Perception of social actors about diversity policies in spanish universities

Percepción de actores sociales sobre las políticas de diversidad en las universidades españolas

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Abstract: Diversity is increasingly a reality in higher education, linked to globalisation and the presence of unconventional students. Previous research has explored students and teachers' perceptions about diversity in higher education. However, there is little evidence about the perception of social actors who collaborate with higher education institutions. This article explores social actors' perceptions regarding the measures that universities implement to respond to diversity and the challenges that diversity presents to higher education institutions. Using a qualitative methodology, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with social actors linked to eight Spanish universities. The results indicate that their perceptions fluctuate. However, they are often linked to the groups traditionally associated with diversity: gender and disability. This shows the invisibilisation of certain groups and primarily the relationship between diversity and issues related to inequalities and equity. The conclusions discuss initiatives that could facilitate collaboration with social actors to advance the social commitment agenda in universities.

Key words: diversity, inclusive university, social actors, higher education, university policy.

Resumen: La diversidad es una realidad cada vez más presente en las instituciones de educación superior, vinculada a la globalización y a la presencia de estudiantes no convencionales. Investigaciones previas han explorado la percepción de los estudiantes y del profesorado sobre la diversidad en el contexto universitario. Sin embargo, se tienen pocas evidencias sobre cómo perciben la diversidad actores sociales que colaboran con las instituciones de educación superior. Este artículo indaga acerca de las percepciones de actores sociales respecto a la diversidad en la universidad; en concreto, se analizan las

percepciones sobre las medidas que las universidades ponen en marcha para responder a la diversidad y sobre los retos que presenta la diversidad paras las instituciones de educación superior. Utilizando una metodología cualitativa, se realizan 18 entrevistas semiestructuradas a actores sociales vinculados a ocho universidades españolas. Los resultados indican que los actores sociales interpretan la diversidad de manera diferente, aunque sus concepciones, en general, suelen estar vinculadas a los colectivos tradicionalmente asociados a la diversidad: género y discapacidad. Esto muestra la invisibilización de ciertos grupos y sobre todo la relación percibida entre diversidad y cuestiones relacionadas con las desigualdades y la equidad. Las conclusiones analizan iniciativas que podrían facilitar la colaboración con los agentes sociales para avanzar en la agenda de compromiso social en las universidades.

Palabras clave: diversidad, universidad inclusiva, actores sociales, educación superior, política universitaria.

Introduction[1]

There are pedagogical, ethical, and legal reasons enshrined in internationally recognised rights, which have awakened the sensitivity of universities to diversity. However, the concept of diversity is often associated with certain minority student groups or specific services. Unfortunately, we do not have statistical data for the sociodemographic profile of the university community. Unlike other European countries, thus far, identifying these data has been considered discriminatory, and so until relatively recently, Spain did not have data broken down by gender. However, indirectly, we have isolated questions in some studies that ask participants, for example, how many languages they speak, or about their mother tongue spoken at home, etc. These findings confirm that the majority of the university community is white, middle class, and of non-migrant origin. Furthermore, the composition of faculty and administrative staff in Spanish universities remains very homogeneous, with few staff members from other countries or belonging to these collectives (Kimura, 2014).

While the concept of diversity is widespread in the discourses, practices, and policies of governments, educational institutions, businesses, academic institutions, and social organisations (García-Cano *et al*., 2018), the debate

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about diversity in Spanish universities is still recent. In this article, diversity in universities is understood as a reflection of diverse and pluralistic societies (Vertovec, 2015). A university that is committed to diversity must reconfigure its teaching, but also its services, participation, relationships, research, and management. All of this, within a formal framework of inclusion so that diversity is not subjected to the will of university leaders who may or may not share interests with diverse groups (Maramba *et al.*, 2015).

This article addresses the perceptions of social actors regarding diversity in Spanish universities, with the intention of exploring their conceptions of diversity and how they value diversity management policies. The aim is to contribute to reflections on education policies related to diversity from the perspective of social actors who are external to university institutions and who at some point interact with them as part of the university-society flow. These are collective actors as understood by Scharpf (1997), in other words, they are part of entities or collectives in which key objectives are shared. In addition, the concept of Touraine (1984) is taken into account, as it considers social actors as collective subjects between the individual and the State who have their own identity, values, and resources to act within society, to defend the interests of the group they represent, and generate action strategies (social actions), which favour social transformation. They are mainly actors occupying the non-public space, where they interact through civil society, the service sector and trade unions, neighbourhood associations, and new social movements (Jaráiz, 2015).

Studies that examine the relationship between universities and social actors tend to identify social actors whose roles and representation lead them towards political action (Van Leeuwen, 1996). The social actors investigated in these studies include higher education organisations, university staff members, students, education policy makers and organisations, among others. However, university quality assurance systems, for example, could also be considered actors in this regard (Saarinen, 2008). Other studies have analysed university degree courses, taking into account the opinions of social actors, considering the latter to be professionals involved in practical subjects and professional associations of that speciality (Gómez and Rumbo, 2018). The literature also identifies reflections that relate external social actors to universities in models of governance through their governing bodies (in Spain, these are called *Consejos Sociales*). Within the social function of universities, companies, public and other non-governmental private firms, trade unions, as well as other social organisations are allowed to take part in the decision-making processes of the universities, meeting social demands (Pons, 2013).

Regarding the development of diversity policies, in Spain, the relationship between universities and social actors is linked to the identification of social actors in institutions that represent underprivileged social sectors. In this case, universities should not form relationships with companies but with these actors instead, privileged connections, social actors that enable socially relevant knowledge to reach society so that universities can contribute to sustainable development and social inclusion (Emiliozzi *et al.*, 2011). Studies about the social function of universities put forward a similar vision (Vallaeys, 2014). This is where the relationship between universities and social actors is situated within the scope of university outreach, acknowledging that innovation emerges when social actors actively participate in constructing the issue of intervention, combining "distant" (academic) knowledge with (the social actors') committed knowledge (Beltramino and Theiler, 2017). In Spain, university outreach is seen as part of the social functions of a university, approached in various manners by the different higher education institutions, though generally developed along the lines of sustainability on campus, the environment, cooperation, and equity (Ruiz-Corbella and Bautista-Cerro, 2016).

Some authors argue that it is the fault of the university if an efficient institutional link with society is not achieved, especially in the field of diversity, and where there is little tradition in terms of transfer with respect to social needs (Emiliozzi *et al.*, 2011). The commitment of social actors can influence the two-way relationship between university and society at the appropriate level, in this case, by trying to answer questions about how they perceive the conception of diversity of universities, their programmes, and the challenges faced when implementing actions. There is limited scientific production on the perceptions of social actors about the response of universities to diversity, so this is a relevant topic of inquiry, since such connections could be strategic for the inclusion of all people in higher education.

The social commitment of universities has been defined as their third mission alongside teaching and research. Although it depends on territories and models, it has largely focused on university outreach programmes. Within this function of universities, two visions are identified: one that relates these activities to social commitment towards the most vulnerable sectors (Brusilovsky, 2000), and one related to the production and transfer of knowledge as commercial value (Laredo, 2007). The social function endows universities with a substantive feature of an innovative entity, with the capacity for permanent change in their model of management

and continuous improvement (González and González, 2019). However, some studies show that the representation of a diverse university has not been achieved yet, with actual commitment to diversity being very limited (Buenestado-Fernández *et al.*, 2019).

Representations of diversity in universities

The analysis of diversity is sectorised according to the characteristics of the student body concerned and in terms of the historical, social, and political diversity of national contexts. These contexts generate different initiatives in each country for the promotion of diversity. Hence, cultural difference (Martí-Noguera *et al.*, 2017), ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity (Vertovec, 2015; Edwards, 2018), functional diversity (Infante and Matus, 2009; Lledó *et al.*, 2012), and gender diversity (Buquet *et al.*, 2013) are analysed. Recent studies show how select universities consolidate prestige through diversity by representing it and developing practices that impact their underrepresented students (Holland and Ford, 2021).

Jokikokko (2005) categorises diversity into visible and invisible. The author refers to the visible diversity faced by university professors on a daily basis, and which is easily perceived, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, and race. Invisible diversity, on the other hand, refers to differences that are not seen at a first glance, such as gender, family background, socioeconomic conditions, sexual orientation, political opinion, or learning style (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2016).

Although a large proportion of the institutional discourse focuses on the visibility of difference, with elements of the cultural paradigm, normative prescription is imposed on the conception of diversity, so disability (functional diversity) and gender (sexual-affective diversity) emerge as the two most important categories of difference in universities (Langa and Lubián, 2021; Jiménez-Millán and García-Cano, 2019).

Approaches that link the conceptualisation of diversity in universities to systems of quality or excellence emerge from a neoliberal perspective (Iverson, 2008), akin to the "business of diversity" (Goldstein and Meisenbach, 2017). These approaches represent difference as the broadening of heterogeneity within the university community, though without socially committing to inequalities (Bowl, 2018; Herring and Henderson, 2012) or equity (Acher, 2007; Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Zanoni *et al.* 2010). In contrast, diversity from an inclusive approach involves the creation of learning opportunities for the entire student body and promoting meaningful social and academic

relationships between individuals and groups that differ in their personal and social characteristics (Tienda, 2013).

Geographically, discourses on diversity tend to focus on different student groups. In the Americas, indigenist issues in universities are often examined, either from a critical perspective (Lehmann, 2013; Pidgeon, 2016) or through universities that promote discourses of deficit, by means of which students are given the responsibility of accessing university with a limited cultural capital specific to this level (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016). Functional diversity (disability) also receives specific attention at American universities (Lombardi *et al.*, 2018; Morphew, 2009). Turner (2013) examines diversity in higher education, looking at several American studies that address the promotion of diversity in universities and explore stereotypes about minorities. Relationships between economic diversity and campus climate have recently been analysed, with interracial interaction being lower at institutions with lower structural income diversity and lower structural racial diversity (Park *et al.*, 2019).

In Europe, along with gender (Klein, 2016), disability receives the most attention with regard to diversity criteria in the organisation of services in higher education (Biewer *et al.*, 2015), nevertheless the effectiveness of inclusion may be very limited (Gibson, 2015). Socioeconomic status is also receiving increasing attention in regions other than North America (Hughes, 2015; Pitman, 2015), while other diversity criteria have been incorporated into diversity statements and plans such as religion (Edwards, 2018) and academic achievement (Freda *et al.*, 2017). Gender issues particularly stand out (Benet-Gil, 2020; Márquez, 2019), following a legal imperative that responds to specific groups through specific and specialised services and actions.

While in Asia, students from ethnic minorities or rural areas suffering from socio-economic difficulties are underrepresented, Australian universities show a strong commitment to the equality of several underrepresented groups, such as women, disabled people, or people who speak a language other than English. Finally, in Africa, access to higher education is considered a privilege for a handful of people, which reinforces inequality in society by excluding different students in terms of disability, ethnicity, culture, language, or rural environment (Buenestado-Fernández *et al.*, 2019).

In Spain, Jiménez and Guzmán (2013) frame "diversity" as an academic concept with a pedagogical tradition that has been developed through two approaches: an institutional-normative approach that focuses on the "specific learning needs" and a cultural approach, which classifies students according to different cultures in terms of the challenge of adapting to the system.

When inclusive policies are implemented, some authors recognise the discourse of deficit in universities, which places the burden of adaption to the institution on the diverse students themselves with institutional support that allows them to achieve the university standard (O'Shea *et al.*, 2016). The very universities remain fairly homogeneous in terms of their faculty or governance models (Kimura, 2014; O'Donnell, 2016). Given the potential of university diversity agendas as a symbolic resource to overcome social inequalities (García-Cano *et al.*, 2021), it is interesting to investigate the discourses of social actors, usually linked to the advocacy and defence of citizens' rights, because of the impact of their approaches and references on the evaluation of university performance.

Method

Design

This work is part of a broader research endeavour that aims to design a proposal to institutionalise diversity management in universities with an inclusive approach. To this end, the opinions of different actors have been gathered: institutional leaders, professors and administrative staff, students, and social actors. Through a mixed methodology (quantitative and qualitative), the perceptions of these different actors were explored in eight Spanish universities. This article focuses on social actors. These are entities external to universities, but which collaborate and interact with them as part of the university-society flow established, in line with the proposal of Van Leeuwen (1996). It is a qualitative interpretative study to ascertain the meanings that people attach to a particular phenomenon (Taylor *et al.*, 2015).

The technique used for data production was the semi-structured interview. In the first instance, the identification details of the interviewee were collected before moving to the main body of the interview, organised into three blocks of questions (Table 1[2]): 1) conceptions and perceptions about diversity in the university setting (assessment of diversity and groups with which it is associated); 2) programmes and policies (knowledge of concrete actions carried out within universities); 3) challenges faced by universities in responding to diversity. Following Langa and Lubián (2021), our interest has been guided towards critically recording how social actors mention some groups and neglect others, which groups are referred to, and

2 All the tables are in the Annex, at the end of this article (Editor's note).

the ways in which these are categorised, as well as how the management of diversity is problematized in universities.

Participants

The research team defined the profiles of actors that each university was to interview, seeking to ensure diversity within the sample so that discourses could be analysed from different positions, experiences, and places. Therefore, the selection of social actors was carried out by means of intentional sampling, identifying key informants in three areas of action: social, economic, and political (Table 2). In the social sphere, third sector organisations, trade unions, and professional groups were included; public and private business organisations in the economic sphere; and political parties in the political sphere.

Selection criteria were established for each type of social actor. Thus, for organisations within the third sector, entities whose actions are aimed at the general population (e.g., NGO coordinator, *Cáritas Española*) were combined with others that serve specific groups (e.g., Roma people, disability, LGBTI). For trade unions, ideologies and size according to the number of members were taken into account. Professional associations were included in professional groups according to their sensitivity to vulnerable groups. Business organisations were selected from the public and private sectors, and gender was taken into account, so that, within a male-dominated sector, they were not mostly men. And for the political parties, ideology was taken into account. All stakeholders had to be linked to the university.

In the selection of participants, maximum discursive variability was sought with a view to finding out different meanings when faced with the same phenomenon. Finally, a total of 18 interviews were carried out (Table 3), 6 with women and 12 with men, with an average age of 44 years; in general, the respondents were fairly senior in their current post since, with the exception of one participant, they all had more than five years' experience.

Procedure

Each participating university contacted the social actors assigned according to the intentional distribution of the research team. The interviews were conducted by university teachers in accordance with the protocol established and following the same interview script.

The interviews were held in person, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and were carried out between the months of June 2019 and February 2020, in the localities of the participating universities. Each person interviewed signed an informed consent form whereby they agreed to participate voluntarily in the investigation.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed literally for comprehensive reading and in-depth analysis. Content analysis was conducted in accordance with the principles of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Initially, inductive analysis was carried out based on the pilot analysis of four interviews to define proposed codes. Based on this and the structure of the interview script, a list of codes was established, which were defined so that there was no error of interpretation or grouping in the analysis. Such list of codes was expanded as the analysis progressed and they emerged in the discourses. The analysis was run in two stages. The first was textual, selecting paragraphs, fragments, and significant quotations from the documents transcribed from the interviews. The second stage involved defining the codes and subcategories used when saturation was reached (Table 4). The software programme ATLAS.ti. v.8.0 was used to analyse the information.

Results

On the basis of the objective of the research and the analysis conducted, the results are presented around two main issues: 1) perceptions about diversity in university, reflecting the conceptualisations of diversity and the groups with which they associate it; 2) social actors' perceptions of how universities respond to diversity, as well as the challenges encountered in terms of implementation.

Perceptions of social actors around the issue of diversity in universities

Conceptions of diversity and groups with which it is associated

The first approach that the interviewees usually make to the concept of diversity is towards social heterogeneity itself, they refer to different

diversities and references to functional diversity (disability) and gender diversity tend to predominate.

As far as functional diversity is concerned, they consider that physical disability is more socially accepted and thereby, there have been greater advances and adaptations than for others such as sensory or intellectual disabilities. They agree that it is a group that is present in universities, but that its full inclusion has not yet been achieved.

> When they talk about diversity, they are mainly talking about physical disability (personal communication, 23 September 2019).

With regard to gender, there is a generalised conception of gender inequality within and outside the university environment. We found discourse on discrimination against women at university, focusing especially on the "glass ceiling", i.e. the subtle obstacles that women encounter in their professional careers. However, they point out that universities are more egalitarian spaces and perceive that gender discrimination will occur especially after they graduate.

> Women at universities don't have as much of a problem in terms of integration as they do after they leave (personal communication, 23 September 2019).

When interviewees refer, less frequently, to economic diversity, they highlight the greater difficulty for people on low incomes to access the education system. Here they highlight the difficulties associated with living in rural or remote areas, due to the costs of access to resources and mobility.

> We need to provide better access for people who live in rural areas and far from major towns and cities [...]. Nowadays, the biggest expenses for university students are travel and accommodation. So, someone who lives in a city, just because they live in that city, will find it easier to enrol in university and have greater facilities than those living in rural areas or more remote areas (personal communication, 11 February 2020).

The presence of students and lecturers of other nationalities is perceived positively, due to the cultural richness that this generates in the university community, although ethnic diversity is little mentioned, with the exception of the organisation working with Roma people, which highlights the discrimination they suffer in two main ways: on the one hand, discriminatory behaviour and comments towards the Roma community, and on the other, the denial of their identity by their peers.

> So, it's cool when you start class and say: "We're going to talk about *gitanos* [Spanish Roma gypsies]. Is anyone *gitano* here?" And we would have raised our hands. And then you can go in and give a good class. But if you're actually going in and saying: "because us... and them". Well, how is that managing diversity exactly? It's not (personal communication, 11 November 2019).

Sexual orientation was the least mentioned aspect in the interviews. When it is explicitly mentioned, it is to point out that it is not as visible as other types of diversity or to designate it as one of the diversities that have been more easily accommodated in the university.

> There are groups within the University that, you might not see it straight off, but they represent different collectives, like the LGTBI community, and they are fine at University, they're included at University (personal communication, 28 June 2019).

The forgotten groups in the discourses examined are immigrants and/or refugees.

Respondents perceive that professors are largely a homogeneous group, dominated by normative profiles, mainly highlighting gender and nationality diversity. They also draw attention to the lack of diversity training despite their commitment to needing support from specific organisations and/or entities to raise awareness to be educated and in turn educate others. Such training on diversity and inclusion is also perceived as necessary for administrative and service staff.

> So, ultimately, if the professors, who should be giving this information, if they are not given resources, well obviously, if they studied twenty years ago, they won't have the most up-to-date information there is nowadays. But that's why they need to keep going on courses and doing more training, so they can give the right information (personal communication, 18 December 2019).

Diversity is more present among students who make specific demands (in relation to gender, ethnicity, functional diversity, etc.) on the institution.

> I think that, within the student body, diversity is becoming more visible. It has been made more visible to the authorities and, above all, to the management side of things, which has forced them to react. It's not really been an institutional reaction, although there has been one, there have been management teams that have been supported by diverse groups and who have sort of achieved that and they have promoted it; but in general, it's more a case of needs that the students convey to us and that we have to deal with any request we get (personal communication, 18 December 2019).

Perceptions of university responses to diversity

University policies

University policies are largely understood as the responsibility of universities to promote equal opportunities and to ensure that the different profiles of students with different circumstances and characteristics are adequately catered for within the educational process. The actions most identified by

the interviewees are aimed at gender equality and the inclusion of people with disabilities.

> That's also the point of university, to connect with these collectives, to exchange information and to try to find answers to the problems they present... (Personal communication, 29 October 2019).

The social actors consider that access to university requires a prior competitive process, this way access and permanence in university implies the achievement of certain objectives, which means that this process is a selective filter itself. In addition, origin and social context (income, nationality, ethnicity) are obstacles that prevent many from accessing university. In fact, the groups that are most characterised as vulnerable are people with intellectual disabilities, immigrants, and people in a situation of social exclusion because they are groups that constantly face barriers and generally do not enjoy the same opportunities as other citizens.

The implementation of university diversity management policies, as described above, begins as a small project through individual initiatives –often by associations or people who are disadvantaged because they do not fit the normative profile of students– and are supported to a greater or lesser extent by the university institution. Through perseverance and the involvement of different administrative, student and teaching actors, resources and spaces are gradually obtained that allow the development of the programmes. These are most frequently translated into awareness-raising and training actions for students and social projects that are integrated into the academic itinerary of degrees related to social intervention.

> It started out three years ago as a collaboration agreement, but thanks to the willingness of the manager and the then Dean, we were given two spaces, at a very low cost, and so we collaborated like this. Gradually, it became more institutionalised, we started getting students from the master's degree in Special Education doing work placements. We ran a few awareness campaigns, a few classes or groups from Education, or from the Master's, or from Social Education, and so we are gradually getting more and more people doing work placements, from different subjects. And in fact this year it has become fully institutionalised as a CPD course, so the project has been much more widely accepted within the University (personal communication, 23 September 2019).

Some of the interviewees highlight that there is a greater involvement of managers when they have first-hand experience of diversity, due to the existence of diversity in their personal circles or because their professional career has brought them closer to it. This managerial profile is described as a facilitator in the implementation of the university's diversity policies.

> I believe that the current chancellor has a daughter with a disability, and I believe that this simple fact will be very beneficial because he will certainly have a much higher level of awareness [...] when the people at the top are aware and sensitive, everything flows more easily (personal communication, 23 September 2019).

Most of the participants point out the benefits of such policies and how they are becoming more heterogeneous and flexible. Social entities also point out the benefit they bring to them.

Challenges in the implementation of diversity management actions

In general, stakeholders perceive the implementation of diversity management actions as an arduous process, in which they encounter various obstacles. Furthermore, the policies implemented are often seen as insufficient due to the barriers they face for their correct implementation within the institution. Recurrent difficulties are lack of resources (financial, space or time) and lack of capacity to manage diversity-oriented initiatives.

Various participants highlight how institutional policy and its priorities (guided by ideological orientation) permeate university policies on diversity management. Thus, the educational standards on which they depend as well as their volatility determine the lack of continuity that affects many programmes, or the fact that they do not have actual or lasting impact over time.

> What I doubt very much is that this will come from university policy, from education policy, or that the university world is given the tools and resources they need to make diversity more productive [...] I would say that the resources, the means, the means to be able to... that and many other issues (personal communication, 23 September 2019).

For their part, the difficulties related to the management capacity of this type of policies and programmes have to do, on the one hand, with the lack of training and knowledge on the part of university staff (administration and services, teaching staff and management) to ensure the correct management of diversity and, on the other hand, with the difficulties that bureaucracy and the administration system impose on people who try to move within the system. The lack of training and knowledge is related, in several interviews, to the lack of participation of the targeted people in the design process itself. Thus, the most successful policies are those coordinated by associations that work for the integration of diversity and have first-hand knowledge of the different needs in this field.

The people who deal with these groups are organisations. They are the ones who know what they are doing, they are trained, they have the staff, they have the budget to do it, and I think that what Universities should be doing is guiding these organisations so that they get better at doing their job, in a more scientific way (personal communication, 8 October 2019).

Administrative/bureaucratic difficulties can be summarised in two fundamental problems for people who want to access diversity management programmes: the tendency to homogenise students in terms of access to resources and opportunities, which puts certain groups at disadvantage; and the difficulty and complications that administrative procedures often impose, making them almost inaccessible for a large number of students.

Despite these obstacles, interviewees say that collaboration and dialogue with universities is increasing and becoming institutionalised (through practical programmes, generally), whilst experiences and communication are positive, close, and flexible.

But that real support is still missing, because when it comes to doing it formally, taking steps forwards, we are coming across lots of problems and barriers, and obviously, universities are geared towards a certain type of person, and that person has to meet certain criteria, and if you don't, well the system's not cut out for that. So you have to get around these barriers, and we're finding it hard. But it's also true that, thanks to the goodwill and attitudes of the people we are meeting, things are going quite well (personal communication, 23 September 2019).

Discussion

Social actors interpret diversity differently according to each profile. For third sector actors, the concept of diversity is the closest to the group they work with. In other spheres, they understand diversity in terms of recognising the universality of difference, but without acknowledging the inequalities between these groups in terms of power, status, wealth, and access (Herring and Henderson, 2012). Social actors interpret the diversity approach as the inclusion of all people, regardless of their characteristics, as a reflection of diverse and pluralistic societies (Vertovec, 2015) and though diversity discourses lead to a 'happy vision' of how to embrace all groups and collectives (Bell and Hartmann, 2007), by and large, inequalities and social justice are not present in the understanding of diversity.

The most represented diversities in stakeholder discourses are disability and gender, in line with other research in Europe (Biewer *et al.*, 2015; Klein, 2016) and Spain (Benet-Gil, 2020; Márquez, 2019), generally focused on a

normative approach to diversity derived from mandatory law enforcement within higher education (Langa and Lubián, 2021). In general, visible diversities (Jokikokko, 2005) are perceived as the main target of university policies. Consequently, and owing to the lack of data about social agents that collaborate with universities, the results presented could be considered original and useful in terms of guiding the dialogue needed to move towards a university system that is more committed to inclusion.

The discourses underline the importance of raising awareness and training the university community in diversity issues, as they consider that, in most cases, they do not have sufficient tools to deal with diversity adequately. Stakeholders mainly confine diversity management to teaching and learning, but not to management and research (Sharma, 2015).

The study has identified discourses on the difficulties faced by universities in implementing diversity inclusion programmes, including the rigidity of administrative procedures and the place of diversity in university policy management.

Most of the social actors point to the evolution of universities, thanks to the victories of different groups that have worked to make their needs visible and demand a response from the universities. In this respect, the discourse on diversity tends to reproduce the dominant discourses, rather than question the dominant power structures and the unequal distribution of resources (Acher, 2007; Herring and Henderson, 2012). As a general trend, a superficial discourse is detected, which is indulgent towards universities insofar as it does not question the institution as a legitimiser of inequalities, and even projects the assumption that the matter is resolved since there are services in place for specific collectives; data that coincide with the findings of García-Cano *et al*. (2021) in relation to university leaders. However, integration is not synonym to campus diversity. Rather, to take advantage of the benefits of student diversity, institutional leaders must deliberately pursue strategies that promote inclusion (Tienda, 2013). From a more critical perspective, some authors talk about "making or creating diversity" (Squire, 2017).

The experience shown by the social actors indicates that the most successful policies are those that engage both the people they are aimed at and the entities that work for them in their design. On the one hand, entities gain benefits in terms of scientific resources and knowledge and skills to improve their actions and meet new challenges in a changing society. On the other, universities become more open to realities beyond the academic world and are enriched with new perspectives while becoming more inclusive institutions capable of reaching the whole of society.

Conclusion

Diversity is present in the field of higher education, and this seems unquestionable when analysing the discourses of social actors. This article sought to show the perceptions of these actors about diversity in the university context, in other words to ascertain in some way the meaning that external actors –who are, in turn, collaborators– attribute to the steps taken by universities to address diversity, the meaning they give to diversity management, groups they associate it with –or what Langa and Lubián (2021) call the logic of differentiation (to whom the concept applies)–, and their assessments of the responses offered by the university setting. Analysis of the discourses of these actors has shown the need to establish and strengthen alliances with them, to bring the university closer to reality through their knowledge of emerging social problems. The results presented could guide dialogue with other actors outside the academia and, in particular, its leaders as a means of moving towards a more socially committed university.

Diversity must be part of the pursuit of inclusiveness for everyone regardless of their characteristics, so that equal opportunities are guaranteed, while also providing an opportunity to create a university that is free from stereotypes and prejudices, and committed to all the realities and collectives that are part of diversity. This is why diversity management must be integrated into the political commitment of universities, which must also translate into more resources and institutional involvement in order to continue implementing such measures in all their functions (teaching, research, and management).

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Annex

Table 1

Semi-structured interview script

Block	Example of the type of questions
Conceptions and perceptions of diversity	What do you understand by diversity? Where do you see diversity in the university setting? What would an inclusive and diverse university be for you? Do you know if there is a university policy linked to the management of diversity? Which collective(s) is it aimed at? How do you see the issue of diversity management in universities? Which collectives do you think should be the focus of diversity management in universities?
Programmes and policies	Which activities or programmes do you do with the university? What does the university ask of you in relation to diversity management? What do you offer the university in terms of managing diversity within your institution? What are the relationships and channels of communication with the university? Which actions, programmes, and/or services do you know the university is offering? Which diversity management interventions and programmes link you or your organisation to the university?
Challenges in responding to diversity	What do you think are the main difficulties that the university finds in terms of managing diversity? What are the main difficulties you have in your institution in terms of managing diversity? What are the main benefits universities will reap by investing in diversity? What are the main benefits you think your institution will reap from investing in diversity?

Source: Own processing from data collected in the framework of the research project.

Table 2

Types of participating entities

Scope	Actors	Number
Social	NGOs	7
	Trade Unions	3
	Professional Associations	3
Economic	Public business organisations	2
	Private business organisations	1
Political	Political Parties	2
Total		18

Source: Own processing from data collected in the framework of the research project.

Table 3

Profile of participants

Participants	Entity	Sex	Age	Qualification	Seniority	City
P1	NGO	Male	55	Psychology	26	Cadiz
P2	Professional Association	Male	46	Engineering	24	Cadiz
P3	Trade Union	Male	61	Draftsman	10	Cadiz
P4	NGO	Male	32	Education	7	Madrid
P5	Political Party	Male	50	Political Sciences and Sociology	5	Madrid
P6	Political Party	Male	53	Political Science	5	Madrid
P7	NGO		28	Sociocultural entertainment	9	
P8	Professional Association	Male	59	Psychology	30	
P9	Company	Male	42	Biology	20	
P10			54	Psychology	12	Jaen
P11	Trade Union	Male	24	Social Integration	6	Jaen
P12	NGO		37	Psychology	5	Jaen
P13	Trade Union		49	Architecture	12	Seville
P14	NGO		24	Social Work and Sociology	1	Seville
P15	NGO	Male	31	Biology	6	Seville
P16	NGO	Male	41	Law	12	
P17	Professional Association	Male	56	Journalism	15	
P18			53	Pedagogy	29	

Source: Own processing from data collected in the framework of the research project.

Table 4

List of analytical codes

Codes	Subcategories
Conception of diversity	
Actors	Students
	Teaching staff
	Non-teaching staff
Diversity	Ethnic
	Functional (disability)
	Gender
	Nationality
	Level of income
	Religion
	Sexual
	Territorial (rural-urban)
Evolution of diversity management	
University Social Responsibility	University policy
	Practical actions
Social dialogue	
Weaknesses	Discrimination
	Vulnerability
	Obstacles
Strengths	Normalisation
	Opportunities
	Tools
Proposed improvements	

Source: Authors' own based on data collected through the research project.

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