

GENDER INCLUSION: A CATALYST FOR DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN ACADEMIA

Dr SENANI RAJAMANTHRI, PhD, CAHRI

Department of Management and Marketing
Faculty of Business and Economics
University of Melbourne.

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ABSTRACT

Managing diversity in higher education has gained significance as institutions recognise that inclusion is not merely an ethical obligation but also vital for sustainable organisational success. This paper explores how gender inclusion—the equitable representation and involvement of all genders—drives sustainability within the global academic sphere. The existing literature on diversity management and gender equality in academia was analysed, shedding light on the connections between inclusive practices and beneficial sustainability results, such as improved institutional performance, innovation, and alignment with societal goals. A mixed-method theoretical framework was adopted, incorporating quantitative and qualitative perspectives to assess how gender-inclusive policies and cultures boost long-term viability and social responsibility in academic contexts. Current inclusion practices in academia are examined through a gender lens, addressing recruitment and mentorship programs and policy initiatives, while critically evaluating their effectiveness. The findings suggest that gender-balanced and inclusive academic environments foster better decision-making, creativity, and overall well-being, thereby enhancing the sustainability of academic institutions. Additionally, this paper discusses implications for educational leaders and corporate stakeholders, highlighting that lessons learned from academia on gender diversity and inclusion can inform broader organisational sustainability efforts. In conclusion, promoting gender inclusion in academia is vital for achieving sustainable development goals and ensuring institutions remain resilient and innovative.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Diversity management, Inclusion, Sustainability

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender diversity and inclusion has become a central concern for universities worldwide as they strive to embody equity and social sustainability principles. Women now account for more than half of higher education graduates globally, yet they remain underrepresented in many academic leadership and faculty positions (Martina et.al, 2025). For instance, recent global data indicate that only about 36% of senior academics and 29% of research authors are women (Martina et.al, 2025). In the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, the gender gap is even more pronounced, with women comprising only 41% of graduates. In contrast, the proportion of female graduates in fields like health is much higher (Martina et.al, 2025). These disparities highlight a persistent vertical

segregation in academia, often referred to as the “leaky pipeline,” where women’s representation dwindles at higher ranks. This inequality is not just a matter of fairness; it has practical implications for the sustainability of academic institutions. Diversity of perspectives has been linked to enhanced problem-solving, innovation, and organisational agility (Martina et.al, 2025). In the context of academia’s mission to generate knowledge and serve society, gender inclusion is increasingly seen as integral to long-term success and relevance.

Diversity management involves intentional policies and practices to cultivate an inclusive environment, capitalising on a diverse workforce. Initially developed in corporate settings, diversity management in academia focuses on strategic initiatives to attract, retain, and empower individuals from various backgrounds, including differing genders, ethnicities, and cultures. It goes beyond mere compliance or superficial representation, aiming to fundamentally shift the organisational culture (Martina et.al, 2025). Research indicates that effective diversity management benefits individuals and institutions by increasing employee commitment and productivity while aligning ethical values with performance results (Rajamanthri, 2023). As Ashikali and Groeneveld (2015) noted, effective diversity management can positively affect organisational outcomes for all individuals by fostering an inclusive environment. In universities, this translates to developing a scholarly community where women and gender minorities are afforded equal opportunities, thus bolstering the institution’s intellectual capacity and sustainability.

Notably, sustainability in academic institutions encompasses social dimensions, including equity, well-being, and justice, alongside financial and environmental aspects. A sustainable university manages resources responsibly and fosters a culture of inclusion and equity, aligning with broader societal goals like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gender equality (SDG 5) and quality education (SDG 4) are explicitly linked, as inclusive academic environments ensure that talent is nurtured fully regardless of gender. Indeed, universities promoting gender inclusion contribute to SDG 5 and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by dismantling structural barriers. An institutional focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) impacts all aspects of higher education management, from governance to daily practices. Recent scholarship frames gender diversity and inclusion as fundamental to the sustainable transformation of academia. In other words, embedding gender inclusion in academic culture is increasingly viewed as a driver of sustainability, enhancing the university’s social impact, innovation potential, and adaptability in a changing global landscape.

However, advancements in gender-inclusive academia vary globally and face significant challenges. While many universities have committed to gender equality—89% of institutions globally indicate anti-discrimination policies for women—there remain notable implementation gaps (UNESCO, 2022). For instance, only 59% of universities provide accessible childcare for students (69% for staff), emphasising the ongoing difficulties in achieving a work-life balance that disproportionately impacts women. Furthermore, regional variations are evident: some areas, like Oceania, excel in gender equality metrics, while others lag (UNESCO, 2022). These insights highlight that attaining genuine gender inclusion necessitates not merely policy declarations but also the implementation of effective practices and a shift in cultural attitudes. This paper addresses these concerns by investigating how gender inclusion, as a facet of diversity management, can promote sustainability in academic institutions. The discussion is organised into a scholarly format that includes an Abstract, an

Introduction, a critical Literature Review, a description of the Theoretical Framework (adopting a mixed-methods approach), followed by an examination of Inclusion Practices in Academia through a gender-focused perspective. Subsequently, the paper analyses the connections between inclusion and sustainability outcomes in universities and discusses actionable implications for academic leaders and corporate stakeholders. Finally, the Conclusion summarises the findings and proposes future directions. By merging insights from peer-reviewed studies and international reports, it is aimed to offer academic and corporate leaders a detailed understanding of the importance and methods of promoting gender inclusion to enhance sustainability within higher education.

2.0 CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Diversity Management and Organisational Sustainability: The approach to diversity management in organisations has transformed into a strategic framework that connects ethical goals with performance advantages. Early models suggested by scholars like Cox and Blake (1991) argued that a varied workforce could provide competitive benefits through enhanced creativity, deeper market understanding, and improved problem-solving capabilities. Later studies have validated this “business case” for diversity, showing that organisations with inclusive cultures often excel compared to those without them. Gilbert et al. (1999) defined diversity management as a new organisational principle capitalising on diversity for ethical and business advantages. Public and academic research has indicated that effective diversity management corresponds with increased employee engagement, innovation, and adaptability (Rasticova et al., 2025). A vital reason for this is that inclusivity brings forth the complete array of talents and perspectives among team members, essential for tackling complex issues in research and education. Shore et al. (2018) stress that real inclusion goes beyond representation, ensuring individuals feel valued and can contribute meaningfully, which fosters greater trust and loyalty within the organisation (Martina et al., 2025). Literature indicates that when genuinely practised, diversity management can bolster human capital development and the sustainability of organisations, including universities.

2.1 Gender Inclusion in Academia – Progress and Challenges: Gender inclusion in academia is a crucial element of diversity management that has undergone extensive examination. Over recent decades, the participation of women in higher education has significantly increased at the student level; in numerous regions, women enrol in and complete degrees at rates that equal or exceed those of men. This trend is often termed the “female advantage” in higher education enrolment, yet it has not translated into equivalent representation in academic careers. Numerous studies emphasise the persistent underrepresentation of women in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) and senior academic and administrative positions globally (Rasticava et al. 2025). A variety of structural barriers contribute to this imbalance, including biased recruitment and promotion practices, limited mentoring opportunities, work environments that fail to support caregiving responsibilities, and incidents of discrimination or harassment. For example, Sheltzer and Smith (2014) discovered that women are less likely to be appointed as principal investigators in leading laboratories, regardless of their publication records, which suggests possible biases in hiring practices. Likewise, data from several countries reveal the presence of a glass ceiling, as the percentage of women drastically reduces at higher academic ranks (Martina et al., 2025).

In fields such as engineering and computer science, women often constitute less than 20% of the faculty at many institutions. In contrast, traditionally female-dominated fields (e.g., nursing and education) remain concentrated in lower ranks. This imbalance is unjust and leads to a loss of potential scholarly contributions and student role models. The literature also points to the concept of intersectionality – the way gender intersects with race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other identities, which can compound inequalities. Women of colour, for instance, often face dual biases in academic careers. While our focus is on gender inclusion, it is essential to note that an intersectional lens enriches the understanding of diversity management by ensuring that policies address the needs of those at multiple points of disadvantage. Duarte et al. (2023) identify a comprehensive framework for sustainable transformation in academia, encompassing 24 fundamental concepts that academic leaders must understand to address these systemic inequities. These include acknowledging how historical biases have created unjust disadvantages for women and gender minorities, and the adoption of targeted solutions such as affirmative action, inclusive pedagogy, and supportive policies for LGBTIQ+ and transgender members of the academic community.

2.2 Benefits of Gender-Inclusive Academic Environments: More research connects gender inclusion to favourable institutional results in higher education. Institutions with a balanced gender representation – where women and men are more equally visible – tend to promote equitable opportunity access, improved work environments, and higher overall satisfaction. A study by Mousa (2021) discovered that faculty in universities with more gender-equitable cultures reported increased job satisfaction and a lower likelihood of leaving, indicating that inclusion enhances retention and morale. Research shows that diverse teams produce more innovative and impactful outcomes, likely due to various perspectives inspiring more creative approaches to scientific inquiries. Hofstra et al. (2020) demonstrated that scientific papers authored by diverse teams, including those with gender diversity, typically achieve greater novelty and influence, even if these teams encounter slightly extended paths to recognition. Additionally, the literature emphasises improved decision-making within gender-diverse leadership groups, such as university committees or boards that include women, which are less likely to fall into groupthink and consider a wider array of stakeholder interests. Ultimately, inclusion expands the knowledge base and cognitive resources accessible to an academic institution, enhancing its ability to tackle complex challenges – a vital element of sustainability.

The literature notes that many academic inclusion initiatives encounter implementation barriers despite these benefits. Cultural inertia can lead to tokenism, where a few women are included in committees or panels without real power or voice. There can also be resistance to change, sometimes from those who perceive (wrongly) that promoting equity might compromise meritocracy. However, studies debunk the meritocracy myth by showing that current systems are not merit-neutral but often reflect accumulated advantages. For instance, unconscious bias in student evaluations and hiring can disadvantage female academics, indicating that proactive measures are needed to level the playing field. The review by Caffarella and Cozza (2021) on women in higher education leadership suggests that mentorship and networking are crucial for overcoming the informal barriers that women face. Moreover, universities that have made concerted efforts (such as through signing charters like Athena SWAN in the UK or implementing NSF ADVANCE programs in the US) have reported measurable improvements in gender parity in some areas, though not uniformly across all departments. An evaluation of the Athena SWAN Charter indicated positive impacts on raising awareness and improving

policies, but also noted limits, implying that continuous commitment and broader cultural shifts are required to sustain progress.

The literature emphasises that gender inclusion is a moral obligation and a strategic imperative for academic institutions. It can foster excellence and innovation, aligning with the institution's educational mission and promoting relevance and fairness within its social mission. Nevertheless, achieving genuine inclusion requires tackling entrenched biases and structural obstacles. Key insights from previous research highlight the necessity of holistic diversity management—integrating policy, practice, and culture—to fully leverage the advantages of gender diversity for enduring academic success.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (Mixed-Method Approaches)

This paper examines gender inclusion as a key factor for sustainability through a theoretical framework that integrates organisational theory, gender studies, and sustainable development theory. It acknowledges that quantitative and qualitative perspectives are essential for comprehensively understanding this issue. The mixed-method approach incorporates numerical data (such as gender representation rates and performance metrics) alongside the personal experiences and institutional contexts that inform these figures. This holistic strategy is consistent with modern research methodologies in higher education. For instance, Rasticava et al. (2025) utilised a mixed-method design that combined university performance metrics and statistical analysis with qualitative case studies to investigate how diversity management practices connect to sustainability objectives. This method enables us to explore not only the nature of the relationship between gender inclusion and sustainability but also the reasons and contexts in which this relationship occurs.

3.1 Conceptual Lenses: Central to our framework is the idea of social sustainability within organisations, which asserts that achieving long-term success necessitates focusing on social equity and the well-being of members. The study considers gender inclusion a crucial element of social sustainability, a viewpoint contemporary scholarship supports. From this perspective, fostering an inclusive academic environment is vital for maintaining an institution's human capital and upholding its social responsibilities. We utilise institutional theory to examine how global standards, like the SDGS and diversity charters, compel universities to implement gender-inclusive policies, and how these external influences interact with internal dynamics. Many universities now explicitly integrate SDG 5 (Gender Equality) into their strategic plans, reflecting a normative shift in which gender inclusion is integral to defining a "world-class, responsible university." Moreover, the study draws from insights in organisational behaviour and feminist theory for a nuanced interpretation of qualitative factors. Critical mass theory (Kanter, 1977) posits that women's influence in organisations significantly grows once they attain a specific representation threshold, often cited as around 30%. This theory explains why gradual increases in women's participation may result in non-linear organisational culture and decision-making improvements. Social role theory and unconscious bias theory also illuminate enduring stereotypes that may obstruct inclusion, such as presuppositions regarding women's leadership capabilities or commitments. By comprehending these theories, our framework can pinpoint which interventions (support-like bias training or mentorship programs) are theoretically justified to enhance inclusion. Furthermore, we utilise the concept of intersectionality from feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to acknowledge that "gender

inclusion” must reflect gender diversity; women's experiences are not uniform and can be influenced by factors like race and class. This deepens our theoretical analysis by ensuring that solutions address multiple aspects of identity.

3.2 Quantitative and Qualitative Elements: This framework evaluates gender inclusion metrics (e.g., the percentage of women in faculty and leadership roles, gender pay disparities, retention rates of female staff, and publication and citation statistics by gender) alongside sustainability outcomes (including university performance indicators, research output, student success rates, and reputation indices). Previous research has sought to establish correlations among some of these metrics. For example, studies have examined whether universities with a greater representation of women in leadership tend to achieve better rankings or have higher student satisfaction levels. The alignment with sustainability-related metrics, such as the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings, which encompass measures about gender equality and other SDG criteria, was also assessed. Analysing such data enables us to quantitatively determine whether institutions with greater inclusivity outperform others or engage more effectively in societal impact initiatives.

The framework emphasises the importance of organisational culture and practices. It analyses narratives and case studies that demonstrate how universities adopt inclusive measures, such as creating family leave policies and forming gender equity task forces, alongside the perceptions of stakeholders. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and literature policy analyses illuminate how female academics perceive their institution’s inclusivity. What challenges do they recognise, and what positive changes have impacted their careers? How do leaders communicate the link between diversity and their institution’s mission? By incorporating these insights, the theoretical framework addresses crucial, yet elusive, dimensions of inclusion, like feelings of belonging, leadership commitment, and institutional climate.

3.2.1 Integrative Model: Combining these elements, it proposes an integrative conceptual model in which gender inclusion mediates between diversity management inputs and academic sustainability outcomes. In simplified form, the model suggests:

- Diversity Management Inputs include policies (such as hiring practices, anti-discrimination laws, and mentoring programs), resources (including budgets for equity initiatives and training programs), and leadership commitment to inclusion.
- Gender Inclusion Climate: The resulting representation (how many women are present at various levels) and, importantly, the quality of inclusion (how welcome and supported these women feel, and whether they have equal voice and opportunities) are crucial. This climate is influenced by organisational culture and daily practices.
- Sustainability Outcomes: Short- to long-term results include employee outcomes (job satisfaction, retention of talented staff), organisational outcomes (research productivity, innovation capacity, decision-making quality), and societal outcomes (progress on gender-related SDGs, community reputation, and knowledge dissemination that benefits society).

The framework also posits feedback loops: success in outcomes can reinforce and encourage further diversity efforts, creating a virtuous cycle, whereas failure to improve the climate

despite policies could stall progress, necessitating adjustments. Using quantitative data (to measure representation and outcomes) and qualitative analysis (to understand context and perceptions), our approach offers a comprehensive theoretical analysis. This aligns with the mixed-methods trend in higher education research, acknowledging that complex social issues, such as gender inclusion, cannot be fully understood through a single methodological lens.

Applying this framework, the subsequent sections of this paper will examine how inclusion practices (the inputs) manifest in academia and then explore the evidence of linkages between those practices, the gender inclusion climate, and various sustainability outcomes. This will set the stage for drawing implications and conclusions through the integrated theoretical viewpoint outlined here.

3.3 Inclusion Practices in Academia (Gender Lens), Translating commitment to gender inclusion into practice involves many initiatives and policies within academic institutions. This section discusses academic standard inclusion practices through gender-focused lenses, highlighting examples worldwide. These practices target various stages of the academic career pipeline—from student recruitment to faculty retention—and address both formal and informal barriers faced by women and gender minorities.

3.3.1 Recruitment and Hiring: Numerous universities have updated their hiring procedures to draw a more diverse array of candidates and reduce potential biases. Gender-sensitive recruitment approaches involve using inclusive language in job advertisements, ensuring diversity within search committees, and requiring unconscious bias training for committee members. Some institutions establish representation targets or implement “dual shortlist” policies requiring at least one female candidate to be shortlisted for faculty roles. For instance, the European Commission’s guidelines on gender equality in research promote such practices to enhance women’s opportunities in competitive hiring. Furthermore, many universities are adopting open recruitment strategies, including extensive advertising and standardised evaluation criteria, to lessen the impact of old-boy networks. These initiatives correspond with recommendations to address the underrepresentation of women in STEM and other sectors (Teichmann et.al., 2022).

3.3.2 While sometimes controversial, affirmative action policies (e.g., quota systems in parts of Europe or gender equity reservations in specific departments) are in place in some regions to directly increase the hiring of women. A critical literature review shows that when well-implemented, such policies can jump-start progress, though they must be coupled with culture change to be fully effective (Teichmann et.al., 2022).

3.4 Promotion and Career Development: Inclusion means enabling women to progress and thrive in their academic careers. This involves implementing formal mentorship programs that pair early-career female academics with senior mentors who can offer guidance on career development, research funding, and leadership abilities. According to global survey data, approximately 81% of universities provide women’s access initiatives, such as mentoring or scholarships. In comparison, around 69% have women’s mentoring schemes that engage many female students. Research indicates that mentorship enhances promotion rates and retention for women by expanding their professional networks and increasing their understanding of unspoken rules. Additionally, universities organise leadership training workshops for women,

focusing on skills like management, negotiation, and grant writing, to cultivate a pipeline of future female department heads, deans, and research centre directors. Some institutions establish sponsorship programs where leaders actively advocate for high-potential women regarding promotions and prestigious opportunities. Another essential practice is ensuring transparency and fairness in promotion criteria; for example, revising tenure clock policies (to allow extensions for parental leave or personal situations) prevents women taking maternity leave from being disadvantaged in promotion timing. Many research-heavy universities now have policies to “stop the tenure clock” for one year per child. This is beneficial, particularly to women, who traditionally have more family caregiving responsibilities (Teichmann et.al., 2022).

3.5 Work–Life Balance and Support: Historically, unequal family responsibilities have hindered women’s academic careers, prompting inclusive universities to provide support for achieving work-life balance. A key mechanism is the availability of subsidised on-campus childcare; however, only about 59% of universities globally offer this to students, and 69% to staff, indicating significant room for improvement. Flexible work arrangements, including adjustable schedules, part-time positions, and remote work options (as long as they align with teaching or lab responsibilities), can better accommodate family commitments. Many universities have also implemented parental leave policies that exceed national legal requirements, such as offering fully paid maternity leave or paid paternity leave to encourage shared parenting. These family-friendly policies are associated with enhanced retention rates of female faculty members as they reduce the pressure of choosing between career and family. Moreover, progressive institutions recognise the dual-career dilemma, where academic couples seek positions near one another. To address this issue, dual-career hiring initiatives aim to secure suitable roles for the partners of newly recruited faculty, a consideration that often influences the decisions of women academics, who are disproportionately represented in dual-career situations within academia (Teichmann et.al., 2022).

3.6 Campus Climate and Culture: Beyond established policies, the daily environment significantly influences inclusion. Universities aim to foster an ongoing culture of respect and equality. Regular training on unconscious bias, harassment prevention, and inclusive teaching practices is becoming routine. For example, many faculties now mandate equity and inclusion training modules for professional development. Additionally, there is an effort to promote gender-inclusive language in official communications and classroom environments (e.g., avoiding the default use of “he” for a scientist and honouring preferred pronouns for all genders). Some institutions organise events like Women in Science symposiums, networking lunches for women faculty across various departments, or International Women’s Day celebratory events to emphasise the importance of gender diversity. (Teichmann et.al., 2022) These cultural initiatives enhance inclusion by showcasing women’s contributions and encouraging solidarity and awareness among colleagues. A firm zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment and discrimination is also crucial, as leading universities provide precise reporting mechanisms, victim support services, and disciplinary measures for misconduct. Recent high-profile incidents have urged academia to fortify these systems, as the lack of a safe working environment can push women away from academic careers. Additionally, transparent grievance procedures and active bystander training contribute to this protective aspect of inclusion (Teichmann et.al., 2022).

3.7 Institutional Initiatives and Charters: At a broader level, many universities engage in national or international initiatives that provide a framework and accountability for gender inclusion. The Athena SWAN Charter (originating in the UK and now adopted in several countries) is one prominent example: universities commit to a rigorous self-assessment and peer-reviewed process to earn bronze, silver, or gold awards for their progress on gender equality. Research has found that departments involved with Athena SWAN often implement more systematic changes, such as data collection on gender metrics and action plans to address gaps. Some evidence suggests that this has improved women's recruitment and promotion in participating departments. Similarly, the U.S. NSF ADVANCE program provided grants to universities to develop innovative strategies for gender equity, resulting in widely shared toolkits (e.g., for bias reduction in hiring). On a global scale, UN initiatives and UNESCO's guidelines encourage academic institutions to mainstream gender in their policies—this includes recommendations like gender budgeting (allocating funds specifically for equity programs) and integrating gender topics into curriculum and research agendas (so-called “gender mainstreaming” in academia).

Many institutions openly disclose gender diversity statistics in sustainability and annual reports, promoting transparency and accountability. The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings have adopted metrics related to gender equality (SDG 5), motivating universities to assess indicators such as the ratios of female students and staff, gender equality policies, and research on gender issues. A joint report by UNESCO IESALC (2022) and THE indicates that most universities (over 80%) are actively tracking gendered data, including application and graduation rates by gender, which signifies a positive step towards identifying areas that require intervention.

Upon reviewing these practices, it becomes evident that no single initiative is a cure-all. Achieving comprehensive gender inclusion demands a multi-faceted approach — recruiting a diverse group, supporting and developing that group throughout their careers, changing the institutional culture, and consistently assessing progress. Optimal results arise when these practices reinforce one another. For example, mentorship and networking assist talented women in benefiting from enhanced hiring and promotion policies; family-friendly policies help ensure that these advancements are maintained despite life changes; and a positive, respectful environment guarantees that inclusion is genuinely experienced rather than merely formalised. Nonetheless, challenges persist, such as garnering support from all campus community members and avoiding a checklist mentality. The following discussion will connect these inclusion practices to the sustainability outcomes they aim to achieve at academic institutions, utilising research evidence to demonstrate which practices have produced measurable results (Gomes et al., 2023).

4.0 LINKING INCLUSION TO SUSTAINABILITY OUTCOMES IN ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

How does gender inclusion concretely influence the sustainability and success of academic institutions? Drawing from theoretical arguments and empirical evidence, this section elucidates the connections between inclusive practices (outlined above) and various sustainability outcomes. Here, sustainability outcomes refer to the long-term thriving of the institution — academically, socially, and even financially — and its contribution to broader

societal goals. Several key outcome areas emerge where inclusion makes a significant impact: organisational performance and innovation, talent retention and development, institutional reputation and alignment with global goals, and the advancement of knowledge relevant to sustainability challenges (Gomes et al., 2023).

4.1 Enhanced Decision-Making and Innovation: Academic settings thrive on varied perspectives in governance and research, leading to improved decision-making and innovative problem-solving. Women in leadership positions—such as those on faculty senates, committees, and boards—help mitigate the risk of uniform thinking within these groups. Diverse teams engage in more productive discussions and consider broader solutions. This diversity is essential in academia because decisions regarding curricula, research projects, and resource distribution significantly impact the institution's future. Research by Hofstra et al. (2020) indicates that papers produced by diverse teams, particularly those with gender diversity, display increased novelty and impact, suggesting that inclusion is critical in driving scholarly innovation. Innovation is vital for an institution's academic sustainability; universities recognised for cutting-edge research and creative interdisciplinary strategies tend to maintain prestige and attract funding. By fully utilising the talents of both men and women, institutions are better equipped to tackle complex, multidisciplinary challenges such as climate change and public health. In areas such as sustainability science, researchers argue that achieving gender equality is crucial for developing comprehensive and impactful research, as different genders bring unique priorities and perspectives to sustainability issues. For instance, some studies indicate that female scientists often emphasise community-oriented and social dimensions of sustainability, enhancing technological insights and expanding research inquiries to achieve sustainable outcomes.

4.2 Human Capital Retention and Well-being: Inclusion is linked to retaining and developing talent, a vital aspect of any institution's sustainability. High turnover, particularly among skilled academics, can incur significant costs and diminish institutional knowledge. Implementing inclusive practices results in increased job satisfaction and loyalty. When academics feel valued, supported, and given equal opportunities, they are more likely to pursue long-term careers at their institutions. Empirical evidence backs this: universities that demonstrate stronger gender inclusion often experience lower attrition rates among female faculty and staff (Hofstra et al., 2020).

Research by Hunt et al. (2012) revealed that STEM departments enhancing their climate (by reducing bias and increasing support) experienced a significant drop in women's departure rates compared to those that did not implement changes. Furthermore, inclusive institutions usually cultivate a sense of belonging. Female academics with mentors, peer support networks (such as women in science groups), and visibility of other successful women are more likely to envision a future for themselves in those environments. This continuity ensures the institution retains valuable educators and researchers, enhancing the quality of teaching and research output.

Inclusion is also linked to employee well-being. A positive environment that rejects harassment and values contributions fosters improved mental health and productivity for all employees. It can be argued that an institution that prioritises its people creates a beneficial cycle: motivated and healthy faculty become more involved in teaching and research, which boosts student

success and research quality, further ensuring the institution's longevity (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). Conversely, workplaces where women feel marginalised or face additional challenges often experience increased stress, burnout, and talent loss, jeopardising sustainability. As one study stated, "a more inclusive environment will result in better science, and the whole of society will benefit." This underscores the idea that better science arises from retaining and fostering all capable individuals.

4.3 Institutional Reputation and Societal Alignment: In today's world, an academic institution's standing is increasingly shaped by its social values and contributions. Universities are now expected to lead in areas such as diversity and sustainability. Institutions that embrace gender inclusivity enhance their reputation by demonstrating their commitment to social responsibility. This can attract more students, particularly from younger generations, who prioritise diversity and inclusion when choosing schools and faculty members seeking progressive workplaces. Furthermore, it may result in partnerships and funding opportunities; for example, some research funding agencies require evidence of diversity initiatives (such as Athena SWAN accreditation or its equivalent) to qualify for grants (UNESCO IESALC, 2022). Therefore, a strategic advantage is that being recognised as an equitable institution can draw resources supporting research and educational objectives.

Moreover, gender inclusion in academia significantly contributes to cultivating a pipeline of women professionals and leaders across various sectors, enhancing societal impact. By graduating more women in traditionally underrepresented fields, such as engineering, science, and academia, universities help create a more diverse workforce beyond their walls. This diversity ultimately benefits industry and society, aligning with corporate leaders' interests in academic inclusion. A genuinely sustainable academic institution generates knowledge and produces graduates and research that drive sustainable development within society. By aligning their internal practices with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), universities demonstrate their commitment to societal advancement. Achieving greater gender equality among staff and students strengthens a university's contribution to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), setting a standard for other organisations. This commitment also enhances the institution's capacity to address additional SDGs; for instance, diverse research teams are actively engaged with SDG 3 (Health), SDG 7 (Energy), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), providing inclusive perspectives that can lead to more comprehensive solutions. In summary, inclusion bolsters the connection between universities and societal sustainability goals – the institution exemplifies its principles, thereby increasing its credibility and moral authority in external engagements.

4.4 Academic and Research Outcomes: Inclusion has a subtle yet significant impact on the quality of scholarly output. A university's primary sustainable goal is to produce high-quality research and education continuously. Research has shown a correlation between diversity and higher education impact, as well as more extensive research agendas. For example, a study by Campbell et al. (2013) found that ethnically and gender-diverse research teams produced publications that addressed a broader range of topics and received wider citations, indicating a connection with a larger audience. Gender inclusion also influences curriculum development and knowledge creation. When women and other marginalised genders are involved and empowered in academic settings, research is more likely to incorporate gender as a variable or explore previously overlooked questions. This fosters more holistic knowledge generation. In medical research, for instance, a higher presence of female researchers has been linked to

increased studies focusing on women's health issues and gender-specific medicine, addressing critical gaps that a male-dominated field has historically ignored. Similarly, enhanced inclusion in sustainability research has resulted in a focus on social sustainability and community impacts, alongside technical solutions. Such comprehensive scholarship enhances sustainability by responding to the needs of a broader population, leading to more effective real-world applications.

4.5 Financial and Organisational Sustainability: Though often overlooked, gender inclusion has financial ramifications that impact an institution's sustainability. Workplaces prioritising equity tend to operate more efficiently and incur fewer legal and conflict-related costs, thereby avoiding costly lawsuits or settlements stemming from discrimination claims. Additionally, maximising the return on investment in human capital is vital; hiring and training women only to see them leave due to attrition represents a significant loss. By focusing on talent retention, universities can reduce costs linked to turnover, including recruitment expenses, start-up packages for new hires, and lost productivity during transitions. Consequently, inclusive practices can positively influence an institution's financial well-being. Moreover, as previously noted, inclusive universities might access new funding opportunities, such as diversity grants and contributions from alums who value their inclusive environment. In corporate terms, universities with strong gender inclusion are "more likely to achieve above-average performance," similar to evidence in the corporate world where organisations with more gender-diverse leadership teams experience greater profitability and innovation (Gomes et al, 2023). This principle applies to academia, implying that these universities may be better positioned to win research contracts, attract students, and gain prestige, all contributing to a self-sustaining cycle for the institution.

In practical terms, case studies illustrate these connections. For instance, consider a university that implemented a comprehensive gender inclusion strategy ten years ago: it transformed its hiring processes to recruit more women into science departments, introduced mentoring and childcare initiatives, and cultivated an inclusive environment. Consequently, the university increased its percentage of female faculty from 20% to 40%, raised the number of women in leadership positions, and expanded its faculty while experiencing lower turnover rates (Gomes et al, 2023). Concurrently, the university's research output grew. Specifically, interdisciplinary research institutes led by diverse teams tackled sustainability issues (Martina et al, 2025). They secured substantial grants, likely due to funders perceiving the team's diversity as a valuable asset and reflective of community values. The university improved its rankings in global impact assessments and gained recognition as a family-friendly employer, which helped attract top talent of all genders. This hypothetical example mirrors trends observed in institutions that have actively embraced inclusion. For instance, UNESCO IESALC (2022) noted that universities promoting gender equality typically exhibit strong policies for student inclusion and community involvement, illustrating institutions performing well across various sustainability aspects.

It's essential to note that correlation does not imply causation; therefore, we should exercise caution when directly linking outcomes to inclusion. Many factors influence a university's success. Nevertheless, the correlation between gender inclusion and favourable outcomes is compelling across various studies, suggesting a causal or at least a mutually reinforcing relationship (Martina et al, 2025). An inclusive institution attracts talented individuals and

innovative ideas, fostering success and enabling greater investment in inclusive excellence. Conversely, institutions that overlook inclusion may gradually fall behind, losing both talent and relevance in a diverse society. Thus, the connection is evident: gender inclusion promotes sustainable outcomes by enhancing academic institutions' human and financial foundations. By appreciating and empowering all members, universities not only adhere to ethical standards but also strengthen their ability to sustainably fulfil their educational and research missions. We will now translate these findings into actionable insights for academic and corporate leaders (Gomes et al., 2023).

5.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMICS AND CORPORATE LEADERS

This analysis provides crucial insights for academic leaders, including university administrators, higher education policy-makers, and corporate leaders who engage with academia and can implement similar diversity strategies within their organisations. Below, we present key takeaways and suggested actions for both groups:

5.1 Implications for Academic Institutions

5.1.1 Incorporate Inclusion in Strategic Planning: University leaders must weave gender diversity and inclusion objectives into their fundamental strategic plans, viewing them as institutional excellence and sustainability markers, similar to research outcomes or financial performance. This involves establishing clear targets (e.g., for women in leadership positions), allocating funds for diversity initiatives, and consistently assessing progress with data. A deliberate strategy demonstrates commitment and guarantees continuity beyond individual advocates (Gomes et al., 2023).

5.1.2 Implement Inclusive Policy Reforms: Organisations should adopt comprehensive policies that foster gender inclusion, from fair hiring and promotion practices to supportive family work arrangements and strong anti-harassment measures. As previously mentioned, fragmented approaches are not as practical; a comprehensive strategy based on proven frameworks (such as Athena SWAN or NSF ADVANCE) is advisable. For example, establishing mentoring programs, bias training, and clear criteria for advancement as routine practices in every department can help systematically eliminate obstacles.

5.1.3 Nurture an Inclusive Culture: Academic leaders such as Presidents, Deans, and Chairs must proactively promote a culture of inclusion. This involves training in inclusive leadership, recognising achievements in diversity, and encouraging male allies to engage in gender equity initiatives. Leaders should convey that diversity is a vital strength, integral to the university's mission, thus influencing campus norms (Gomes et al., 2023). Activities like diversity discussions, workshops, and visible support for women's networks contribute to an atmosphere where individuals of all genders feel respected. A supportive culture enhances morale and retention, essential for sustainable growth.

5.1.4 Utilise Data and Accountability: Universities must consistently gather and analyse data related to gender equity, including hiring, salaries, promotions, publications, and satisfaction surveys broken down by gender. This data-driven strategy helps identify issues (e.g., a decline in women transitioning from PhD to faculty positions) and assess the effectiveness of interventions. Ensuring accountability within units – for instance, linking a department's

diversity initiatives to funding or leadership evaluations – can foster genuine advancement. Additionally, publicly reporting results, such as annual reports or submissions for impact rankings, bolsters accountability and institutional reputation.

5.1.5 Collaborate and Share Best Practices: Academic institutions can significantly enhance their inclusion initiatives through collaboration. Engaging in consortia, attending workshops, and conducting research on gender issues in academia facilitates the exchange of practical strategies and identifies less successful ones. For instance, universities within a country or region might form partnerships to implement joint mentorship programs or evaluate the outcomes of various policies. Additionally, on a global scale, institutions should connect with organisations like UNESCO IESALC (2022), highlighting challenges and promoting interventions, such as addressing women’s underrepresentation in STEM through early interventions and mentoring. By learning from one another, academic leaders can accelerate progress and minimise isolated attempts at improvement.

5.2 Implications for Corporate Leaders

5.2.1 Acknowledge the Academia-Industry Talent Pipeline: Corporate leaders must recognise that inclusive academic institutions foster a broader and more diverse pool of graduates and researchers, which enhances industry recruitment and innovation. Investing in gender inclusion within academia—through collaborations, internships, and scholarships for women in STEM, among other initiatives—demonstrates a commitment to developing the future workforce. Numerous companies have begun forming partnerships with universities to promote women in technology or business, understanding that this will lead to more qualified female candidates over time (Gomes et. al, 2023; Teichmann et. Al., 2024).

6. Incorporate Lessons from Academic Inclusion Initiatives: Strategies that promote inclusion in universities, such as mentorship, bias training, flexible work arrangements, and inclusive leadership, can be effectively applied in corporate environments. Corporate leaders should emulate successful academic programs, such as family leave policies, sponsorship, and initiatives for women faculty, by adopting similar practices within their organisations. The evidence supporting the benefits of inclusion on performance and sustainability is equally pertinent to businesses as it is to academia. Studies, including those from McKinsey, reveal that gender-diverse leadership teams achieve better financial results than their counterparts. Therefore, corporate sustainability initiatives must prioritise diversity management, drawing insights from the comprehensive strategies implemented in academic settings.

7. Encourage Collaboration between Industry and Academia for Inclusion: Businesses and educational institutions can collaborate on research and initiatives to enhance gender inclusion. For example, companies might fund research positions or centres dedicated to gender and diversity studies, sponsor leadership training programs for women in academia, or partner in organising conferences focused on women in STEM fields. These partnerships contribute to knowledge and improve practices in both areas and demonstrate a shared commitment to gender equality within societal organisations. Corporate leaders on university boards or advisory councils play a crucial role; they should advocate for diversity and ensure their advised institutions prioritise inclusive practices (Crenshaw 1989).

8. Expanding the Definition of Sustainability: Business leaders increasingly adopt Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria as essential to sustainable practices. Research underscores that the “S” (social) dimension, encompassing diversity and inclusion, is vital for organisational sustainability. Just as a university’s sustainability is enhanced by gender inclusion, a company’s enduring success, driven by innovation, talent retention, and brand reputation, is bolstered by a diverse and inclusive workforce. Industry leaders should view gender inclusion not merely as a matter of compliance or corporate social responsibility but as a crucial strategy that fosters sustainable growth and competitive advantage. This shift in perspective—viewing inclusion as central to sustainability—is thoroughly endorsed by academic discussions (Crenshaw 1989).

9. Address Common Issues in Academia: Academia and industry face similar gender-related obstacles, including the glass ceiling, difficulties with work-life balance, and pipeline leakage. Leaders in corporate contexts can collaborate with academic leaders to address these challenges comprehensively. For instance, improving access to childcare and changing societal perceptions of parental leave require united efforts across sectors. By advocating for policies (whether governmental or organisational) that assist working parents or promote STEM education targeted at girls, corporate stakeholders help create an environment where both universities and businesses can work together towards gender parity. This strategy also fosters a more sustainable socio-economic landscape (Crenshaw 1989).

The implications reveal a reciprocal relationship: progress in gender inclusion in academia benefits both the corporate sector and society. At the same time, businesses can also support and learn from these initiatives. Leaders in both academia and the corporate world play a crucial role in creating a gender-inclusive environment that fosters sustainable development. They must demonstrate commitment and accountability – university presidents and business CEOs have the authority to establish norms and drive structural changes. By implementing the actionable steps mentioned above, academic institutions can exemplify sustainability through inclusion. At the same time, corporate organisations can enhance their sustainability efforts by valuing the human and intellectual capital nurtured through inclusive academic practices.

10.0 CONCLUSION

This paper explores how gender inclusion is a significant force for sustainability within the global academic landscape, viewed through the lens of diversity management. The research began by highlighting the ongoing gender disparities in academia, where women remain underrepresented in many senior and STEM roles worldwide, despite increased enrollment. Bridging these gaps is essential for achieving equity and enhancing the sustainability and quality of academic institutions. A comprehensive literature review identified compelling evidence indicating that effective diversity management and inclusive practices lead to beneficial outcomes such as increased productivity, improved decision-making, and healthier institutions. The study acknowledges the challenges involved and stresses the necessity for ongoing commitment, as implementing inclusion necessitates cultural transformation and the removal of systemic barriers.

In constructing a theoretical framework, the study integrated quantitative and qualitative insights, acknowledging that metrics combined with lived experiences yield a thorough

understanding of the topic. This mixed-methods approach, bolstered by recent studies, emphasises that gender inclusion must be viewed as a multifaceted concept impacting various levels within an institution. Our exploration of inclusion practices in academia—encompassing recruitment, mentorship, policies, and culture—demonstrated that significant progress arises from various interventions working together. Notably, these practices connect academic institutions with global sustainability objectives (particularly SDG 5: Gender Equality), highlighting that universities have a dual responsibility: to improve internally while fostering societal progress.

By linking inclusion to sustainability outcomes, the study identified distinct connections: gender-inclusive academic institutions are more likely to retain top talent, promote innovation, build stronger reputations, and contribute valuable knowledge to society. Essentially, these institutions are more resilient. A university that fosters diversity is better equipped to adapt to shifting demographics, evolving student needs, and research challenges – all essential elements of sustainability. Moreover, our cited research indicates that diversity and inclusion are key drivers of social, economic, and organisational sustainability (Caterina et.al, 2024).

This reinforces a paradigm shift: excellence in higher education is increasingly measured not just by traditional metrics, but also by how well an institution embodies inclusivity and social responsibility. For academics and administrators, the results outline a strategy for prioritising gender inclusion as essential to the institution’s long-term success. Corporate leaders can gain important insights and collaborative opportunities from the academic setting, advancing mutual sustainable and inclusive growth objectives. Ultimately, striving for gender inclusion in academia goes beyond mere compliance; it seeks to unlock the complete potential of academia’s human resources to foster discovery, learning, and social advancement. As Teichmann et al. (2022) compellingly stated, diversity is a “creative force that broadens views and enhances ideas... making our organisations more agile and timely.” In a time when humanity is confronted with intricate sustainability issues, such as climate change and public health crises, we cannot afford to squander the creativity and talent of half the population.

In summary, prioritising gender inclusion is vital for creating sustainable academic institutions that are innovative, equitable, and impactful. Universities that emphasise diversity management act justly, ensure their resilience, and positively contribute to society. As higher education becomes more globalised and adaptable, those institutions that genuinely embrace and support gender inclusion are likely to excel in research breakthroughs, enhance educational standards, and influence society. Future studies should continue to assess inclusion efforts through an intersectional lens while exploring how diverse gender teams can effectively address sustainability challenges. Furthermore, fostering ongoing discussions regarding diversity between academia and industry will remain advantageous. By consistently striving for inclusive excellence, academic institutions worldwide can maintain their roles as sustainable centres of knowledge and innovation, remaining true to their values and essential for our shared future.

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