# Diversity and Inclusion in Focus: Cultivating a Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

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**Abstract :** South Africa is a diverse nation but with many challenges. The fundamental changes in the political, economic and educational domains in South Africa in the late 1990s affected the South African community profoundly. In higher education, experiences of discrimination and bias are detrimental to the sense of belonging of staff and students. It is therefore important to cultivate an appreciation of diversity and inclusion. To bridge common understandings with the reality of racial inequality, we must understand the ways in which senior and executive leadership at universities think about social justice issues relating to diversity and inclusion and contextualize these within the current post-democracy landscape. The position and status of social justice issues and initiatives in South African higher education is a slow process. The focus is to highlight how and to what extent initiatives or practices around campus diversity and inclusion have been considered and made part of the mainstream intellectual and academic conversations in South Africa. This involves an examination of the social and epistemological conditions of possibility for meaningful research and curriculum practices, staff and student recruitment, and student access and success in addressing the challenges posed by social diversity on campuses. Methodology: In this study, university senior and executive leadership were interviewed about their perceptions and advancement of social justice and examine the buffering effects of diverse and inclusive peer interactions and institutional commitment on the relationship between discrimination–bias and sense of belonging for staff and students at the institutions. The paper further explores diversity and inclusion initiatives at the three institutions using a Critical Race Theory approach in conjunction with a literature review on social justice with a special focus on diversity and inclusion. Findings: This paper draws on research findings that demonstrate the need to address social justice issues of diversity and inclusion in the SA higher education context. The reason for this is so that university leaders can live out their experiences and values as they work to transform students into being accountable and responsible. Documents were selected for review with the intent of illustrating how diversity and inclusion work being done across an institution can shape the experiences of previously disadvantaged persons at these institutions. The research has highlighted the need for institutional leaders to embody their own mission and vision as they frame social justice issues for the campus community. Finally, the paper provides recommendations to institutions for strengthening high-level diversity and inclusion programs/initiatives among staff, students and administrators. The conclusion stresses the importance of addressing the historical and current policies and practices that either facilitate or negate the goals of social justice, encouraging these privileged institutions to create internal committees or task forces that focus on racial and ethnic disparities in the institution.

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