak 2025; Kim, Kong, and Tirotta-Esposito 2023).
33 The fifth mechanism is reflexive learning and review. Universities need
34 mechanisms through which inclusion-related data, lived experience, and
35 stakeholder feedback lead to adjustment. This includes equity review processes,
36 transparent communication of findings, and willingness to revise structures that are
37 producing unintended exclusion.
38 These mechanisms also interact. Strategic embedding without capability
39 alignment produces aspiration without delivery. Structural accountability without
40 reflexive learning can devolve into compliance routines. Inclusive climate without
41 executive follow-through may surface concerns without changing institutional
42 conditions. The analytical value of the framework lies in revealing these
43 dependencies.

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1 **Table 3.** *Organizational Mechanisms, Governance Risks, and Illustrative Institutional*
2 *Indicators*

Mechanism	Typical institutional expressions	Governance risk if absent	Illustrative indicators for review
Strategic embedding	Mission language, formal strategy, budget priorities, senior leadership mandates	DEIB remains peripheral, episodic, or dependent on individual champions	Presence of explicit DEIB objectives in strategy; dedicated resources; executive reporting
Structural accountability	Committee mandates, reporting lines, appointment criteria, review systems	Responsibility is diffuse and commitments are difficult to monitor or contest	Role clarity; regular governance review; transparent decision pathways
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	Survey follow-up processes; participation in consultations; communication of actions taken
Capability and incentive alignment	Recruitment design, leadership development, promotion criteria, workload recognition	Inclusive labor is undervalued and implementation depends on unpaid or invisible work	Promotion criteria referencing inclusion; training uptake; recognition of mentoring and inclusive teaching
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	Action tracking from reviews; recurring audit cycles; evidence of policy adjustment

3 Source: Authors' conceptualization based on the reviewed literature.
4
5 *Institutional Outcomes and Boundary Conditions*
6
7 The framework does not reduce outcomes to simple numerical targets, although
8 representation and retention remain important. Instead, it identifies four broader
9 institutional outcomes that should become visible when a CDR-informed approach
10 is functioning: stronger legitimacy and trust, more equitable participation and
11 progression, more inclusive educational environments, and greater institutional
12 capacity for learning and adaptation.
13 These outcomes are contingent rather than automatic. The framework is most
14 relevant under conditions in which institutions are serious about linking DEIB
15 commitments to governance and are prepared to treat resistance, contradiction, and
16 uneven implementation as central features of institutional change. It is less useful
17 where diversity work is expected to remain purely symbolic or where accountability
18 systems are designed only for outward reporting rather than internal learning.

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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.

Discussion

Conceptual Contribution to Higher Education Literature

The main contribution of this article is conceptual clarification and higher education adaptation. CDR was first conceptualized and introduced by Fagerland in 2015 (Fagerland and Rambøl 2015); the present paper does not claim that provenance anew. Instead, it demonstrates how a CDR-informed approach can be specified as a governance architecture for higher education. This matters because it resolves a common conceptual slippage in diversity work: DEIB language often identifies desirable aims, but institutional responsibility for achieving those aims remains diffuse.

By specifying the relationship among principles, organizational mechanisms, and institutional outcomes, the framework contributes to higher education literature in three ways. First, it strengthens the link between inclusion and governance by showing that equity work is inseparable from leadership responsibility, organizational design, and accountability. Second, it offers a more integrated explanation than approaches that treat legitimacy, justice, innovation, and organizational change as unrelated concerns. Third, it makes visible the boundary conditions of institutional inclusion by emphasizing that universities are hybrid organizations in which governance is negotiated across multiple values and constituencies.

The framework also answers a critical concern often directed at diversity models: that they become managerial checklists detached from academic life. In this paper, that risk is addressed by theorizing how mechanisms interact. Leadership commitment without structural accountability remains symbolic. Structural accountability without inclusive climate can intensify compliance while weakening trust. Incentives without social justice criteria can instrumentalize diversity. Reflexive review without strategic embedding may generate recurring consultation with little institutional movement. The framework is therefore not additive but relational.

For higher education scholarship, this relational approach is important because it 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 and Ubbiali 2021).

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Illustrative Scenarios

The analytical value of the framework can be demonstrated through short scenarios. These are not empirical findings. They function instead as theory-informed illustrations of how the framework helps interpret governance dilemmas.

In one scenario, 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 likely consequence is uneven implementation across faculties and a risk that inclusion remains dependent on isolated champions.

In a second scenario, faculty members resist a new inclusive curriculum initiative on the grounds that it threatens disciplinary autonomy. The framework helps avoid simplistic interpretations of this resistance. It directs attention to legitimacy, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive capacity, asking how institutional leaders can protect academic integrity while still addressing structural exclusion. Here the issue is not whether resistance exists, but how it is engaged and governed. Open deliberation, transparent criteria, and contextual adaptation become central.

In a third scenario, 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 scenario, 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 scenarios, the framework clarifies that inclusion is not a discrete intervention. It is a governance accomplishment requiring coordination across strategy, structure, climate, capability, and learning.

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 et al. 2021; Cho and Cesar-Davis 2022; Rall et al. 2025).

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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 and Thomas 2025; van Kessel et al. 2025; Wilson, Ghosh, and 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. 2019; Smith et al. 2024; Le, Sok, and Heng 2024; Gehreke, Schilling, and 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 conceptual provenance, governance theory, institutional mechanisms, and short scenarios, it can support teaching in higher education leadership, educational policy, organizational studies, and DEIB-focused courses. Its value in teaching lies precisely in its ability to help students and practitioners analyze tensions rather than assume that inclusion is a straightforward managerial task. In this respect, the model developed here is not only a research contribution but also a pedagogical tool that preserves the CDR concept's original lineage while making it analytically usable in educational settings. This pedagogical role is especially important where emerging leadership agendas advance faster than the available curriculum literature, creating teaching and implementation gaps in professional higher education settings (Fagerland, Boe, and Madsen 2025).

Conclusions

This article set out to address 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 conceptual framework for institutional responsibility in higher education that explicitly builds on the concept first conceptualized and introduced by Fagerland in 2015.

The framework does not claim to replace DEIB, CSR, ESG, or inclusive governance. Instead, it clarifies what a governance-focused approach adds. It shows how equity commitments can be translated into core principles, embedded through organizational mechanisms, and assessed through broader institutional outcomes. In

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doing so, the paper preserves the provenance of CDR while adapting it into a more precise analytical framework for higher education governance.

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 does not empirically test the framework across institutional types or national systems. Second, its value depends on contextual adaptation. A CDR-informed approach may look different in research-intensive universities, teaching-oriented institutions, or highly centralized systems. Third, although the framework aims to avoid narrow managerialism, the tension between accountability and instrumentalization remains real and requires careful empirical study.

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 et al. 2021; Rall et al. 2025; Allen et al. 2024; Smith et al. 2024).

Finally, future research should test how the framework can be used pedagogically in leadership and governance education, including as a way of supporting reflective analysis of institutional dilemmas. This is particularly relevant for educational journals because the framework may contribute not only to scholarship on universities, but also to how future leaders are taught to interpret and govern institutional inclusion. 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 et al. 2025).

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