Diversity Under Attack: Does Inclusion Have a Future Now?

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Abstract

In recent years, accepted norms and values regarding diversity, equity and inclusion have come under increasing attack, particularly in the United States. This is a concerted campaign of outright hostility to measures taken to address historic impacts of discrimination and segregation. The emergence of diversity management initiatives after World War II was based on a military response to the negative impact of discrimination. These initiatives paralleled powerful new legislative and policy advances in landmark decisions regarding equality in terms of race, gender and disability. The evidence points to a sustained improvement in the opportunities open to non-traditional learners over many decades. Internationally, diversity and inclusion became essential elements in educational reform and are powerfully reflected in programs such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The nature and specificity of organized ideological attacks on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are a matter of significant concern, compounded by the fact that since January 2025 it is increasingly part of US Government policy priorities to reverse any and all such initiatives and (more disturbingly) the values and thinking underpinning them. Legislative bans and restrictions are being enforced at both federal and State levels abolishing or restricting DEI programs and prohibiting associated training for staff or students. In further developments, associated topics around racism, sexism, privilege, identity have been banned. At university level, free speech is severely compromised with academics and students who espouse equity and equality labelled dangerous or even illegal. The very words that underpin discourse on DEI are now forbidden and educational institutions are seeing their continued funding dependent on conforming to the new Administration's rejection of DEI. This paper will examine the roots of this counterattack on principles underlying inclusive education. It will trace the achievements of inclusionary best practice and interrogate the role of powerful forces and monopolistic media in attacking justice-based principles of equity. The role and operation of inclusion as a principle of quality education will be assessed in light of this seismic policy shift. While the immediate crisis is in the United States, the paper will address the situation of DEI internationally with particular reference to Europe. The future of inclusion as both principle and method in achieving rights and participation will be evaluated.

Keywords: *Diversity; Equity; Inclusion; Critical Thinking; Human Rights; SDGs; Quality education; Accessibility*

1. Introduction

In recent years, long-established norms and values surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have come under intensifying attack, particularly in the United States. This backlash is not accidental. It represents a deliberate and coordinated campaign of hostility aimed at dismantling measures designed to redress the enduring impacts of historical discrimination and segregation. What was once widely regarded as a moral and legal imperative - addressing systemic inequalities in education and public life - has become a battleground in a growing ideological conflict. That also has international implications.

The origins of DEI initiatives can be traced to the post-World War II era, particularly within the context of military reform, where the negative consequences of discrimination were recognized as detrimental to national cohesion and effectiveness. These early efforts were soon complemented by transformative legal and policy advances, most notably through landmark civil rights legislation, citizen activism and judicial decisions that affirmed equality on the basis of race, gender, and disability. Over subsequent decades, evidence has shown that such interventions significantly expanded opportunities for historically marginalized and non-traditional learners.

Globally, diversity and inclusion have become integral components of educational reform. They are enshrined in numerous international frameworks, most notably the United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals*, which position inclusive and equitable quality education as a foundational pillar for sustainable development and social justice. In this context, DEI is not merely a policy preference but a globally endorsed standard for advancement of human rights, democratic citizenship, and institutional accountability.

However, the nature and intensity of recent ideological attacks on DEI raise profound concerns. These attacks have escalated to the point that, as of January 2025, reversing DEI frameworks has become a declared policy priority of the United States federal government. What is especially alarming is the extent to which this reversal encompasses not only practical programs and training but also the core values and conceptual frameworks that underpin them.

At both federal and State levels, sweeping legislative bans and administrative restrictions are now being enacted. These measures aim to abolish DEI offices, prohibit training related to anti-racism or equity, disparage all discussion on equality or human rights and eliminate curricular content (and even books) that reference systemic injustice. Topics such as racism, sexism, privilege, and identity have been explicitly banned from educational discourse in many jurisdictions. The erosion of academic freedom is particularly evident at university level, where faculty and students who advocate for equity and inclusion are increasingly stigmatized, surveilled, and, in some cases, sanctioned. In some instances, expressions of support for DEI principles are deemed not only subversive but unlawful.

Even the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion is being purged. Educational institutions are now finding that continued funding - whether public or private - may depend on strict compliance with the current administration's anti-DEI stance. This instrumentalization of funding as a tool of ideological enforcement has deeply compromised institutional autonomy and the integrity of education itself.

This paper explores the historical and ideological roots of the contemporary backlash against inclusive education. It traces the achievements and best practices that have defined inclusive pedagogies and policies across decades and across continents. Further, it interrogates the role of powerful political interests and monopolistic media in framing equity-based initiatives as threats to national identity, tradition, or meritocracy. In doing so, it highlights how DEI has become a proxy battleground in a broader cultural war over democracy, pluralism, human rights and justice.

The paper also considers the principle of inclusion as a hallmark of quality education. In light of the current policy shift in the United States - a shift with potentially global repercussions - it re-evaluates the role of inclusion not merely as an educational method but as a fundamental condition for rights-based participation in democratic societies.

While the current crisis is most visible in the United States, its implications extend far beyond. As part of a comparative analysis, the paper considers developments in Europe and other international contexts where similar tensions are emerging. In doing so, it seeks to assess the future of DEI as both a guiding principle and practical framework for inclusive education in a world increasingly divided over questions of identity, justice, and human dignity.

2. Transformation, Knowledge and Access in Global Learning

Each social transformation we have experienced (from pre-Industrial Age to the Industrial Age, from Industrial to Post Industrial) has created a radically new articulation of prevailing educational systems. The current transformation is creating just such a new articulation. The transformation towards the Knowledge Society is, however, even more revolutionary. It is linked to a set of processes and elements that are, for the first time in human history, explicitly and consciously global. This planetary process links all countries and societies. It changes the fundamental processes of communication, cognition, memory, and identity construction that provide the foundation for social life and knowledge creation. At present, we are not only changing the aims and objectives of the prevailing educational system, but also the division of labor between the different components of the educational system, up to and including higher education.

This entails a parallel process of changing learning itself. Cultural transfer through education is a critical means to generate the stability required by the continuation of social life. Cultural transmission, however, is not only a means. Societies need a system of education to exist. Much of this cultural transfer occurs in these systems.

The other key function of education is diametrically opposite to its integrating and stabilizing function: societies can continue to exist only because they adapt and change. For this they need variety, incremental innovation, and reconfiguration. Complete integration of aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge would be fatal to human creativity but also to what is valued as the democratic process. Education is, therefore, also needed to generate and facilitate social change and innovation.

A key function of education is the ability to analyze the contradictions and conflicts in societies fractured by the inherent inequalities of the prevailing socio-economic system. As the ecological, psychological and social dimensions of crisis become increasingly apparent, it is essential to rediscover critical capacity. This means a radical challenge to accepted wisdom, and a deep and focused investigation of the persistence of the profound inequalities in human opportunity and access – ranging from entrenched reactionary forces (racism, homophobia, sexism and anti-scientific obscurantism) to the growing disparities in wealth, power and access that now characterize most of our planet.

The interaction between technology and globalization has created new challenges but also new opportunities. Digitalization is connecting people, cities, countries and continents in ways that vastly increase both individual and collective potential. These same forces and trends also have the potential to make the world volatile, complex and uncertain. At its core, digitalization is a democratizing force. It is now possible to connect and collaborate with anyone. But digitalization also has the ability to concentrate extraordinary power. Digitalization can make the smallest voice heard everywhere but can also quash individuality and cultural uniqueness.

For higher education, this has the added dimension of challenging traditional roles, power systems and functions of the Academy and removing the sacrosanct elitism inherent in such restricted systems. Between the impact of global war, the emergence of social responsibility and even rudimentary forms of the welfare state, societies gradually built up a secure network of policies and procedures as much designed to maintain security and order as to proclaim that 'democratic capitalism' had triumphed. Universities provided the graduates, administrators and new emerging elites to maintain unprecedented prosperity. Universities also provided critical space to challenge the external environment. At almost every level however, western universities did not support the transformative socio-political upheavals of the 1960s. Universities also lost large parts of the digital race, ceding ground to exponentially more innovative and expanding high-tech companies. Lacking critical insight or technological relevance, many universities fell into serving mainly national roles and functions. This pattern has been further hampered by the massive student hunger for new horizons and thinking, international focus and engagement and the ability to move seamlessly across boundaries both real and imagined. The task becomes one of designing learning to meet needs and realities of a new world.

3. From Learning to Corporate Need: the Assault On Public Good

The wider socio-economic environment is neither objective nor unchanging. It is the dynamic sphere of ever-mutating relationships and a matrix of power systems that define spaces around ownership, access, control and autonomy (both group and individual). This determines the contours of both decision-making systems and acceptance of challenge to orthodox knowledge. This tension between systems-resistance and need for innovative renewal is a paradox or contradiction central to the understanding of innovation in hierarchical societies, where differential access to resources is the norm and collective enterprise the exception.

The surrounding environment should not be reduced to some abstract conceptualization, divorced from everything except a theoretical construction. Environment is not simply the physical space around people. Neither is it a reified space, removed from all consideration of control and domination in concrete social contexts. Environment is about other people, and about the relationships between people and the social structures that other people construct in terms of interaction, power-relationships

and hierarchy. Environment is the system (educational, economic, political, social) under which conditions of innovation and creativity, meaningful learning, are forged, tolerated, accepted, rejected or enhanced. Environment is centrally about power and the exercise of power.

Finally, issues and elements around design, inclusion and access connect to concepts of *social justice* in education. This is critical for strategic planning for future education systems and learning methodologies. This conceptualization enables us to understand that, for example, universal design, like any measure concerning equity and enhanced inclusion, cannot be divorced from wider prevailing issues around power hierarchy and access to resources. Universal Design for Learning is one tool among many intended to remove barriers to participation. The comprehensive nature of its vision means that it challenges structures themselves.

This builds on earlier work by thinkers like Freire but goes beyond into human rights and participation on the basis of defined benefits and outcomes.

> *In accepting the case for social justice, there is the embedded a priori assumption that the world is not structured fairly enough, and that something should be done about it. This assumption does not gain universal assent, especially from those who regard the market as the most simple and effective mechanism for distributing goods. Even where the abstract principle is supported, it is likely to strike the rock of self-interest as soon as it demands the shifting of resources from some of the haves to some of the have-less or have not groups.*
> [1]

The integration of social justice principles into public education has emerged as a response to long-standing structural inequalities and the evolving role of schools as agents of societal transformation. Social justice in education emphasizes fairness, inclusion, and the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, aiming to challenge systems of oppression and empower all learners. School, obviously, is only one element in this cultural transfer – and a rather superficial one, as Dewey noted [2]. This background traces the philosophical, historical, and policy foundations of social justice in public education, highlighting its relevance in today's diverse and dynamic schooling environments.

Social justice education draws on a range of philosophical traditions, particularly critical theory, which interrogates how power and inequality are reproduced through institutions like schools (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983) [3][4]. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is widely regarded as a foundational text, advocating for a dialogic, emancipatory model of education where students are co-creators of knowledge. Freire emphasized education as a tool for critical consciousness (*conscientização*), enabling individuals to recognize and challenge injustice.

Additionally, theorists such as John Dewey argued that education should prepare students for democratic participation and social responsibility, laying the groundwork for viewing schools as key spaces for civic development (Dewey, 1916). The push for social justice in education has been shaped by various civil rights and equity movements across the 20th and 21st centuries. In the United States, desegregation following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), Title IX, and affirmative action policies all reflect efforts to correct educational disparities. Similar movements around the world, including anti-apartheid education reforms in South Africa and indigenous education rights in Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, have contributed to a global discourse around justice in education.

Social justice in education involves multiple dimensions:

- **Equity vs. Equality**: Social justice emphasizes *equity* - providing different levels of support based on individual needs - rather than simple equality of resources.
- **Recognition and Representation**: Ensuring diverse identities, cultures, and histories are acknowledged and included in the curriculum and school life.
- **Access and Participation**: Removing barriers to education for marginalized groups and creating inclusive, participatory learning environments.
- **Redistribution of Resources**: Advocating for fair funding models and resource allocation that address socio-economic disparities.

Modern public education systems incorporate social justice principles through inclusive policies, multicultural curricula, and anti-discrimination legislation. Examples include:

- **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy** (Ladson-Billings, 1995): Encourages teaching that reflects students' cultural contexts.
- **Restorative Practices**: Replace punitive discipline with approaches that focus on dialogue, accountability, and healing.
- **Critical Pedagogy**: Encourages learners to question and act upon social injustices.

Educators are also trained to recognize systemic bias, unconscious prejudice, and the social determinants that affect student performance and wellbeing.

4. The Use of Diversity In Modern Education Systems

The integration of diversity into modern education systems reflects a broader societal shift toward inclusivity, equity, and global awareness. As education moves beyond traditional, standardized approaches, diversity has become a core value and practice in contemporary pedagogy. Iy is important to consider the background of the development and significance of diversity in education, exploring its historical roots, conceptual evolution, and practical implementation.

The push for diversity in education is closely linked to historical movements for social justice and equality. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s marked a significant turning point, leading to desegregation efforts and legislation which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional (Ladson-Billings, 1995). [5] Similar movements around the world reflect global efforts to address historical exclusions and systemic inequalities.

Initially centered on race and ethnicity, the concept of diversity broadened considerably to include gender, socioeconomic status, language, disability, sexual orientation, and religion (Banks, 2006). [6] Education systems today recognize the importance of intersectionality, the idea that individuals may experience multiple, overlapping forms of identity and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991). [7] This has shifted the focus from equal access alone to equity and inclusion in both policy and practice.

Modern education policies increasingly emphasize inclusive education, defined by UNESCO (2009) as "a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners." This approach advocates for adapting curriculum, pedagogy, and school environments to accommodate the needs of all students, not just those traditionally excluded. Multicultural education, as articulated by scholars such as Banks (2006), promotes the integration of diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum, fostering mutual respect and preparing students for democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society. In practice, embracing diversity means reforming curriculum content, teaching strategies, and school culture. Culturally responsive teaching, for instance, encourages educators to draw on students' cultural knowledge and experiences to make learning more meaningful (Gay, 2010). [8]

Despite progress, the implementation of diversity initiatives faces significant challenges. There is often a gap between policy and practice, due to inadequate teacher training, limited resources, or systemic bias (Nieto, 2010). [9] Additionally, diversity efforts have become politicized in some contexts, leading to controversy over curriculum content, such as critical race theory or LGBTQ+ inclusion. These debates highlight the tension between promoting diversity and respecting local values and traditions.

Diversity in modern education systems is not merely a trend but a necessary response to the realities of an interconnected, multicultural world. Rooted in historical struggles for justice and informed by evolving understandings of identity and equity, diversity initiatives aim to create more inclusive, responsive, and effective learning environments. As education continues to evolve, the commitment to diversity remains central to its role in fostering human potential and social cohesion.

5. Asserting Diversity in Europe

For contemporary society, issues of diversity and equality are pressing ones for a number of connected reasons. This reflects the demographic, social and cultural changes of the wider socio-

economic environment. It also reflects the powerful challenges and struggles within the organization, structure and control of work and labour conditions that have emerged with a new globalized environment.

The nature of the modern labor market displays increased complexity and diversity emerging from social change and population movements. This links to issues like:

- Forced migration
- Regional impoverishment
- Increased participation rates for women
- The changing nature of work itself (due to technological advances and improvement)
- Legacies of colonialism and racism
- Implications of legislation and human rights practice.

These touch on diversity in regard to rights, ethical practice, conflict resolution and promotion of equal opportunities. The labor market therefore manifests changes in work practice that have been conditioned, on the one hand, by the process of globalization and, on the other, by the enactment of equality-based legislation in various jurisdictions.

Equal status for all (and particularly for those who have been traditionally excluded by reason of prejudice or discrimination) poses a set of challenges for social institutions apart from the labor market. The added impact of European Union rules produces a strong emphasis on common standards both to affirm rights and to regulate workforce conditions. Both European and American concepts of diversity management in labor market contexts have a number of shared concerns.

These include:
- Best practice in the human resources development function
- Maximization of the potential of new and existing labor market participant categories
- Reduction of social and economic cost in dealing with diverse labor groups
- Conformity to national or transnational legislative requirements
- Tapping into the creativity latent in diverse and non-standard work groups and perspectives
- Innovative responses to inclusion, design and differentiated market sectors.

In European terms, management of diversity has been centrally linked to the enforcement of principles of equality among citizens and the prohibition of discrimination on a wide range of specified grounds. While legislation varies significantly between all Member States, in most there remains a gap between the legal prohibition of discrimination and the actual outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged groups. In all countries, legal proof of discrimination tends to be very difficult.

The dramatic changes in employment and economic performance in recent years relate to the identified fact that European rights are in fact increasingly restricted. They are sometimes seen to be available only to European citizens and not to the millions of external workers, refugees and asylum seekers who have arrived in Europe in ever-greater numbers. The extension of equality of rights of participation, citizenship and access beyond gender to all citizens (and indeed non-citizens) is now a fundamental question of European social policy.

Managing diversity and equality approaches can be seen, at a minimum, as tools to enable vocational educators and trainers to adapt to challenges posed by differentiated workforces (where expectations and levels of communication may even be sources of potential conflict). In a wider context, they may be seen as powerful resources to benefit from external change processes and - tapping into levels of creativity and potential produced by radical departures from past certainties.

The critical need for international engagement and learning needs to be emphasized in vocational training contexts (as much from US as European perspectives). Rights and inclusion are international issues – a fact not as widely represented in professional trainer development as it should be. The removal of barriers to participation will, at the end of the day, be about asserting the primacy of a global vision that challenges traditional complacencies as well as inherited structures. This

emphasizes the best practice and innovative quality that underscore effective international engagement and learning.

Barriers to equality stem from prejudice and ignorance. The removal of barriers can be addressed (at least formally) by legislation and monitoring practice. Deeper transformation can be expedited most rapidly by educators seizing the opportunities offered by social difference and incorporating them into the employment process itself in innovative learning paradigms. This places a critical focus on the training of trainers to achieve mainstreamed equality approaches and attitudes.

Equality and diversity are common concerns. Such a focus provides a valuable network of specialists who have:

- Deeper understanding of equality and diversity issues and their relevance and application in the workplace
- Comprehensive knowledge of policies, procedures and legislation
- Understanding of difference, stereotyping and prejudice
- Understanding of diversity at work
- Skills to design and develop toolkits for work-based equality interventions.

The removal of barriers to participation and the enhancement of embedded equality approaches will, at the end of the day, be about asserting strategic policy as well as the techniques necessary to embed best practice. A sense of vision about what society means, and about what it is for, can inform the creative process of training and skill development interventions. It can give a sense of value and direction to the design and development of employment structures. A lack of informed understanding about the meaning of work in contemporary society means that we could be forever condemned to repeat past mistakes.

The changes produced in both the human and technical aspects of the globalization process shape how global education may now include various learning communities previously excluded by reason of prejudice, discrimination or remoteness. We need to support learners across the globe to transcend barriers and address conflict and persistent discrimination by means of skillful application of potent technological tools in the metamorphosis of traditional educational systems to meet unprecedented levels of socio-economic transformation. Inclusion is not simply a theoretical construct – it has quantifiable dimensions. Inequality can be measured in terms of wealth, access and power. The inescapable fact is that our society is grossly unequal and this trend is accelerating.

This also speaks of the critical importance of innovation and vision in addressing the key priorities for developing learning and transnationality to combat socio-economic marginalization. It is of interest that marginalized groups themselves can often be critically important springboards for new innovative learning methodologies.

6. **The Attack on Inclusion**

In recent years, the MAGA movement in the United States has escalated a systematic campaign against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, academic freedom, and broader civil rights frameworks. Positioned rhetorically as a defense of "merit-based" opportunity and ideological neutrality, the MAGA assault on DEI represents a concerted political and cultural effort to reshape public education and civil rights enforcement in ways that critics argue are regressive, authoritarian, and exclusionary. This movement has deep ideological roots and echoes the fears and reactionary policies stemming from legacies of slavery, racism and civil violence.

The aggressive push to dismantle DEI programs across the federal government began in January 2025, with Executive Order 14173, *"Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity."* This order mandates the elimination of DEI offices and initiatives in all federal agencies and government contractors, asserting that such programs constitute unlawful discrimination. While the language of the order appeals to principles of fairness and individual merit, legal scholars have

criticized it as dangerously vague and legally destabilizing, enabling discretionary and politically motivated enforcement (LPE Project, 2025). [11]

Perhaps more consequentially, the administration has sought to abolish the "disparate impact" legal standard. This doctrine - enshrined in civil rights law since the 1971 Supreme Court case *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.* - allows plaintiffs to challenge policies that have discriminatory effects, even absent explicit discriminatory intent. Its removal significantly weakens civil rights enforcement in education, housing, and employment, representing a fundamental shift in how discrimination is defined and addressed in American law.

Universities have experienced immediate and tangible consequences as a result of these policies. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), under political pressure to align with federal directives, dismantled its Community and Equity Office in May 2025 and terminated all formal DEI programming. Administrators framed the decision as a reorientation toward a "merit-based" approach, but the university suffered significant consequences: a loss of approximately $35 million in research grants and an 8% reduction in graduate admissions for the 2025–26 academic year. Similarly, the University of Houston faced severe funding cuts, losing nearly $10.3 million across 18 federally supported research projects. Cancelled studies included projects on residential segregation, LGBTQ+ health disparities, and the history of feminist societies. These cases demonstrate how anti-DEI policies directly impact the production of socially relevant knowledge and funding for marginalized communities and topics.

Beyond the immediate effects on policy and funding, the anti-DEI campaign signals a deeper ideological shift in American governance. Critics have noted striking parallels between this approach and the tactics of authoritarian regimes. Michael Ignatieff, former president of Central European University, likened the Trump administration's attacks on elite institutions like Harvard to the Hungarian government's expulsion of CEU under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—an act widely regarded as emblematic of democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the erosion of DEI principles in education coincides with increased restrictions on public speech, academic inquiry, and institutional autonomy. The campaign threatens not only the rights of historically marginalized groups, but also the role of public education in fostering critical thinking, civic engagement, and democratic deliberation.

7. Conclusion

The coordinated assault on DEI programs, higher education, and civil rights marks a significant turning point in American public life. Through federal executive actions, state legislation, and institutional pressure, it aims to reconfigure the purpose and scope of education away from equity and inclusion, and toward a narrowly defined, ideologically charged version of meritocracy and neutrality. The implications are profound: a diminished ability to challenge systemic injustice, weakened civil rights protections, and a chilling effect on academic and intellectual freedom. As the movement continues to reshape the educational and legal landscape, it raises urgent questions about the future of justice, pluralism, and democracy in the United States.

The concerted attack on science itself, rationality and critical thinking is embedded in this assault. In Europe such tendencies exist already in some countries and are part of an international network of reactionary forces among to systematically roll back rights based interventions and inclusive strategies. This is seen graphically in the changing discourse around migration, Islamophobia, homophobia and xenophobia. The achievements of the past century cannot be taken for granted. Inclusion and diversity are key elements in the generation of knowledge and innovation. Educators need to be at the forefront of defending these advances at a time of significant peril that is well-orchestrated and amply funded and incited by a monopolistic media.

The real discourse in education for marginalized groups and populations is Active Inclusion: located between Access and Citizenship. Access denied is the same as rights denied. Opening access is the first step in an emancipatory process. The essential issue is however a clear assertion of the importance of equal citizenship. Citizenship takes access from being present to active participation. This remains the critical determinant today in the rights of people with disabilities, migrants, refugees and women. By challenging legacies of segregation, questioning assumptions of accepted norms, asserting rights and embracing digital emancipation, educational inclusion creates opportunities for

systemic transformation. This can be achieved by investing in educator training, flexible educational practices, and promoting a more inclusive and equitable learning experience for hitherto excluded learners. This analysis highlights the importance of ongoing efforts to advance educational inclusion, ensuring that all students have opportunities to succeed and thrive in diverse, integrated and supportive learning environments.

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