

Rhetoric on diversity in a public university according to its leaders

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to interpret the meanings given to the concept of diversity at university according to the discourse of its leaders, those with the capacity to influence the debate and definition of diversity policies in the institution. To this end, a qualitative case study was conducted at a public university in Spain, interviewing 31 leaders from various collectives (faculty, students, and administrative staff) and collegiate bodies. The results describe two different meanings –as individuality and as collectivity– with two different perspectives woven through: enrichment or problem. Interviewees point to foreign students, with disabilities, women, or with limited socio-economic resources, though they do not refer to faculty members or staff. These results allow us to distinguish between three types of rhetoric in relation this concept –naturalization, difference, and inequality– which could potentially be examined further in new studies on the orientation and development of diversity in different contexts.

Key words: higher education, diversity, Spain, leadership, policy discourse analysis.

Resumen: El artículo tiene como objetivo interpretar los significados del concepto diversidad en la universidad según el discurso de sus líderes, aquellos con capacidad de influencia en el debate y definición de las políticas de diversidad en la institución. Desde una perspectiva cualitativa, se ha realizado un estudio de caso en una universidad pública en España donde se entrevistaron a 31 líderes de distintos estamentos (profesorado, estudiantes y personal de administración) y órganos colegiados. Los resultados describen dos significados diferentes: como individualidad y como colectividad, atravesados ambos por dos orientaciones: enriquecimiento o problema. Se nombran a estudiantes extranjeros, con discapacidad, a mujeres o a personas con escasos recursos socioeconómicos, pero no se refiere profesorado o *staff*. Estos resultados permiten distinguir tres retóricas sobre el concepto –naturalización, diferencia y desigualdad– con potencial para profundizar en nuevos estudios sobre la orientación y el desarrollo de las políticas de diversidad en distintos contextos.

Palabras clave: educación superior, diversidad, España, liderazgo, análisis del discurso político.

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Introduction

Diversity as a topic of inclusion has become a policy priority in higher education institutions (Naciones Unidas, 2006; EHEA, 2018). The literature indicates that this project aims to promote the access of underrepresented groups, respond to personal, professional and social needs of all, and to favor their participation and achievement by creating equitable learning environments (Owen, 2009); as well as eliminate negative attitudes and beliefs related to race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle, class, age, language, religion, disability, and their intersections, respecting their individual and group identities (Stefani, 2018).

However, as comparative studies have shown, not all universities understand the concept of diversity in the same way, nor do they orient the policies and subjects to which their actions are designed in the same sense (Brooks, 2019; Buenestado *et al.*, 2019). In the international context, all university policies move in different directions, both in terms of orientation and the collectives that are included. While Europe has been particularly conducive to non-discrimination policies based on income, gender, age or disability (Brooks, 2019; Gibson, 2015; Klein, 2016), in the United States affirmative action policies for racialized ethnic minorities have prevailed (Jones, 2014; Thomas, 2018), and in Latin America –as a result of political struggles of indigenous movements over the last decades– intercultural universities concerned with culturally relevant education in ethnic, linguistic or cultural terms have progressed (Dietz and Mateos-Cortés, 2016; Guilherme and Dietz, 2017).

In Spain, policies and the number of studies on inclusion at universities are still limited (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2019; Benet-Gil, 2020). This paper takes its place in the international studies that examine the meaning of the concept of diversity in higher education institutions and the way they influence the meaning and orientation of equity and inclusion policies with specific groups¹ (Ahmed, 2006; Berrey, 2011; Bowl, 2016; Klein, 2016; Brooks, 2019).

This work is a case study on the rhetoric of diversity. For this, a public university in Spain was selected and its leaders were interviewed, people who are involved in the policy design and are capable of making it hegemonic since they hold one-person positions in the institution, either by democratic

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election or by appointment in the university administration, therefore they are responsible for university policy and its accountability to decision-making bodies (for example, rector, vice-rectors, directors of Specific Services, deans, departments directors, Student Councils or Social Council) representing diverse collectives (students, Administrative and Service Staff [hereinafter PAS] and faculty). Thus, the research questions are: what are their conceptions of diversity? and what groups are considered for the development of diversity policies at university?

Theoretical framework

The inclusive attention to diversity in higher education was promoted in the United States and in other countries with an Anglo-Saxon university tradition at the end of the 20th century and early 21st century. The literature has made a major contribution by trying to define what different meanings are taken by policies and what comparative results various collectives receive on their access to and progress in the institution. Since then, American literature has repeatedly stressed the *whiteness*, along with the elitist and exclusionary nature of university with respect its students and its leaders (Chin *et al.*, 2016; Stefani, 2018).

Several studies have shown the contradiction and double meaning given to the concept of diversity in higher education. On one hand, they refer to diversity as difference, pointing out vulnerable groups traditionally not present in the institution, as the black population and those with limited economic resources. On the other, in case there are policies, they refer to diversity as equity; however, they identify the lack of equity-oriented policies aimed at eliminating the factors that generate its absence and unequal progress in the institution (Acher, 2007; Owen, 2009).

These processes that derived from the meaning of diversity concept have also been described by Thomas (2018) as diversity regime. The author mentions that the institution draws on what he calls “happy talk” (Thomas, 2018); that is, individuals are seen as diverse considering that they belong to vulnerable, racial, or ethnic minority groups, but the social and cultural processes that put them under positions of inequality are obfuscated. Therefore, he notes that despite the presence of diversity language at universities, there is no change in structures of distribution of power, resources, and opportunities for these collectives. Actually, this diversity language contributes to the increase of inequality considering that, for its leaders, mention diversity entails assuming that action has already been taken, even if the position of these groups remains unchanged.

These results are in line with studies by Ahmed (2006 and 2017) at Australian and British universities, which indicate that the concept is used to show the institution as global, international, and plural, but it hides situations of systematic inequality with racial groups and ignores a social agenda related to justice. The author stresses that at university being white is the universal, and being black is considered the particular, being unusual, and to be “welcomed” as guests or strangers, as well as to be the one asked not to cause distress (Ahmed, 2017).

This dual discourse, which names the unusual without changing the conditions of inequality, is also emphasized by Brooks (2019). The study, based on interviews of political actors in six European countries, points to two explicit dimensions of difference: age and social class. In both cases, the concept of diversity has a different focus. When it comes to age, diversity is celebrated and encouraged by higher education institutions, as part of the strategy undertaken by European countries to promote and make learning more flexible throughout life. However, when they refer to social class, diversity becomes a problem, arguing that students’ deficits have negative consequences for teaching-learning processes, especially when their presence contributes to the undesirable mass expansion of the institution.

Along the same lines, the work of Bowl (2016), argues that universities in England and New Zealand are replacing the discourse of equality with that of diversity, within a context of distinction and elitism among institutions competing in the global academic market. In this research, cultural and nationality differences are taken on a positive meaning that is celebrated, harmonious, warm, and evoke diversity, but remains unaffected by the elitist ethos of the institution. In this latter case, the concept of diversity is also shown to be socially exiguous.

In Spain, the debate on diversity at university follows the Anglo-Saxon theoretical tradition developed with the model of inclusive education and linked to special education, disability, and special educational needs in compulsory education (Ainscow *et al.*, 2019). The discourses point to collectives with needs or interests in a wide sense, but policies are related to disability and the development of these students in the institution (Morgado *et al.*, 2016; Moriña *et al.*, 2017; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2019; Bernet-Gil, 2020; Márquez and Melero-Aguilar, 2021). In accordance with this theoretical model, priority is given to the study of access (assistance and reception) and permanence (orientation, support, accessibility and participation) as analytical axes of policies (Bernet-Gil, 2020). And, although other studies have been carried out on access and performance of

specific groups, as the case of the gypsy population at university, they are not so clearly framed in the debate on diversity or inclusion (Padilla *et al.*, 2017; Peña, 2020).

However, in this regard, important organizations for university policies in Spain, as the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE, 2018 and 2020) and the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), actively participate in the design of university agendas. CRUE, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda, is committed to inclusion and gender equality. ANECA (2020a) also shows a firm commitment to equity that is translated in incipient resolutions that include affirmative action measures for this purpose (ANECA, 2020b); in addition to promoting a new International Quality Seal in Social Inclusion in the areas it is responsible for: institutional and degree evaluation and curricular evaluation in scholarship and teaching staff accreditation procedures (ANECA, 2021).

In light of the increasingly political and organizational relevance of inclusive policies in higher education institutions and various interpretations of the term diversity, it is important to clarify both their narratives and the subjects that are considered susceptible to be addressed. The discourse of their leaders on this matter is a priority, as they are understood to be a key element to promote institutionalization and guide a change more oriented toward social and justice issues (Williams, 2013).

Methodology

A qualitative research and case study as methodological design were carried out (Creswell, 2007), with the aim of interpreting the meanings given to the concept of diversity in the political discourse of public university leaders (Allan and Tolbert, 2019).

This case was selected based on the following criteria: location, history, size, and performance index, making it a traditional case of a university that represents the average in the Spanish context (Table 1).² It is located in a provincial capital with a population under one million inhabitants. It was founded in 1972, which includes it in the largest group of institutions according to their date of creation. It is a medium-sized university, with 21,000 students in the academic year 2017/18, figure below the estimated average for Spanish universities.

2 Tables can be found in the Appendix at the end of this article (Editor's note).

The performance index for teaching, research, and innovation and development is in the average of parameters between which the U-Ranking oscillates (Pérez and Aldás, 2018). Moreover, it is a non-specialized university, which allows the student profile to be diversified, with studies in all areas of knowledge (arts and humanities, health sciences, engineering and architecture, sciences, and social and legal sciences), in 36 bachelor's degrees and 12 double degrees, and a postgraduate offer of 47 masters and 17 double masters with a staff of 1,806 faculty members and 760 PAS. From a geographical point of view, it is organized into four campuses: three distributed throughout the city and one located in the province. Since 2011, its Social Responsibility has been related to actions on cooperation, solidarity, volunteering, equality between men and women and diversity, grouping its politics in the same vice-rectorate under the name of "Inclusive Policies", where actions are coordinated and transversal with other services and vice-rectorates.

Participants and instrument

People were selected according to various criteria to obtain a complete view of the leader's discourses, from the different collectives and representative bodies. Firstly, they should hold a position in one of the one-person bodies of the institution, whether at university government level (rector, vice-rectors, directors of Specific Services), centers (deans of colleges), academic units (department directors) or student representatives (Student Councils). In all cases, they are one-person positions, either democratically elected (as in the case of rector, deans, and department directors) or by appointment (vice-rectors and service directors), but with responsibility for decision-making and accountability to the university community. Secondly, they should represent collectives (students and PAS) in the collegiate bodies and, therefore, influence democratic decision-making (Student Councils, Board of Personnel and Directive Committee for the PAS). Lastly, they should be part of the Social Council, as it constitutes a body for financial control and involvement with society in the governance of Spanish universities (Castro and Gairín, 2013).

The semi-structured interview was used as instrument for producing information. It greatly varied in duration according to the participants; if it was short-lived, it was because of problems with the interviewee's schedule, who was rushed by tasks associated with their position in the institution. Therefore, this has been identified as a weakness in the study. A total of 31

interviews were conducted, of which 17 were men and 13 were women from eight different levels of position or representation (Table 2). The participants were previously informed of the objectives of the research and the anonymous use of their data, requesting their written consent to participate and record the conversation.

Face-to-face contact and non-standardized interview, that is, adapting the script to the person and their position of responsibility in the institution, have facilitated access to relevant information beyond the “official” and superficial version (Blatter *et al.*, 2016). Thus, we have obtained several perspectives of the object of study, together with different versions of the same event, which has favored the interpretative and meaningful analysis characteristic of qualitative methodology.

The interview script was based on the work on institutionalization of diversity and inclusion in higher education, due to its holistic nature for the self-assessment of universities on diversity, equity, and inclusion (NERCHE, 2016). The interview was conducted in depth on those aspects that were most appropriate to each collective and leader’s position, contextualizing the interview protocol to the case study.

The methodological process adopted a multiple triangulation approach (Denzin, 1970) to incorporate: a triangulation of collected data, with participants of all collectives and levels of representation; a triangulation of investigators, with two participating in conducting the interviews and thus validating the instrument; and a theoretical triangulation, using the literature as a reference for the instrument construction (NERCHE, 2016), as well as allowing for dialogue, reflection and discussion of the findings with other research. This paper examines and explores two fundamental issues: 1) how the concept of diversity is defined and 2) which individuals are included in it.

Analysis

All the audios were transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the text was coded using the ATLAS.ti v.8.3 program, following an emergent process for the identification of topics and patterns of meaning. An initial list was defined to validate the codes, then exemplified and tested by two experts following two coded interviews to reach an intercoder reliability (Miles *et al.*, 2014). The resulting degree of agreement was 94%, with the maximum score being given to 90 items out of 96 proposed for the parameters of sufficiency, coherence, relevance, and clarity, thus contributing to the reliability of the study. Finally,

the results were interpreted narratively according to two axes: the meaning of the concept of diversity and the subjects involved.

Results

Diversity narratives

The analyzed discourse shapes its meaning in two different directions: individuality and collectivity, which are simultaneously perceived in two different ways, diversity as enrichment or diversity as a problem.

Therefore, when discourses refer to diversity based on individuality, they allude to particular differences, which are due to multiple and different reasons of each person. Differences are recognized as personal circumstances, understood as natural, inexcusable considering their biological correspondence:

I understand diversity in a natural way because diversity is something natural and I understand it also to be individual, not grouped; diversity concerns each person and it is not fitted into some groups, but uh... a person considered individually (Dir. Dep_W_02-03-2018).

This analogy on the individual and natural acquires greater significance in terms of enrichment. Thus, in most cases, individuality is emphasized as an opportunity for people to benefit from each other. Therefore, some leaders support the promotion of plural and broad interaction that allows people to know and relate to people with different characteristics:

We should see society as Plato saw it, as that mantle. And the more diverse people there're in society, in our classrooms, the more beautiful it is. I think it's considering diversity as valuable (Dir. Dep_W_02-03-2018).

From this perspective, heterogeneity is celebrated, multiple points of view are recognized and the opportunity and benefit of interaction between different people is stressed, promoted by the equal treatment that is mentioned in the constitutive texts of the institution and which is given the same consideration as individuality, that is, equality as natural and inevitable.

Despite diversity as individuality is associated with enrichment, particularly from an abstract approach, we find discourses that also refer to it as a problem. In these situations, a different nuance is adopted, since it is subordinated to parameters of normality, which is conceived as the general and common in a broad sense. Consequently, anyone who is not within the standards is diverse, and the diverse person entails certain difficulties:

Diversity is a series of circumstances that make your life a little more difficult, as you have to deal with more difficult situations (PAS(4)_W_08-10-2018).

In these circumstances, it is especially significant when diversity is articulated with academic performance because it alludes to the subject, to their abilities or, more specifically, to the lack of them and the consequences for their academic performance. In this case, diversity mostly appears as a euphemism for disability, specific educational needs or learning difficulties. In fact, many of the leaders interviewed point to the opportunity to use the term diversity in contrast to other that they consider to be reviled and recognize the distrust that it generates, such as disabled or handicapped due to the pejorative connotations they entail. Moreover, they recognized not mastering the educational, theoretical, and political debate on inclusion, and use this term prevents them from committing possible conceptual errors as they are representatives and decision-makers in the institution. In this sense, the term diversity offers leaders an anodyne narrative, though a useful one in discourse. A problem is presented in a vague way by not specifying the causes or dimensions of the problem. While "diversity" serves as an umbrella term, it is also expressed with hesitation and wavering: "Let's see, how do I understand diversity... it is a complex word" (Dir.Dep_W_09-03-2018).

The allusion to the leader's experiences as teachers, taking the sense of individuality, is an interesting element that has been especially significant by the department directors, who coordinate that area. In these instances, they underscore their role recognizing the abilities of the students, while revealing their lack of training and resources to address specific situations in the classroom. From this level of leadership, the emphasis is placed on the individualistic meaning of the term, as opposed to the more collective interpretation that, in their view, is made by the institutional policy, pointing to specific groups (for example, people with disabilities), but which, according to them, requires individualized treatment of personal needs within the classroom:

We had a boy who had Asperger's syndrome [...]. The school is prepared for these cases and reports them to the faculty. Although you really find it as something new and you don't know how to act (Dir.Dep_M_06-03-2018).

I think the institution perceives diversity, but a group diversity. I defend the perception of individual diversity, which is overlapped, hidden, the one we don't see (Dir.Dep_W_02-03-2018).

Contrary to diversity as individuality, we find a second interpretation by the interviewed leaders: diversity as collectivity or social circumstances. In this case, differences are pointed out by naming collectives that share various

characteristics and, at the same time, are distinguished from other groups. In other words, it is defined under a criterion of intra-group uniqueness and inter-group distance:

It is a reflection of what human society is: there're whites, there're blacks, there're men, there're women, there're people doing better, there're people doing worse, there're many sexual orientations... (Dir.Dep_M_06-03-2018).

In this scenario, we also find diversity related to enrichment as well as to problem. In the first case, from their experience as teachers, leaders specify the concept of diversity alluding to the presence of foreign students participating in mobility programs at university. Collective terms are used, and foreign status is clearly narrated as an opportunity for cultural and academic diversity for the institution:

With students from mobility programs [...] we're enriched because even in tutoring I find out how the educational system works in another university (Dir. Dep_M_14-03-2018).

Therefore, encountering diversity is perceived as an opportunity, which can lead to new learning and greater social capital for the members of the institution. And, along the same lines, there are statements linking diversity to the opportunity of higher education to promote access and respond to the needs of groups that have not accessed university or that have not achieved success in global terms. This is the point where we find most references to the principles of equality and non-discrimination explained in university's constitutional texts. Indeed, this is the principle to which the rector refers when defining diversity:

Equality of opportunity. This means that no matter what kind of ability, gender, race... or any other aspect, equal opportunities must be guaranteed (R_M_21-10-2019).

However, the concept of diversity is also linked with a problem, since two related issues are expressed: first, the difficulties or specific needs of certain groups in accessing to university or in their academic development; second, the lack of knowledge of teaching staff to deal with these difficulties and the available specialized services offered by the institution to address them.

Regarding the first element, groups of people who have not traditionally had access to university or have had a distant cultural or social capital in higher education are mentioned in diversity narratives, with students being almost exclusively pointed as opposed to other members such as faculty staff or PAS. Particularly, diversity is identified as a problem because of difficulties of access or academic performance, for example, being a woman, limited economic resources, cultural differences, illnesses or disabilities as mentioned in the following lines:

Well, I think that diversity must include women's collective, it must include also the collective [...] And diversity, taking into account that we come from different cultures, different socio-economic levels, because university is expected to reach everybody. And then, also considering the needs of some people with disabilities, I also believe it's important to include this group (Dir.Dep_W_09-03-2018).

Based on the previous element, the lack of teachers training to address the difficulties of these groups in the classroom is expressed in the analyzed discourses, especially by student leaders and department directors:

There is an expert course to become a teacher at university, well, something like that with diversity as topic; they're taught about this, so we're preventing (C.Est_M_13-03-2018).

Individuals included in diversity

The interviewed leaders refer to subjects that lead to the interpretation of two positions that may even be contradictory: on one hand, certain groups are explicitly mentioned, which argue for services and actions for their specific attention in university policies; and on the other, it is avoided to mention them and, consequently, to address them with concrete policies.

As regards the first case, we find discourses that identify specific groups and the opportunity of having specific services to address their needs, especially students with disabilities. This element is consistent with the meaning of the concept of diversity discussed above. The association between diversity and subjects with disabilities is so evident; in fact, the service provided by the university is identified as such (*Servicio de Atención a la Diversidad* [Service of Attention to Diversity]) and is mainly aimed at these students. Despite the recognition of progress in this area, most of the interviewed leaders still demand improvements in disability-inclusive policies:

I think right now the urgent, urgent, urgent, urgent thing is to attend to those who have a disability that makes them unable to access higher education, why? [...] this is a real problem, and we don't provide the means for these people... it may be a very small group, but we'll always have some people who will not be able to access a university degree. [...] that's where we should do something, some kind of program for them (Dir.Dep_M_14-03-2018).

Secondly, also as a priority, discourses mention women pointing to gender inequality. In relation to this, the availability of services and concrete actions, such as the Equality Unit or Equality Plans (I and II Equality Plan, 2014 and 2018, specifically) implemented in accordance with national

orders, contribute to their demand. However, this seems paradoxical because it is recognized as the area where most work is done, but also women as the most susceptible subjects in need of attention. In all levels of leaders, diversity work is linked to women and improvements; for instance, their increasing participation in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) studies or in positions of institutional leadership. Those circumstances are shown in the following statements:

The presence of women is gradually increasing in engineering careers, one of the problems we used to have. When I was a student, only 10% of the students were women [...] we are around 30%, it's not much, but we're improving (Dec_W_17-04-2018).

Equal number of men and women in administration, now we're 60-40 female deans, we're more female deans at this university not long ago (Dir.Serv_W_12-04-2018).

Students with economic difficulties constitute another group exposed in relation to diversity. According to the leaders, the grant system, national and of the university, has been consolidated as a policy of attention to diversity, as it serves as an instrument to promote access to university for those who traditionally did not have it and to transform the student profile:

I believe that with the democratization and the mass expansion of the university since the end of the twentieth century, the profile has changed. When I studied teaching in the seventies, the profile was upper class. Today, more people gain access to university through the scholarship system... (Dir.Dep_W_02-03-2018).

In line with the meaning associated with diversity, the interviewed leaders refer to foreign students in international mobility programs, with Erasmus³ being the most recognized. The attention to this student body is due to the relationship with language learning; although it is rarely interpreted as a problem, it is seen as an opportunity for enrichment, as previously discussed.

In addition to people with disabilities, women, students with limited socio-economic resources, and foreigners, other subjects mentioned –although to a lesser extent– are university students older than those who constitute the usual profile. They are presented in two different situations: firstly, adult students pursuing undergraduate degrees; secondly, students participating in the program for people over 55 years, retiree or early retirees. Both cases are identified as diverse subjects requiring particular attention, despite interviewed leaders do not describe concrete actions implemented by university services.

3 *Erasmus+* is an European mobility program that organize student exchanges within EU and partner countries (available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/opportunities/individuals/students/studying-abroad_es).

Most of these collectives are explicitly identified; however, we also find discourses that take the opportunity of not mentioning subjects or groups that are not addressed by diversity policies; they use different arguments:

1) The first, giving insignificant value to certain aspects of diversity, such as emotional and sexual orientation or their religious. On this matter, some leaders, especially department directors, argue that this kind of discrimination is already eliminated and does not exist at university, or that these aspects do not interfere in academics and, therefore, are not university's concern:

I think that, fortunately, this has already been overcome at university and actually no one is discriminated because of gender issues, political issues, and probably not even for religious matters (Dir.Dep_M_14-03-2018).

2) The second, alluding to the respect that leaders have for the desire of certain students not to be identified as members of a group with specific needs. According to their criteria, they suggest the explicit and voluntary decision of these students not to be treated differently, so that academic merit can be shown individually and the connotations of labeling that such treatment may entail can be avoided:

This subject is a bit delicate because sometimes boys and girls who have a disability don't want to be treated specially. In fact, I know that boys and girls claim that they don't want to depend on a vice-rectorate attending to diversity, but on the vice-rectorate of students: "we're just another student" (ViceR_W_14-04-2018).

Although in both cases, when an insignificant value is given to certain conditions or the respect for not being identified specially is alluded, subjects are mentioned, academic relationship and interaction between students and faculty in the classroom is again stressed.

Discussion

The results reveal a dominant discourse of the leaders interviewed, in which diversity is interpreted almost exclusively regarding students in the academic performance context. Other members of the university community, as faculty or PAS, are not included in their discourses, which shows their almost exclusive link with learning process, but not with work context or, in broader terms, with coexistence spaces in the institution. Based on this, we point out two discursive lines that project certain rhetoric in relation the concept of diversity in the institution: from naturalization and from difference.

First, we identify a discourse on diversity linked to the natural: the inherent which derives from the very nature of subjects and, therefore, is evident. As an example of this, in the discourses, we have found diversity narrated as individuality associated, mainly, with enrichment. These discourses underscore characteristics, experiences and competencies, showing people as unique when they coexist in the same space and perform in the academic scenario with “their” immanent capabilities.

This discursive line emphasizes such naturalization that leads to what Acher (2007) or Gibson (2015) have called “institutional silence”, referring to situations in which institutions mention diversity in their discourse, but do not commit to enact changes or programs that mitigate the inequality or privileges of some individuals or collectives. In the analyzed discourses, expressions such as “we are all diverse” illustrate this sense of naturalization and embrace, in line with studies such as Bowl’s (2016), the most harmonious and warm version of the institution.

Everything and nothing is diversity, exempting it from recognition, assessment or compensatory measures. In addition, this student-centered discourse links diversity with academic performance in the classroom, understanding it as an individual student activity whose results have no educational, social or cultural consideration. Thus, with the naturalization of diversity, the process of institutionalization is based on a discourse that considers equality as a starting point and not as a political aspiration of the institution.

This diversity discourse has been described by Herring and Henderson (2012) as colorblind diversity. Iverson (2007) warns that it entails a certain “camouflaged discrimination”, since differences are made visible and tolerated, but the causes that generates individuals’ disadvantages are not recognized. In this sense, Jones (2014) notes that a neutral diversity policy obfuscates the initial disadvantage of vulnerable groups. In this study we recognize that a rhetoric of diversity based on naturalization and enrichment may lead in the same direction.

Secondly, we observe a discourse linked to differences, which emphasizes the heterogeneity of groups and their presence at university, but with several nuances and assessments. On one hand, we find diversity associated with internationalization due to the presence of foreign students in international mobility programs. In this case, the enrichment they give to the institution is distinguishable; a discourse linked to the groups exposed by Iverson (2008) or Gibson (2015), or to the results reported by Brooks (2019) when it refers to the benefits of allowing university access to older students, or to Bowl’s

(2016) research and the recognition of universities that receive students from various cultures and nationalities.

On the other, diversity represents groups characteristics that unify subjects under the same criteria or conditions (for example, women's collective or people with disabilities). This discourse obviates the international and complex analysis on differences (Ahmed, 2017) that understands them as social and contextual processes that place subjects in many positions, which should be further explored to have more clues about the policy management model that is sometimes justified by specialization or by a more generalist orientation. The results of this research evidence the association between diversity and disability, in agreement with other studies within the Spanish national context (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2019; Benet-Gil, 2020), but differ from the results in North America and Europe where diversity is mostly linked with ethnic and colored minority groups (Stefani, 2018; Thomas, 2018; Ahmed, 2006).

Our results do not allow us to identify discourses from a third rhetoric that we recognize here as inequality, oriented by a critical approach of authors as Thomas (2018) or Ahmed (2006, 2017). This rhetoric would enable the identification, from the individual and collective perspective, of the "non-privileged" position, as well as circumstances and processes involved in higher education context, either because they have not traditionally had access or, consequently, because the institution's ethos does not meet their needs. This discourse on inequality allows placing diversity in the contemporary context of systematic inequalities, considering that differences of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and disability, as well as the intersection between them, should be a central issue in current policies (Stefani, 2018). Nevertheless, the nonconformist discourses that have been demanded, albeit cautious, for more teacher training could be situated in this rhetoric, which would lead to more sensible policies for an inclusive university.

Conclusions

The results and discussion show several rhetoric about diversity in the institution and, also, reflect the novelty of the debate that is still present in the Spanish context. From a leadership perspective, this study is particularly relevant to assess diversity policies as its discourse is hegemonic because of their decision-making capacity in the elaboration of regulations (Allan *et al.*, 2006).

These actor's concept of diversity, as other Spanish studies carried out in compulsory education, projects the differences that became hegemonic but are constructed according to dichotomous, essentialist and exclusionary parameters (Jiménez-Rodríguez and Guzmán-Ordaz, 2016). In this paper, differences, personal or collective, for which subjects are responsible are considered as diversity. The transformation of social processes and the institution's responsibility to a more social and fair sense is ignored, representing, in fact, the challenge of inclusive policies. For Owen (2009), an inclusive and equitable university does not only mean valuing differences, but recognize inequalities and foster social justice, which may be translated into measures that promote access for underrepresented groups, as well as measures for promotion, participation and professional and academic achievement. Although it is important to delve into conceptions, it is necessary to be committed and capable to project them into plans and policies of the institution (Márquez and Melero-Aguilar, 2021). Indeed, university leaders are able to create this discourse and translate the concepts into the philosophy of policies.

These are some of the recommendations derived from this work at the theoretical, empirical and political levels:

- Establish a clear and explicit theoretical and practical definition of the concept, so that diversity is treated not as a trend but as a philosophical principle, a social and critical value that guides actions.
- Understand the discourses of university leaders from their practices and positions in the governance of the institution to interpret better political agendas and their interests.
- Increase the participation of the entire university community, students, faculty and PAS, in the development of inclusive diversity actions by recognizing their interactions and influences.

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Appendix

Table 1

Criteria for case study selection

Criteria	Reference data	Case
Location-Inhabitants*	< 500,000 inhab. = 22 provinces 500,000-1,000,000 inhab. = 14 provinces >1,0000 inhab. = 14 provinces	782,979 inhab.
Foundation	19th century = 12 universities From 1960-1970 = 15 universities From 1985-1990 = 20 universities Since 1990 = 10 universities	Founded in 1972
Number of students in the academic year 2017/18**	Average in Spain of public face-to-face universities: 23,086	21,000 students
U-Ranking	From 1.7-0.5 points	1.1 points

Source: Own elaboration based on *INE (2019) and **CRUE (2019).

Table 2

Interviews with institutional leaders

Leader (Code)	Term	Gender	Identification code
Rector (R)	2014-present	Man	R_M_21-10-2019
Vice-rector (ViceR)	2014-present	Man	ViceR_M_04-04-2018
	2014-present	Woman	ViceR_W_04-04-2018
	2014- present	Man	ViceR_M_06-04-2018

Dean (Dec)	2014- present	Man	Dec_M_13-04-2018
	2016- present	Man	Dec_M_16-04-2018
	2016- present	Woman	Dec_W_17-04-2018
	2014- present	Woman	Dec_W_19-04-2018
	2016- present	Woman	Dec_W_13_01_2020
Department Director (Dir. Dep.)	2015-2019	Woman	Dir.Dep_W_02-03-2018
	2006- present	Woman	Dir.Dep_W_05-03-2018
	2015- present	Man	Dir.Dep_M_06-03-2018
	2015- present	Woman	Dir.Dep_W_09-03-2018
	2014- present	Man	Dir.Dep_M_14-03-2018
Specific Services Directorate (Dir. Serv.)	2015- present	Man	Dir.Serv_M_19-03-2018
	2014- present	Woman	Dir.Serv_W_12-04-2018
	2006- present	Man	Dir.Serv_M_02-05-2018
	2006- present	Man	Dir.Serv_M_26-09-2018
	2018- present	Woman	Dir.Serv_W_05-10-2018
	2018- present	Woman	Dir.Serv_W_08-10-2019
Presidency of Student Councils (C. Est.)	2016-2018	Man	Dir.Serv_M_22-01-2020
	2017-2018	Man	C.Est_M_13-03-2018
	2017-2020	Man	C.Est_M_10-04-2018
Head of Administrative and Service Staff (PAS)	2017-2019	Woman	C.Est_W_10-04-2018
	2015- present	Man	PAS(1)_M_15-03-2018
	2017- present	Man	PAS(2)_M_15-03-2018
	2015-2019	Man	PAS_M_02-10-2018
	2007-2019	Woman	PAS(3)_W_08-10-2018
	2015-2019	Woman	PAS(4)_W_08-10-2018
Member of Social Council (C. Social)	2010- present	Man	PAS_M_16-10-2018
	2017- present	Woman	C.Social_W-13-01-2020
TOTAL		31 (17 men / 14 women)	

Source: Own elaboration.

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