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## **Exploring Intersectionality into the Design of an Equality Strategy within Higher Education: A Brazilian and UK study**

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### **Summary**

Incorporating intersectionality within higher education institutions (HEIs) strategies is not merely theoretical but a practical necessity for fostering inclusive environments. This paper explores a strategic approach that embraces the transformative potential of intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive approaches that address the diverse experiences of academic communities. This study integrated semiotic analysis and rich picture methods along with intersectionality within higher education framework to investigate the dynamics of equality in Brazil and UK HEIs. Findings of the study advocates for continuous reinterpretation and adaptation of equality strategies, in line with evolving understandings of intersectional identities and their impact on educational experiences. The paper concludes by emphasizing the interplay between social justice and environmental sustainability, advocating for a holistic approach to addressing social inequalities alongside environmental challenges. This integrated perspective is crucial for HEIs aiming to contribute to societal transformation through research and education.

**Keywords:** Inclusivity, Intersectionality, Equality, Higher Education Institutions, Brazil and United Kingdom.

**Track 9:** Gender in Management

**Word count:** 1993

## **Introduction**

The discourse on equality within higher education has evolved to underscore the critical role of intersectionality in dissecting and addressing the multifaceted nature of inequality. This progression acknowledges that effective gender equality strategies must be nuanced and inclusive, accounting for the diverse experiences of individuals across various identity spectrums. Intersectionality, a concept pioneered by Crenshaw in 1989 and further developed by scholars such as Collins (2000), offers a lens through which the interconnectedness of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identity markers can be examined, revealing how these intersections influence experiences of discrimination or privilege.

The integration of intersectionality into higher education equality strategies marks a significant shift from single-axis approaches, focusing on the interplay between gender, race, class, and other identities. This approach not only aligns with the foundational work of Crenshaw and Collins but also responds to current scholarly discussions on fostering inclusivity and equity in academic settings. Examples from institutions like the University of California, Riverside, and the State of Sikkim illustrate efforts to accommodate the complex realities of those facing multiple forms of discrimination, showcasing the transition towards more integrated and intersectional approaches in higher education.

Contemporary studies highlight the imperative of embedding intersectionality in equality strategies to effectively address the nuances of gender and race interactions. Research by scholars such as Chen, Medina, and Meadows-Haworth underscores the relevance of intersectionality in identifying specific challenges within educational contexts, such as the intersectional disadvantages faced by disabled women students in the UK. These insights underscore the complexity of addressing gender disparities and campus culture through an intersectional lens, aiming for a more inclusive academic environment.

Furthermore, the narrative explores the challenges of applying intersectionality in academic settings, including methodological complexities and practical application issues. Critics argue that the multifaceted nature of intersectionality complicates its integration into institutional strategies, yet the need for such an approach is increasingly recognized. Practical challenges, such as resistance to change and resource constraints, highlight the difficulties in embedding intersectionality within higher education frameworks.

The integration of intersectionality into higher education equality strategies is not merely theoretical but a practical necessity for fostering inclusive environments. This approach ensures that policies and practices are truly inclusive, reflecting the interconnected nature of social categories and addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups. Through a deliberate and informed approach, higher education institutions can achieve a more equitable and inclusive community for all members, aligning with the foundational principles of intersectionality and responding to contemporary scholarly and practical discussions on inclusivity and equity in academic settings.

The paper hopes to explore a strategic approach that embraces the transformative potential of intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive approaches that address the diverse experiences of academic communities. By leveraging insights from contemporary research and practical initiatives, higher education institutions can develop and implement equality strategies that reflect the principles of intersectionality. This involves recognizing the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of their identities and actively

working to dismantle systemic barriers, thereby promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion at all levels of the academic experience.

## **Methods**

This study plans to integrate semiotic analysis and rich picture methods within higher education settings to investigate the dynamics of inequality and intersectionality. By exploring the visual representations developed by university leaders, this research elucidates the complex interplay between gender, race, disability, and socioeconomic status. Our methodological approach bridges abstract theoretical concepts and tangible institutional practices, offering a novel lens to examine the challenges and potentials of embedding intersectionality into gender equality strategies.

### **Semiotic Analysis**

Leveraging Charles Sanders Peirce's Sign Theory, our semiotic analysis delves into the process of meaning-making within cultural texts and practices in higher education. This framework scrutinizes how signs—comprising symbols, icons, and indexes—convey meanings related to diverse identities and experiences within the academic sector. We examine the symbolic barriers and facilitators to equality, focusing on how meanings attached to various identity markers influence the experiences of students and staff. This analytical approach is pivotal for understanding the nuanced ways in which discrimination and privilege intersect, informing the development of inclusive equality strategies.

### **Rich Picture Methodology**

Complementing our semiotic analysis, rich picture methodology from Soft Systems Methodology provides a visual tool to map the intricate institutional cultures and their impacts on equality strategies. This technique allows stakeholders to depict and analyze the structural, cultural, and individual factors affecting equality in higher education. By engaging diverse community members in the co-design of policies and practices, rich pictures ensure that multiple perspectives are considered, fostering a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities for embedding intersectionality into equality strategies (Checkland & Poulter, 2006; Bell & Morse, 2013).

### **Application of Intersectionality Theory**

Central to both semiotic analysis and rich picture methodology is the application of intersectionality theory. This theory serves as a critical lens to examine the interconnected forms of identity and oppression, highlighting the necessity for equality strategies that not only recognize but actively address the complex interrelations between different forms of discrimination (Jones, 2016). Our approach aligns with Peirce's perspective on semiosis as an ongoing interpretative process, advocating for the continuous adaptation of equality strategies to reflect the evolving understanding of intersectionality within higher education.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The study's data collection involves the development and analysis of visual representations by university leaders, alongside a comprehensive review of literature on equality and intersectionality in higher education. Semiotic analysis of these visual tools and rich pictures

facilitates a deep dive into the institutional dynamics, enabling the identification of effective and inclusive equality strategies. Our analysis leverages both theoretical frameworks and empirical research to design comprehensive equality strategies informed by the current state of gender equality within higher education.

This methodological framework offers a comprehensive approach to exploring the dynamics of inequality and intersectionality in higher education. By integrating semiotic analysis and rich picture methodology, our study provides unique insights into the challenges and potentials of embedding intersectionality into gender equality strategies, contributing to the broader discourse on equality and diversity within academic institutions.

## **Initial Findings and Discussion**

Our study has started to reveal that intersectionality is intricately woven into the fabric of higher education institutions (HEIs), manifesting through varied and complex dynamics that influence the experiences of individuals across gender, race, disability, and socioeconomic status. Semiotic analysis of visual representations developed by university leaders uncovers the symbolic barriers that perpetuate inequality, as well as the potential facilitators for fostering a more inclusive academic environment. These visual narratives, rich with symbols, icons, and indexes, illuminate the nuanced ways in which identities intersect, shaping the lived experiences of students and staff within HEIs.

The semiotic analysis indicates that certain symbols and narratives within university policies and campus cultures serve as barriers to achieving gender equality and intersectionality. For instance, traditional symbols of academic excellence and meritocracy often mask underlying biases that disadvantage marginalized groups. These symbols reinforce existing power structures, subtly perpetuating exclusion and inequality. Additionally, the study finds that institutional narratives frequently overlook or simplify the complexities of intersectional identities, leading to policies and practices that fail to address the multifaceted nature of discrimination.

Conversely, our findings also highlight visual narratives that act as facilitators for inclusion within HEIs. Rich pictures developed during the study depict scenarios where diverse identities are recognized and valued, pointing towards the possibility of more inclusive campus cultures. These visual tools demonstrate the potential for symbols and narratives to challenge traditional power dynamics, advocating for a shift towards more equitable and inclusive institutional practices. For example, representations of collaborative spaces and inclusive leadership styles emerge as powerful symbols for fostering an environment that embraces diversity and intersectionality.

The application of rich pictures has proven instrumental in engaging stakeholders in the co-design of inclusive policies and practices. This methodology enables a diverse range of community members to visualize and articulate the dynamic interplay between various forms of identity and institutional structures. Through these visual narratives, stakeholders identify key challenges and opportunities for embedding intersectionality into equality strategies, facilitating a collective understanding and commitment to transformative change.

Our findings underscore the critical role of intersectionality in the development and implementation of effective equality strategies within HEIs. The study illustrates that strategies informed by an intersectional lens are more likely to address the complex realities of

discrimination and privilege, leading to more nuanced and comprehensive approaches to equality. The integration of semiotic analysis and rich picture methodology offers valuable insights into how intersectionality can be effectively embedded in institutional policies and practices, ensuring that equality strategies are responsive to the diverse needs and experiences of the academic community.

The research highlights systemic factors that contribute to educational inequalities, including but not limited to, institutional policies, curricula, and campus cultures. These factors often intersect in ways that exacerbate disparities, underscoring the importance of adopting expansive, people-centered paradigms that recognize the ethical and political significance of intersectionality. Our findings advocate for continuous reinterpretation and adaptation of equality strategies, in line with evolving understandings of intersectional identities and their impact on educational experiences.

Our study contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and intersectionality within higher education by offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and potentials for embedding intersectionality into institutional strategies. The integration of semiotic analysis and rich picture methodology provides a unique framework for examining the symbolic barriers and facilitators to equality, highlighting the importance of inclusive narratives and practices. These findings underscore the need for HEIs to continually engage with and adapt their equality strategies, ensuring they are informed by a comprehensive and intersectional approach to diversity and inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Initial conclusions derived from the interpretant data, facilitated through rich pictures, encapsulates a collective vision for a society deeply committed to inclusivity, diversity, and social justice. This vision articulates a pressing need for spaces that are equitable and embrace the entire human experience, advocating for a transformative social agenda that places inclusivity and diversity at its core. It reflects a broad societal desire for change, urging communities, institutions, and individuals to actively participate in creating a more equitable world.

The analysis underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing diversity, highlighting the inherent strength in our differences and the imperative for collective efforts to ensure universal participation and freedom. It resonates with scholarly perspectives that emphasize the role of cultural traditions and diverse heritages in promoting community cohesion and a sense of belonging. Specifically, the call for higher education institutions (HEIs) to incorporate diversity and inclusion into their operational ethos reflects a strategic approach to fostering an inclusive academic and social environment. The conclusion emphasizes the interplay between social justice and environmental sustainability, advocating for a holistic approach to addressing social inequalities alongside environmental challenges. This integrated perspective is crucial for HEIs aiming to contribute to societal transformation through research and education.

Community cohesion is identified as a pivotal theme, advocating for the creation of safe and inclusive spaces that facilitate social connections and accessibility for everyone. This aligns with the notion of creating urban environments that encourage community engagement and social cohesion, emphasizing the potential of HEIs to collaborate with local communities in urban development initiatives.

The emphasis on individual expression and freedom highlights the societal imperative to combat oppression and support individuals' rights to express their identities and beliefs freely. This principle is crucial for creating academic environments where diversity of perspectives is celebrated. The positive representation theme underscores the influence of constructive imagery and narratives on fostering an inclusive and empathetic societal mindset. This suggests that HEIs and broader society should leverage positive depictions of diversity and community to promote a more inclusive culture.

The rich picture data paints a compelling vision of a society striving for inclusivity, diversity, social justice, and community cohesion. It calls for a concerted effort from HEIs, communities, and individuals to embody these values, urging the creation of spaces that are not just aspirationally inclusive but actively so, through ongoing dialogue, research, and tangible actions that contribute to the realization of these foundational ideals in our societies and institutions.

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