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NAVIGATING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IMPLEMENTATION OF SELECTED DEI DIMENSIONS IN THREE POLISH UNIVERSITIES

POMIĘDZY RÓŻNORODNOŚCIĄ, RÓWNOŚCIĄ I WŁĄCZENIEM – STUDIUM PORÓWNAWCZE WDRAŻANIA WYBRANYCH WYMIARÓW DEI NA TRZECH POLSKICH UNIWERSYTETACH

Streszczenie: Zainteresowanie DEI (różnorodność, równość i włączanie) wzrasta, także w ramach koncepcji społecznej odpowiedzialności uczelni, która podkreśla trzecią misję uniwersytetu, a mianowicie przyczynianie się do zrównoważonego rozwoju i budowanie relacji z interesariuszami. W Polsce DEI pojawiło się dopiero niedawno i wciąż jest bardzo nową koncepcją. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ocena, w jaki sposób DEI zostało przyjęte na kilku polskich uczelniach publicznych – zbadanie przesłanek stojących za wprowadzeniem tej koncepcji, narracji wokół niej oraz jej faktycznego wdrożenia w trzech wymiarach: studentów z niepełnosprawnościami, studentów neuroróżnorodnych i studentów o specjalnych potrzebach religijnych.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczna odpowiedzialność uczelni, DEI, osoby z niepełnosprawnościami, neuroróżnorodność, religia, specjalne potrzeby

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Abstract: There is also a growing interest in DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) within the concept of university social responsibility, which emphases the third mission of the university, namely to contribute to sustainable development and forge relationships with stakeholders. In Poland DEI has only recently emerged and it is still very new concept. The aim of this article is to assess how DEI has been embraced at few public Polish universities – exploring the rationale behind its introduction, the narratives surrounding it, and its actual implementation in three dimensions: students with disabilities, neurodiverse students and students with special religious needs.

Keywords: university social responsibility, DEI, people with disabilities, neurodiversity, religion, special needs

Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become integral to the organizational landscape of many Western European institutions, including universities. In a VUCA world full of growing global issues, the role of universities is no longer just education and research – the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR), which has been developing over the past few years, has increasingly emphasised that these original tasks of universities have expanded and a third mission has emerged, involving the need to contribute to socio-economic development by maximising the positive impact of universities on their surroundings (Carrión et al. 2012). In Poland, a Central and Eastern European country with a post-socialist legacy, DEI has only recently emerged as a concept, remaining more abstract and theoretical than pragmatic and achievable. This paper analyzes how DEI has been embraced at public Polish universities, exploring the rationale behind its introduction, the narratives surrounding it, and its actual implementation. We selected three dimensions to illustrate DEI in practice: establishing facilities for students with disabilities, neurodiverse students and students with special religious needs. These three cases can be chronologically organized, since most universities started with wide-range programs to include special needs of students with disabilities, later they expanded to include neurodiverse students, while accommodating different religious needs could build on the latter.

This article is structured as follows: First, we introduce the concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within a university context, tracing its origins and definitions in both Western countries and Poland. Next, we present our dataset and methodology. In the subsequent section, we develop three case studies, each with its own conceptual framework and relevant data. Finally, we conclude by outlining the conditions necessary for DEI to be genuinely embraced at Polish universities.

Genesis and evolution of the DEI in the context of universities

Azam Esfijani et al. (2013) analysed around 40 definitions relating to the idea of social responsibility of HEIs, finding that it is most often captured through the lens of: stakeholders, engagement, responsibility, education, research, service, knowledge, teaching and ethics. Similar keywords characterising a socially responsible university were identified by Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña (2017) based on a review of different definitions of USR and their implications in the literature on USR between 2000 and 2015: sustainability, knowledge transfer, ethics, good governance, citizenship, responsibility, stakeholders and the environment. Krzysztof Leja (2008), one of the pioneers of USR in Poland, noted that for a university to become an organisation serving the environment it must respond positively, but not indiscriminately, to stakeholder expectations and the degree to which these expectations are fulfilled is a measure of its social responsibility.

One area that fits in with both the concept of sustainable development (enshrined in the form of Sustainable Development Goal 10 on inequality) and stakeholder expectations is DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion), the concept of recognising and accepting diversity, meeting everyone's individual needs and creating an environment where everyone feels valued. This is a key issue in the context of human rights, an issue that is becoming a challenge particularly in those parts of the world where autocracies, corruption and wars are present (Kostrzewa et al. 2023).

The concept of diversity can be understood 'dictionary-wise' as variety, plurality (Syper-Jędrzejak, Łuczak 2024). Diversity is determined by the catalogue of characteristics by which people differ from each other, visibly and invisibly (Gross-Gołacka 2018b). Diversity can therefore be interpreted ambiguously, as the basic categories in which people differ can be considered through the prism of three fundamental dimensions, which include two primary categories, defined in 1990 by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosner: primary identity, encompassing primary, natural, innate aspects (gender, age, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity) and secondary identity, encompassing non-native traits that are easier to change (appearance, education, marital status, religion) (Syper-Jędrzejak, Łuczak 2024).

The origins of diversity thinking were linked to the increasing representation of discriminated groups (women and national and ethnic minorities), including in universities, in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. Before the idea was introduced as an overall concept of corporate management, it began there with social protests and protest movements fighting for equal opportunities, resulting from the challenge of racist views and the emergence of assimilationist concepts. The term diversity management was first used in the US in the 1980s (Gross-Gołacka 2018a), but it was not until a decade later that the focus was not so much on minorities themselves and their situation, but on the organisational barriers to their inclusion (FOB 2009), and differences began to be seen in the category of non-deficit potential and acknowledged by using this diversity. Within the US

approach to diversity management, therefore, it was not legal requirements, moral obligation or CSR that were the main arguments for implementing diversity management, but primarily the benefits that organisations derived from implementing such a concept (FOB 2009), especially in the context of upcoming demographic and economic changes (Gross-Gołacka 2018a). With regard to universities in the United States, an unprecedented Supreme Court ruling in 2003 held that a quota system guaranteeing places to racial minority students was entitled to be implemented at the University of Michigan, as a racially diverse student body guaranteed a higher level of education (Durska 2009).

In Europe, diversity management grew out of the fight against discrimination, initially focussing on combating gender discrimination, only later extending to other aspects. A review of diversity policies in the EU suggests that the Union went through three main periods: equal treatment (1970s), positive action (1980s) and mainstreaming (post-1990s) (Gross-Gołacka 2018a). Community law had a strong influence on the development of the concept, diversity management was therefore largely the result of the conscious influence of European institutions. A turning point for equality issues in the EU was the Lisbon Treaty of 2007, as it reinforced the principle of equality by placing it among the values and objectives of the EU (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union mentions equality and non-discrimination).

Community action to promote diversity is not only European law, but also numerous programmes, such as the EQUAL Community Initiative, in operation until 2011, aimed at combating all forms and manifestations of inequality in the labour market. An example of this approach is also the inclusion in the current EU research and innovation funding programme Horizon Europe 2021-2027 of the obligation to have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) as an eligibility criterion for all public authorities, higher education institutions and research organisations wishing to participate in the programme. It is worth underlining that "gender" issues are relationally defined: they emerge and are constructed through, and in relation to the interactions of men, women, and people who embrace other forms of gender identities and expressions; together with other identity-shaping elements such as among others religion (GENOVATE 2016). In Poland, 36 HEIs out of 160 signatories of the Declaration of Social Responsibility of HEIs , a Polish self-regulation of the academic community (MEN 2024), informed about the adoption of GEPs on their websites. Practice shows that in Polish GEPs gender issues are understood very narrowly – in relation to gender. Another EU initiative, already voluntary, is the Diversity Charter, which is a written commitment by an organisation to implement equal treatment and diversity management policies in the workplace and to disseminate them among business and social partners (FOB 2024a). In Poland, seven universities have signed the Charter (FOB 2024b).

In Poland we owe the concept of diversity management primarily to the presence of multinational corporations and membership of the European Union. Since

the beginning of the 1990s, foreign trends, concepts and practices in people management and corporate culture building started to reach Poland through subsidiaries of multinational corporations. In many companies, foreigners with a different culture or religion started to appear on managerial positions, codes of ethics began to appear, defining corporate values, which also defined values related to respect for others and openness to employee diversity (FOB 2009).

Diversity management in organisations has evolved over the past few years to the concept of DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion), with the realisation of the greater importance in this management of the element related to creating an organisational culture that is able to ensure the true inclusion of diverse employees. Because diversity does not yet mean inclusiveness (Kostrzewa et al. 2023). In the DEI, diversity means all the ways in which we are different, respecting equality means meeting everyone's individual needs, and practising inclusion means that everyone feels valued (Zavvy 2024).

Dataset, methodology and rationale

Our exploratory study comprised two stages. First, we contacted members of the Academic Network for Security and Equality (Akademicka Sieć Bezpieczeństwa i Równości – ASBiR) – a professional body of ombudspersons, ethics, and equality spokespersons – via their mailing list, which includes over 80 members. We asked about diverse facilities offered by the universities to accommodate students with different needs with a focus on prayer facilities for Muslims in order to identify the universities that have such arrangements in place to interview them. Thirteen persons responded, and while most of them were negative, as we had presumed, eight members agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews to discover how their campuses address the special needs of different student communities.

The interviews, conducted between June and July 2023 via MS Teams, lasted between 40 to 90 minutes. Our primary respondents were ombudspersons, selected for their expertise and the specific, often delicate issues they address at their institutions. They were consulted on matters related to dedicated spaces for individuals with special needs and often actively supported these initiatives. As mediators, these officers not only participated in creating these spaces but also gained insights from various stakeholders, allowing them to describe the process comprehensively. The interviews were transcribed and coded using MAXQDA software. Our sample included public universities in major urban centers such as Białystok, Gdańsk, Kraków, Szczecin, Toruń, Warsawa and Wrocław, as well as two smaller cities. The sample comprised four universities, three technical universities, two medical universities, two art academies, one economic university, and one agricultural university. To maintain confidentiality and adhere to participation principles, we chose not to disclose the names of the universities or the smaller towns.

Our interlocutors usually referred to three different kinds of DEI dimensions while trying to provide a framework of a possible prayer space: facilities for students with disabilities, neurodiverse students, and spaces for intercultural contact. These references provided the framework for our current article.

Accomodating students with disabilities

If one looks at the chronology of accommodating students with special needs at Polish universities, it usually started with providing facilities to students with disabilities. At Polish universities, the number of students with disabilities is increasing every year. In the academic year 2022/2023, the share of students with disabilities in the total number of students, as well as the share of graduates with disabilities in the total number of graduates, was 1.8% (GUS 2023). For many years, university managers addressed these needs based on their infrastructural context and budget constraints, as many adjustments, such as installing elevators for physical accessibility or toilets for wheelchair users, are costly. Meanwhile, teaching staff learned to accommodate the special needs of their students, provided the students approached them and explained their requirements.

A fundamental change came in 2019 with the introduction of the programme "Inclusive University" that came within the wider funding programme Accessibility Plus by the Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy co-funded from the European Social Fund. It was the first systemic and wide-range programme that addressed accessibility in public spaces, including universities. The programme provided funding for architectural and infrastructural adjustments, special equipment, adapting legal and institutional environment, creating sustainable units that care for students with special needs and manage their needs, and training for faculty and administrative staff. During the first three years of the programme 196 co-financing universities (more than half of those operating in Poland) for over 672 million PLN (i.e. 3.42 million PLN ~= 0.7–0.8 million EUR per project) (NCBR 2024). This funding became a milestone for many universities:

> We received a grant for this project, which is part of a larger grant from the National Centre for Research and Development aimed at adapting the university to diverse needs. [1]

> During the implementation of the Operational Program Knowledge Education Development, competitions focused on accessibility emerged. [2]

The universities got a significant boost to act in advance and prepare dedicated facilities for existing and possible students. Interestingly both universities are located in middle size towns. They build their competitive advantage to attract

students by thinking about increasing broad accessibility and ensuring equal opportunities.

> There are students with various needs, so we respond to them. For example, if we have students with mobility impairments, we build elevators. If we have students who are hard of hearing, we create materials for them. If we have students with sensory issues, we open quiet rooms. If the first student with needs we are not accustomed to comes forward, we will respond. I don't want this to sound overly idealistic, but simply put, we talk to the person who knows their needs best, and we see what is possible. Not everything happens instantly. It's not like we can do everything in a week, but maybe by the next semester or academic year? We will respond as best as we can. [1]

> It's not about how many such people there are, but rather we assume that there may not be such people because we are not prepared for it, which creates an immediate barrier to entry. I would rather point to this change as an opening for potential future users and the creation of safe, open, universal spaces. [2]

It is worth noting that external funding can, however, at the same time be a constraint, imposing the scope of use of the designed solutions, as was the case with the special rooms at one of the universities.

> However, in the case of the three that were created from the project, the indicators were a bit of a limitation, because it was dedicated to people with special needs, people with disabilities. [...] The generally accessible first ones, which were created [not from the project], have a very high occupancy rate, they are almost non-stop occupied, while the second ones are less used because of these access difficulties. [2]

The BONs (Support Offices for People with Disabilities), which are being set up at universities, focus primarily on the needs of such people, relatively much easier to satisfy, treating other special needs somewhat in addition – as we will indicate in the following sections.

Reaching out to neurodiverse students

The concept of neurodiversity has only recently gained recognition within the Polish university landscape. Prior to this, accommodations for physical disabilities were made in accordance with the resources and willingness of university staff, often predating the support provided by EU-funded programs. For example, the student services office might rearrange a wheelchair user's schedule to ensure classroom

accessibility; alternatively, peers might assist with transportation to lecture halls. Visually impaired students could receive enlarged exam materials from their lecturers. However, support for neurodiverse students was not as apparent, largely due to a lack of awareness among staff, who sometimes misinterpreted these needs as unwarranted requests for special treatment.

The incentive to accommodate needs of neurodiverse students came from two different sides. The first one were experiences gained in Western universities:

> We went on a study visit to Washington to a university and it was a bullseye, because we took many faculty members, their minds were opened as well. And when we came back, everyone was delighted, and they all unanimously stated that we had to open up not only to deaf people, but that this change in our university had to happen in general, and from that moment on, we really started talking about the broadly understood group of people with special needs. [2]

The respondent indicated that the minds of university faculty members (most probably senior ones who are able to make strategic decisions) opened up, and that they decided not to lag behind but become more open to accommodate needs of a broader group of students with special needs. This is how silent rooms were created at this university.

The second kind of incentive came along with programmes dedicated for disabled students. After making the campus more accessible, some universities decides to include facilities for neurodiverse students into these programmes. This is why it is often a bureau for disabled students that takes care for the needs of neurodiverse students. Another respondent explains how it works:

> We have more and more, like probably many universities in Poland, students who have specific needs resulting from their health, condition or mental state. As you know, people on the spectrum are very different, but I often need a space with a limited amount of stimuli to use before classes, after classes, during classes and these rooms we call a quiet room are primarily intended for people on the spectrum who have declared such a need. And we have quite a few such people. [1]

Universities struggling with the problem of acceptance and openness are trying to find compromises that will meet emerging needs without, however, causing conflict and opposition from those who are not yet ready for such solutions. An example of this would be a special room with a wide range of uses. Such a solution for many in the university may be a compromise that is easier to accept, although not at all the best.

The idea was raised that perhaps it should be such a room, simply. Maybe it should be a calming room, because we also have to deal with those neuro-atypical people who have challenges with concentration, with calming down, and maybe everything could be combined in some kind of space for calming down and prayer. And that already sounded much safer to many people. Also, of course, I'm not sure that this is the optimum. […] Well, because if someone would want to calm down at the same time as someone is going to use it for prayer, well here we already have two needs that are a bit mutually exclusive. [3]

Challenges related to neurodiversity will increase at universities as it is a phenomenon that is increasingly present in social life as the group of people with a diagnosis of neurodiversity includes about 15-20% of the population, and those who are undiagnosed but display neurodiversity characteristics to a significant degree may be much more numerous. Thus, there are also more and more neuroatypical students at universities and for them there is a lack of systemic support (Pisula E. et al. 2024, p. 11).

Practicing students

The case of practicing religion at university campus is a different story and operates in a different framework. Firstly, it seems to be a need less obvious or necessary compared with other types of special needs (for the same reason the vast majority university canteens in Poland have no vegan, kosher or halal food options; however, some offer vegetarian dishes to cater the needs of vegetarian students). Secondly, it operates in a majority Catholic society with a strong institutionalised presence of Catholic religion in the public space. Thirdly, Polish universities are not that culturally diverse. Although the number of foreign students has been steadily increasing (currently around 7.34%), Polish universities were largely monocultural for many years (in 2010, foreign students constituted only 0.84%; Nauka w Polsce 2023). Moreover, most of foreign students come from neighboring countries with Ukraine at the top.

In the Western context prayer spaces are a natural consequence not only of the ethnically and religiously diverse population, but also of the international-alization of studies. Rooms for students with special needs have become part of the institutional fabric of universities, which create such separate spaces to meet the spiritual or religious needs of students. These rooms are referred to in various ways: a room of silence, a place of worship, a place of prayer, a space of many religions or many denominations (Christensen et al. 2019, p. 300). Sometimes these spaces are dedicated to a specific group (e.g. a chapel) or a specific purpose (e.g. a room of silence), and sometimes they serve a bundle of similar needs (e.g. different religious needs). The appearance of such rooms in the space of universities was either bottom-up or top-down.

In the Polish context, if prayer spaces are available, they are designated for Catholic students and staff. In fact, at some universities there are chapels at campuses, while organizing Catholic ceremonies (especially for Christmas) is something natural. Accommodating religious needs of other religious groups is much less obvious. In this regard, other Christian communities have easier access to catering their religious needs as example below illustrates:

> When it comes to religious needs, I can confirm that yes, we definitely had and probably still have students who are Christians, Eastern Rite, Orthodox and we are used to it. These are small things related to holidays, we postpone, justify, but it is very simple, right? [It] is at the Institute level, but for us it is here, we are in the east of the country, so to speak, for us it is, it is not a problem. [1]

Practicing religion at many Polish universities is much more complex as it is embedded into an ongoing struggle between the dominance of Catholic faith in the public space and keeping the university neutral. That was the case of one of the biggest Polish universities. It ranged between the two extremes: allowing or banning religion from the public space:

> The pendulum seems to swing extremely in both directions, i.e. from the fact that we are a Christian university, so crosses have the right to hang. To the fact that we are a secular university, so no one is allowed to present themselves in any way as a person for whom religion is important. Religiosity is supposed to be invisible, so you are not allowed to pray like that, because praying is no longer invisible. And what is it like to pray that is not Catholic-Christian? Well, that is doubly extreme. [3]

When the university started to manage diversity – by accommodating needs of different groups of students – some people acknowledged that people have the right to pray, although without expressing the expectation for now that they should be provided with a place to do so, and additionally, voices that the different calendars of the world's different religions should be taken into account:

> And I started to hear about things, not even that there is nowhere to pray, because people didn't have the nerve to come and think that they have the right to pray here, but people came to me that, for example, they were praying somewhere exactly on the floor by the cloakroom and someone came and yelled at them, that it was inappropriate and that they were violating the feelings of others by praying. [...] I started to hear about issues of practicing Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Christians with holidays and the Sabbath. And also with what to do when classes, especially in winter, are on Friday afternoon

> and is it possible or not? And how far is it from your place of residence and will you make it or not? [3]

There are also universities in Poland where the issue of taking into account the different festive calendars of different religions seems obvious, although it is not always systemically resolved.

> As far as religious needs are concerned, I can confirm that yes, we certainly had and probably still have students who are Christian, Eastern rite, Orthodox, and we are used to that. These are small things related to holidays, we move, we justify, but it's very simple, isn't it? [It] is at the level of the Institute, but for us it is here, we are in the east of the country, so to speak, for us it is not a problem." [1]

This case is however special, since the university is located in an area with a relatively high number of Orthodox people, and thus students. The university had therefore to adapt to the needs of this significant number of students.

Conclusions

The university's approach to DEI is changing, as there is an increased awareness of the importance of this topic, especially among university managers, who are beginning to understand that have to open up to internationalisation as well the diversity, there is a huge change in their attitude and in even talking about diversity, about special needs. It often depends on a committed leader who is an agent of change at their university. This does not always have to be a university employee, an expert in a related subject or with personal experience ("because I have an autistic son"), but often it is the authorities who are the ambassadors of the actions taken.

DEI at universities in Poland is in a very early stage of development. The original category of persons with special needs was persons with disabilities, only recently also neuroatypical persons. Religious issues, in Poland as a country with strong Christian traditions, have recently become particularly politicised, so that the religious majority often feels discriminated against (RPO 2018, p. 5).

A major stimulus for the development of DEI at universities has been the advent of dedicated EU funding, thanks to which offices for persons with disabilities have appeared in half of the universities operating in Poland. These institutions focus primarily on the needs of such persons, although practice forces them to broaden their optics, as specific needs go beyond disability. Although the very subject of persons with disabilities in Poland is a difficult and unsolved, as the protests of carers and persons with disabilities in the Sejm, which have already lasted for several years, show (Winogrodzki 2024). It is people with disabilities who are most

frequently identified by Poles (43% of respondents in 2018 against 28% in 2013) as the most disadvantaged groups facing the greatest difficulties and limitations in society (CBOS 2018, p. 8). The size and relatively easy availability of funding for universal design and outreach to persons with disabilities paves the way for the introduction of new, innovative DEI and USR solutions at Polish universities.

An issue whose public awareness has grown rapidly in the last few years is the issue of neurodiversity – more and more students are choosing to disclose such judgements and the academic community itself, realising how difficult and wide-ranging the problem is, is beginning to seek practical knowledge in this area. However, it seems that in this area the vast majority of universities are still at the stage of self-diagnosis of needs. Moreover, the needs of neuroatypical people are organisationally located in BONs, which links them to some form of disability. In the case of the needs of neuroatypical persons, observations from Western universities are an important source of inspiration. In this case, Polish universities 'do not want to stand out'.

Special religious needs operate within a different framework. They cannot count on dedicated programmes to create prayer rooms for students, nor is it possible to classify them as a category of needs based on disability or neuroatypicality. Nor have the prayer rooms that exist, for example, in British universities become an inspiration for Polish universities. The case is therefore different: religious needs seem to be inferior to other types of special needs in terms of the need for implementation. These needs, moreover, should arise from a kind of critical mass – the students who officially report them. This, however, seems to be severely hampered both for quantitative reasons (still a small number of foreign students and/or practising non-Catholics) and institutional reasons (reporting such needs can be misconceived).

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