



## PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: INTERVENTIONS AND OUTCOMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS IN KWAZULU-NATAL

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54476/ioer-imrj/061404>

### ABSTRACT

This critical literature analysis examines interventions and outcomes aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion among first-year students at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Using a scoping review, the study examines research from 2004 to 2024 to evaluate strategies implemented to foster inclusive academic environments. In higher education, particularly for first-year students, diversity and inclusion are crucial for enhancing academic success, retention rates, and social integration. The review identifies key interventions, including orientation programs that address cultural diversity, mentorship initiatives, inclusive teaching practices, and support services tailored to diverse student needs. Outcomes of these interventions include improved academic performance, heightened student engagement, and a stronger sense of belonging among first-year students. However, challenges remain, including resistance to inclusive practices, inadequate funding, and the necessity for continuous monitoring and evaluation of diversity initiatives. The findings highlight the importance of dedicated institutional commitment, ongoing faculty professional development, and comprehensive policy support to sustain diversity and inclusion efforts. This analysis contributes to the broader discourse on higher education in KwaZulu-Natal, offering insights and recommendations for enhancing the academic and social experiences of first-year students through effective diversity and inclusion strategies.

*Keywords: diversity, inclusion, scoping review, student engagement, inclusive education, policy support*

### INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education refers to an educational philosophy that goes beyond serving disabled students to embrace all students, regardless of ability, socioeconomic status, or culture, with the ultimate goal of providing equitable, high-quality education to all (Shaeffer, 2019). This paradigm is acknowledged as a fundamental lever for creating social cohesion and equity beyond the university (Silva & Fraga, 2025). In the South African context of higher

education, specifically in the KwaZulu-Natal province, inclusive education is essential to address past injustices and support a successful transition for first-year university students (Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis et al., 2024).

Modern scholarship conceptualises inclusive education as creating an environment that intentionally provides safe, affirming, and responsive spaces for students to feel their inclusion is welcome, especially through the lens of diverse gender and sexual orientations (Adams, 2023). A conceptualisation of inclusive



education, exemplified by the university leaders and administration in its implementation, highlights the centrality of collegiate policies and campus cultures of affirmation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and questioning (LGBTIQ+) youth (Moore, 2020). For this to happen, proactive institutional leadership and purposefully designed interventions are important in promoting diversity and inclusion in the first-year curriculum (Barnett & Felten, 2023).

Effective leadership is key to cultivating campus climates that protect, accept, and affirm all students, and this is even more important as first-year students enter uncharted academic and social territories in their studies (McNair et al., 2022). There still exists a significant challenge in understanding where this gap is, in that so many university leaders, despite training through formal training, lack the necessary training to develop diversity leadership competencies that would allow their students to effectively respond to diversity and support these diverse learners' needs, which is what these models address. For first-year students, these include, among others, systemic, individual, and environmental factors that often interact to prevent inclusion (Strayhorn, 2019).

Systemic institutional stigma and discrimination can disrupt a sense of belonging or academic motivation (Veenstra, 2024). Multifaceted interventions are needed to alleviate these challenges. It has been observed that the introduction of extensive orientation programs, professional mentoring programs, multicultural pedagogical methods, and resources can positively improve the academic performance, social integration, and well-being of first-year students from different cultural contexts (Paulino et al., 2023).

## OBJECTIVES THE STUDY

This study seeks to systematically investigate, map, and synthesise the existing literature on interventions aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion among first-year students at higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal. Through a scoping review, this study aims to summarise the research strategies adopted,

explore study results, and identify current gaps in the literature.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the main interventions implemented in higher education institutions with first-year students from KwaZulu-Natal to achieve diversity and inclusion?
2. What are the existing reports that identify the results of these interventions with first-year students regarding their academic and social life experiences?
3. What are some significant gaps currently reported in the literature about diversity and inclusion interventions in this domain, designed for first-year students that still require further investigation?
4. How could we differentiate and compare typologies of diversity and inclusion strategies regarding reported effectiveness in the creation of more positive, inclusive learning contexts?

## METHODOLOGY

Considering the nature and depth of existing literature, the scoping review methodology was undertaken because it has been shown to effectively describe and systematically map a broad spectrum of literature across a complex and multifaceted topic (Upputuru et al., 2026). The nature of this research, which encompasses efforts and outcomes around diversity and inclusion within first-year students enrolled in KwaZulu-Natal institutions, is especially useful in synthesising existing data. When a field is of significant scope and diversity, a scoping review provides a broad overview of key concepts, types of evidence in a field, and trends (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

This methodological decision was developed mainly to highlight prominent gaps in the existing literature, pointing out areas deserving scholarly research, notably in the KwaZulu-Natal context (Abrahams & Phesa, 2025).



A well-organised, step-by-step methodology was used to identify research questions, search systematically for pertinent literature, chart data, and collate and report findings. Such a formal systematic approach creates transparency and rigour, which will give a good basis to evaluate the state of the art of research and practice in the area of diversity and inclusion of the higher education in the region.

#### *Search Strategy and Selection Criteria.*

We conducted a systematic investigation of the literature from the leading academic databases EBSCOhost, JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search strategy was employed using a list of search terms and Boolean operators – (“diversity” OR “inclusion”) AND (“first-year students” OR “freshmen”) AND (“higher education” OR “university”) AND (“KwaZulu-Natal” OR “South Africa”). The inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed literature, book chapters, and conference proceedings published in the English language from 2004 to 2024.

#### *Key Interventions Implemented in Higher Education Institutions to Promote Diversity and Inclusion Among First-Year Students*

In KwaZulu-Natal, a number of higher education institutions have been introducing diversity and inclusion programs for first-year students. A large intervention here is the designed orientation program and a module on cultural competence as well as university values of inclusion; and opportunities for resources for under-served groups that support marginalised people to help ease that transition process for students (Ioakimidis & Sookraj, 2021). Many mentor programs are often implemented, putting incoming students within an intervention program with seniors or staff members to link them to peers (for example peers, faculty and peers) to generate a sense of personal belonging, social support, and community within the campus, which is essential for developing a sense of belonging (Flores et al., 2018).

Universities also embrace inclusive pedagogical practices, with employees being encouraged to apply pedagogies and curricula,

sensitive to the perspectives of diverse groups and students, allowing all students to participate in any learning (Mavutha & Biyase, 2025). Specialised alternative assistance, such as identity affirmation counselling, peer support groups, and specific resource centres, provides students who seek support around the difficulties they experience in relation to their background or identity with services to support them Sheyapo, 2024).

To improve institutional competency for inclusion and also train faculty and staff on implicit bias, cultural humility and inclusive classroom management, professional development programs have been introduced in the institution (Corte & Amrein-Beardsley, 2024).

#### *Challenges to Implementing Diversity and Inclusion Interventions*

The deployment of diversity and inclusion programs in higher education organisations in KwaZulu-Natal face important obstacles that undermine their effectiveness. The biggest challenge is resistance to change from within the community of the institution; if entrenched mindsets, just a comfort with the status quo can cause some staff and students to either passively or actively resist inclusive policies (Rosenberg, 2023).

This resistance blocks momentum and limits the cultural adjustments required for durable inclusion. Simultaneously, inadequate funding and resource allocation contribute to a significant structural barrier, necessitating extensive cash investments for many interventions including but not limited to broad training modules, specialized support services, and continued programs often missing from institutional budgets (Regal, 2023). Such a scarcity constrains the breadth, quality and longevity of diversity programming.

Last but not least, inadequate and inconsistent training for faculty and staff is an endemic challenge; without proper professional development for people involved in such training, such as cultural competence, and inclusive pedagogy, those at the frontlines who are in the implementation stage of inclusion may not have



the tools (e.g., experience, ability, confidence) to effectively assist a diverse set of students. Thus, there is a chasm in how best to work out policy towards inclusion versus how best to implement inclusive pedagogy (Bashir et al., 2025).

### *Strategies to Enhance Diversity and Inclusion for First-Year Students*

For new college students, as we know, increasing diversity and inclusion will take time, while incorporating the various elements of quality improvement and best practices and research. A foundational strategy is the development and the provision of well-planned and well-designed orientation programmes for all students that go beyond simply providing logistics and engage in cultural competency, community values, and anti-discrimination, and create an inclusive culture at the student level.

Accessibility and tailor-made support services, such as mental health counselling, academic advising and identity-based resource centres, respond to the integrated needs of pupils and eliminate barriers to participation (Lawson & Lawson, 2020).

Developing and effectively enforcing specific anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies has a strong signalling effect on institutional culture. It establishes a minimum level of safety for all in the community. Fundamental to all of these initiatives will be ongoing professional development and upskilling for all faculty members and staff, so they get the training and resources to foster an inclusive campus climate (Brewer et al., 2022). The most effective way ultimately is a strategic integration of the above, underpinned by a proactive leadership and sincere institutional commitment to equity as a core operational principle.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Hogg (2016) developed the Social Identity Theory, the theoretical framework by which the idea of diversity and inclusion in higher education is best understood. It suggests that a large portion of the individual's self-concept stems from social group membership and that

these individuals are driven to build a positive social identity. For first-year students, the change represents the adjustment to new social role categories through academic discipline, residence, race, gender, etc. Diversity and inclusion interventions can be seen as attempts to build positive group memberships and intergroup relations.

University communities encourage positive distinctiveness through in-group connections through mentorship programs and cultural clubs. However, an issue has arisen in this case; one of Social Identity Theory is its tendency to reduce the multidimensional interplay character of individuals' identities, which is best modelled through intersectionality theory (Settles & Buchanan, 2014).

Thus, social identity theory has a good role to play in accounting for psychological mechanisms of group membership; however, it should be coupled with an intersectional analysis if it is to better address the complexity of the experiences of first-year students from diverse backgrounds and to develop interventions that are attentive to the multiplicative identity categories.

## **RESULTS**

### **1. Orientation Programs**

Orientation is generally identified as an integral early intervention strategy for supporting first-year inclusion and needs. Quality programs support the transition to school and community by bringing together aspects that focus directly on diversity, equity, and campus climate. Studies claim that orientations which include cultural sensitivity workshops, introduction to the resources for marginalised students, and discussions on values within the community could have a very positive impact on belongingness and university readiness (Khoza-Shangase & Kalenga, 2023). A major discovery from the literature is the criticism of fixed, one-size-fits-all orientation frameworks. But such approaches fall flat when it comes to the particular challenges that students from many marginalized backgrounds may face, therefore,



providing a more individualized or segmented approach to students' orientation could better align them to learn and affirm information that meets their current needs (Idowu, 2024).

## 2. Mentorship Initiatives

There are findings about mentorship initiatives as a potentially transformative approach to support first-year students. Such initiatives pair incoming students with senior peers or faculty and offer important academic and psychosocial support and help integrate students into the university community (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). Results show that effective mentorship boosts academic confidence, retention rates, and overall student satisfaction. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these programs is dependent on their design and implementation. Challenges observed included variability in mentor training and commitment, potential power dynamics within mentor-mentee relationships, and the necessity for structured support to maximize consistent and positive outcomes for all individuals, but especially for those from underrepresented groups (Bell, 2016).

## 3. Inclusive Teaching Practices

It argues by pointing out that the development of inclusive pedagogical practices is a key element in creating fair learning environments and this will lead to equitable learning communities. They are all ways e.g., being inclusive in the curriculum, the inclusion of diversity in curricula and culturally responsive pedagogies to teaching, diversity of assessment, classroom climates that value diverse perspectives (Gay, 2021). However, its extensive mass application demands an enormous amount of faculty development and institutional backing. Without the requisite capacity, tools and drivers to completely redesign their courses and teaching methods to be inclusive (Ferguson et al., 2001) educators find it difficult to redesign their courses and teaching to be truly inclusive.

## 4. Support services

A wide variety of support services such as academic advice, mental health counselling, peer tutoring and identity-based resource centres will be recommended to help ensure the need diversity in first year students are met. Access to support services has been highly linked in the literature with increased retention, better academic outcomes and higher quality of student life (Tinto, 2010). These services are especially important for students who encounter multiple financial, mental and discrimination challenges. One challenge that emerged from the findings was in the areas of fair access as well as resource availability. Students with marginalized backgrounds may experience structural or informational obstacles to accessing services and institutions may experience a lack of funding to sustain and amplify these critical supports (Kumar, 2025).

## 5. Challenges in Promoting Diversity and Inclusion

By summarising literature, it is possible to suggest that a number of these are recurring, interrelated difficulties for promoting diversity and inclusion. Resistance from institutions - rooted in established bias or an absence of urgency - may be barriers to transformative activities and sustain exclusionary norms (Temper et al., 2018). Insufficient, unstable funding perpetually constrains the range, quality and durability of even well-conceived programs, and it can be both vulnerable and less effective (Cammack et al., 2006). Additionally, programs tend to have to exist within the limitations of wider societal and cultural norms that may be hostile to certain aspects of diversity, such as gender non-conformity, requiring sophisticated and bold institutional leadership to navigate.

## 6. Reported Outcomes of Diversity and Inclusion Interventions

Student-reported results from multiple interventions were generally favourable and different outcomes, however. Academically, students reported enhanced performance,



attributable to a greater appreciation of diversity offered to them through training and inclusive classrooms, which is consistent with research on the educational effectiveness of diverse interactions (Gurin et al., 2002). Mentorship and peer programs played a significant role socially in creating community and reducing isolation, directly leading to greater belongingness, which is strongly correlated to student retention (Tinto, 2017). In terms of overall experience, not only the experience of social engagement and belonging but also the importance of self-identity and sense of purpose enhanced the university experience outside academic knowledge and research findings, which focus on the significance of student engagement (Harper & Quayle, 2009). These qualitative reports link to quantitative research that has linked inclusive environments to increased retention, satisfaction, and student development.

## 7. Gaps in Current Research

The scoping review identified major research gaps in the field. One of the key gaps is that there are few long-term studies that investigate the associations between programs that promote diversity and inclusion and student outcomes, such as graduation rates, postgraduate success, and lifelong attitudes (Harper, 2012). Research has commonly concentrated on single axes of identity (e.g., race or gender). It has not sufficiently addressed students with multiple, complex, and frequently interconnected worlds, where many subjugated identities are held simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1989). Finally, within the South African and, more specifically KwaZulu-Natal context, few comparative studies have been conducted evaluating the relative cost-effectiveness, scalability, and contextual adaptability of existing intervention models.

## DISCUSSION

Both significant implications and the difficult challenges of diversity and inclusion work are highlighted in the findings of this scoping review for first-year students in KwaZulu-Natal's higher education system. The recognised

interventions from orientation and mentorship efforts, to inclusive pedagogy and support services are found to be effective approaches to helping support academic integration and facilitate belonging and overall student success (Mayhew et al., 2016; Lange, 2021). Successful experiences reported by students support previous findings indicating that the success of intentional inclusion strategies produces notable benefits as they relate to students' engagement and well-being. Nevertheless, the talk has to face ongoing implementation challenges.

Any intervention's success is shaped by the nature of its translation (in terms of performance) and implementation, which is constrained by resources, institutional commitment, and the ability of the staff to implement it. This comparison of modalities highlights that while specific awareness-raising activities have their own merit, relational-level, maintained and embedded practices like mentorship and equitable curriculum development that contribute to daily lived experiences for students have the deepest impacts (Kuh et al., 2010).

The gaps in this research point to the need for evolution in scholarly inquiry. Without longitudinal data, we cannot advocate for the continuous institutional investment necessary for deep cultural change (Harper, 2012). Moreover, the lack of consistent implementation of an intersectional framework carries a risk of making interventions ineffective or exclusionary for students with complex, layered identities (Stewart, 2017). Tackling these gaps will not only be an academic exercise but a pragmatic point if we are to design an intervention that is truly fair and responsive. In the end, a debate emerges that successful diversity and inclusion does not arrive from a set of single programs in isolation, but require an institutional and systematic transformation (Kezar, 2010).

This requires a steadfast leadership that is committed to long-lasting and strategic use of resources to drive effective policy change, and a persistent practice of monitoring and changing in relation to changes, based on the work of the change process. Universities in KwaZulu-Natal can better serve these students and students'



communities as agents of social justice and equitable opportunity if equity and inclusion principles are intertwined with institutional mission, operation, and pedagogy.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following summarizes the main findings of the study, highlighting the key insights derived from the review.

1. Identifying a broad range of literature on diversity and inclusion interventions for first-year college students in higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal.
2. Confirming that structured orientation programs, mentorship initiatives, inclusive pedagogical practices, and student support services are already in place and contribute to improved academic performance, social integration, and well-being.
3. Highlighting that the impact of these interventions is often constrained by institutional resistance, limited funding, weak evaluation systems, and sociocultural challenges.
4. Revealing important gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of longitudinal studies and intersectional analyses needed to fully assess intervention effectiveness.
5. Indicating that many institutions still rely on fragmented or short-term initiatives rather than a fully integrated and systemic approach to inclusive education.
6. Emphasizing the need for sustained institutional commitment, including funding, staff development, monitoring systems, and the embedding of equity and inclusion within governance structures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the key recommendations based on the findings.

1. To adopt a comprehensive, institution-wide and systemic approach to diversity and inclusion rather than fragmented initiatives.

2. To allocate sustainable and adequate funding to ensure the long-term implementation and continuity of inclusion programs.
3. To implement continuous and mandatory professional development for academic and support staff on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
4. To establish strong monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness and outcomes of interventions.
5. To integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion principles into institutional policies, governance frameworks, and strategic plans.
6. To conduct longitudinal and intersectional research to better understand the long-term and multifaceted impacts of interventions on student success and experience.

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