



## Inclusive Leadership in Higher Education: Strategies for Dealing with Student Diversity

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### Abstract :

This research aims to explore inclusive leadership strategies in managing student diversity in multicultural universities in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach based on intrinsic case studies, data were obtained through in-depth interviews, policy documentation, and participatory observation in two universities. The results show that inclusive leadership is manifested in operational actions, such as lecturer diversity training, cultural orientation programs, interfaith forums, and flexible policies that support the participation of minority students. Student diversity is not only seen as a challenge but also utilized as a pedagogical resource that encourages collaborative and innovative learning. The findings also reveal challenges to cross-cultural integration, including communication barriers, limited access to information, and gaps in institutional support. Successful leadership strategies are those that combine critical awareness, policy flexibility, and systemic psychosocial support. This research has both theoretical and practical implications, as it maps the conceptual framework of inclusive leadership within the context of Indonesian higher education and also provides practical guidance for campus managers to develop an adaptive, equitable, and sustainable diversity management system.

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity in higher education is understood as the existence of differences in the identity, culture, and social background of students who interact in the academic space (Bettencourt, 2021; Koutsouris et al., 2021; Marginson, 2022). According to the theory of cultural pluralism, diversity is not just a social attribute but a reality that demands a reflective and adaptive managerial approach (Jalonen, 2025; Laeheem et al., 2025; Tallent & Zabala, 2024). Campuses, as social institutions, play a crucial role in facilitating integration between groups; however, without an inclusive approach, differences can evolve into social segregation and academic exclusion. In this context, social inclusion theory emphasizes the importance of recognizing, participating in, and representing minority groups in all aspects of campus life (Guo, 2024; Sá, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Inclusive leadership is viewed as a transformative strategy that bridges differences by creating an organizational climate that is supportive, dialogical, and responsive to the needs of diversity (Kim, 2023; Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Simmons & Yawson, 2022). Through this approach, higher education institutions can manage diversity not as a burden, but rather as a source of strength for the development of more critical and collaborative learning.

Research on inclusive leadership in higher education has evolved through various theoretical perspectives. Some studies have employed the theoretical framework of intercultural competencies to demonstrate that rigid hierarchical structures tend to hinder cross-cultural adaptation, thereby requiring a leadership model that facilitates multicultural collaboration (Maddux et al., 2021; Mawaddah et al., 2025; Scarlet & Bărar, 2024). Meanwhile, another study draws on activist leadership theory to argue that inclusivity is not only established through formal policies but also through participatory practices that accommodate the voices of marginalized identities (Felicetti & Holdo, 2024; Kosko et al., 2022; Mallory, 2025). On the other hand, research conducted by Mertens (2021) used the lens of transformational leadership to outline how structural strategies can expand the representation and participation of minority groups in the academic environment. These three studies collectively affirm that inclusive leadership is a combination of critical awareness, intercultural competence, and transformative courage, which together form the foundation for creating a campus climate that authentically and sustainably supports diversity.

Although the concept of inclusive leadership is gaining increasing attention in global discourse, its implementation in the context of Indonesian universities remains limited. Previous studies have focused more on diversity issues in Western countries or on the diversification of teaching staff. In contrast, the dimension of student diversity and leadership responses to it has received less attention. In addition, there has been little research that explicitly maps leadership operational strategies in dealing with student diversity within a multicultural campus environment. This creates a significant gap in the literature: how do campus leaders in Indonesia develop, execute, and reflect on their inclusive leadership strategies? What is the impact on social integration and the student learning process? Without a deep understanding of these strategies and dynamics, it is challenging for institutions to establish a sustainable and transformative diversity management system within the context of national higher education.

This research offers a significant theoretical and practical contribution by presenting a contextual mapping of inclusive leadership strategies in managing student diversity in Indonesian multicultural universities. The novelty of the research lies in its explicit focus on leadership operational practices, rather than just normative values or discourses, in creating an inclusive campus climate. Unlike previous studies that tended to generalize the institutional diversity approach, this study explored the reflective practices of campus leaders through a case-study-based qualitative approach, focusing on the interactions between policies, organizational culture, and the experiences of minority students. The resulting findings not only provide an empirical picture of successful strategies but also establish a conceptual framework relevant to the local context. Thus, this research expands the horizons of inclusive leadership and provides a reference for the development of higher education policies that are responsive to social diversity.

This research aims to explore inclusive leadership strategies in depth for managing student diversity in multicultural universities in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach of intrinsic case studies, this study examines how leaders in higher education institutions, including heads of study programs, student affairs bureaus, and supervisors, develop, implement, and evaluate policies and practices that promote the social integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The primary focus is directed toward the operational dimension of leadership, including diversity training, cultural

orientation, interfaith forums, and adaptive academic policies. This research not only presents a descriptive narrative but also builds an analytical understanding of the process of institutionalizing inclusivity in the higher education environment. Thus, this research is expected to produce scientific and practical contributions that can serve as a reference for policymakers, education practitioners, and researchers interested in issues of inclusive leadership and diversity management in the Indonesian higher education sector.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an in-depth case study design with a qualitative approach to explore inclusive leadership strategies in managing student diversity in Indonesian universities (Bendoly et al., 2024; Bingham, 2023; Miller et al., 2023). This design was chosen because the phenomenon being studied is contextual, specific, and inseparable from the social environment in which it takes place. Intrinsic case studies enable researchers to focus on cases that possess high intrinsic value and are relevant to the research's exploratory objectives. This type of case study research is considered suitable for describing in detail the dynamics and practices of leadership within the context of cultural diversity in higher education settings (Farquhar et al., 2020; Schlunegger et al., 2024; Sridharan, 2021). This research employs a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that social reality is shaped through meaningful experiences, perceptions, and social interactions (Hendren et al., 2023; Leko et al., 2021; Wilhelmy & Köhler, 2022). This approach enables researchers to capture the subjective nuances and complexities of inclusive leadership practices, as well as to explore how institutional actors interpret and strategically implement diversity.

The data collection methods employed in this study included semi-structured in-depth interviews, campus policy documentation, and limited participatory observation. The interviews were chosen to explore the narratives and reflections of institutional leaders on the inclusive leadership strategies they implemented. The researcher plays the role of both the main instrument and an active observer in interpreting the data reflectively. The primary informants consist of faculty leaders, heads of student affairs, supervisors, and students from cultural minority groups. The research was conducted at two multicultural universities in Indonesia over four months, from February to May 2025. The validity of the data was tested through source triangulation and member checking techniques to ensure the credibility of the findings (Charli et al., 2022; Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldana, 2014; Wood et al., 2020). Here is a table of research informants:

**Table 1. Research Informant**

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Data Contribution</b>	<b>Relevance to Research Focus</b>
Head of Study Program	Inclusive teaching policy practices	Lead the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies
Head of the Student Affairs Bureau	Designing student forums and cultural orientation	Determining the direction of student integration policies
Supervisor	Observations on the dynamics of multicultural classes	Convey hands-on experience in academic guidance
Minority Students	Personal narratives related to integration and diversity challenges	Describe the immediate effects of campus leadership strategies

The data analysis technique employed is the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which comprises three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion/verification (Karimi-Ghartemani et al., 2022; Karmina et al., 2021). This technique was chosen because it enables the systematic and flexible capture of the dynamics of the qualitative process, supporting the thematic analysis of the informants' narratives. The reduction stage is carried out through an open coding process to filter information relevant to the research focus, followed by the presentation of data in the form of a thematic matrix to map the linkages between concepts such as inclusive leadership, cultural integration, and learning innovation. Conclusions are drawn through repeated verification by comparing findings across sources and confirming them directly with the informant (member checking). This approach maintains the credibility and depth of the analysis, producing a contextual and meaningful interpretation of the social reality being studied. This technique supports the formulation of coherent analytical categories within the context of inclusive leadership theory in higher education.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

#### **Inclusive Leadership in Student Diversity Management**

Inclusive leadership in the context of higher education refers to a managerial approach that actively embraces students' diverse backgrounds, both culturally, ethnically, religiously, and socio-economically. Educational leaders, such as chancellors, deans, and heads of study programs, play a central role in creating a campus climate that respects diversity and ensures equal access to academic and non-academic services. In practice, inclusive leadership focuses not only on eliminating discrimination but also on empowering minority students to participate equally in campus life. This includes fair admissions policies, diversity training, cross-cultural dialogue forums, and humanistic approaches to decision-making. In this study, the theme of inclusive leadership is the key to understanding how student diversity can be managed strategically to support learning goals and social cohesion in the higher education environment.

One of the study program leaders conveyed the importance of awareness of students' backgrounds: "We have students from different regions and cultures. I always convey to lecturers that our approach cannot be a one-size-fits-all pattern. We have to listen to their needs one by one." Similarly, a head of the student affairs bureau said: "In the student forum, we try to make all groups feel safe and accommodated. Starting from the activity schedule to the content of the training, we designed it to be inclusive and not partisan with the majority culture." Through the results of interviews conducted with the campus leaders above, inclusive leadership is not only normative but also manifested in concrete actions. The importance of flexibility in teaching approaches and academic guidance based on student diversity. This indicates that education leaders recognize that diversity is not an obstacle, but rather an opportunity for personalizing educational services. The operational dimension of inclusivity involves preparing activities and training that avoid the cultural bias of the majority. Both quotes indicate that the success of diversity management is highly dependent on the awareness and commitment of leaders in organizing a campus system that is open and responsive to diversity.

Several universities have implemented cultural orientation programs for new students from outside the region. The program includes an introduction to local culture, diversity values, and group reflection sessions facilitated by lecturers and seniors. Additionally, the institution has internal policies that promote the formation of interfaith and cultural student activity groups, as well as specialized academic guidance programs for minority students. Campus leaders consciously design these practices as part of an inclusive leadership strategy. This reinforces the previous informant's statement that diversity is not sufficiently recognized, but needs to be managed through systemic and sustainable mechanisms. Building on this, the inclusive leadership strategies identified are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Inclusive Leadership Strategies in Managing Student Diversity**

<b>Inclusive Leadership Strategy</b>	<b>Results/Benefits Achieved</b>
Diversity Training for Lecturers	Lecturers are more sensitive to student needs
New Student Cultural Orientation Program	Students' social adaptability increases
Cross-Cultural and Interfaith Discussion Forum	Social cohesion between students is built
Multicultural Counseling Service Unit	Minority students are more confident and active
Flexible Scheduling Policy	Increased accessibility for certain groups

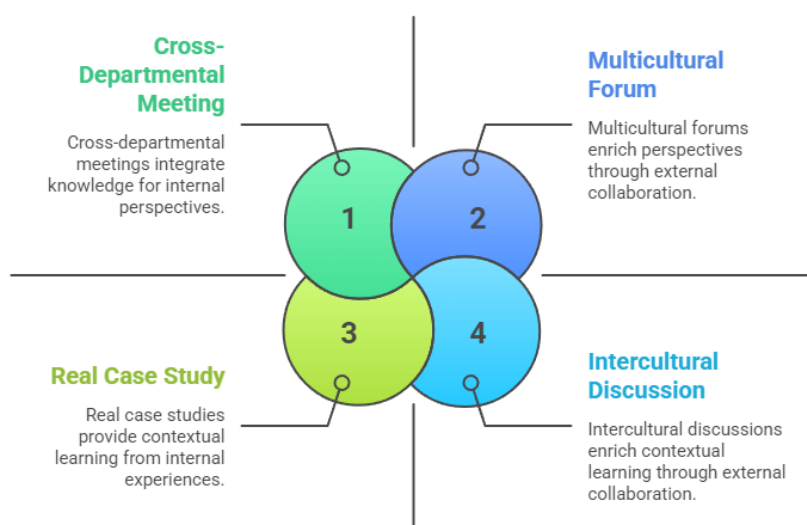
Inclusive leadership is a key element in creating a higher education environment that supports student diversity. This approach involves policies and programs that ensure equal participation, including diversity training, cross-cultural forums, and academic support for minority groups. The study's findings show that responsive campus leaders can foster a sense of security and engagement among students from diverse backgrounds. This fosters the creation of a conducive, collaborative, and learning-oriented atmosphere to strengthen social cohesion. Thus, inclusive leadership not only strengthens social integration on campus but also positions education management as the main driver in building a transformative and equitable academic culture.

### **Diversity as a Driver of Collaborative Learning Innovation**

Diversity in the context of higher education encompasses a range of students' backgrounds, including cultural, ethnic, religious, and learning experiences. In collaborative learning, diversity is a valuable asset because it enables the exchange of perspectives, broadens horizons, and fosters the development of more complex and creative ideas. Collaborative learning innovations emerge when students from diverse backgrounds complement each other in responding to a problem or group task. Therefore, diversity is not only seen as a social condition but also as a pedagogic resource that can be utilized in the design and implementation of active learning. In this study, diversity is viewed as a catalyst for a learning process that is more critical, reflective, and relevant to global needs through interdisciplinary and intercultural interactions among students.

A study group coach shared a positive experience in the dynamics of diversity: "When we formed groups from different regional backgrounds, the discussions became more lively. They have a unique perspective on completing tasks and often come up with ideas that they had not thought of before." This was also agreed by a student from the social studies program: "I feel that I learn more when discussing with friends from different majors and cultural backgrounds. Sometimes I think in a one-way way, but after group discussions, I see a lot of new alternatives." These two statements demonstrate that diversity in learning teams not only enriches the academic process but also fosters a more immersive and reflective learning experience for students.

In addition, several faculties in universities have implemented project-based learning methods across study programs as a means of encouraging collaboration between students with diverse backgrounds. In practice, students from engineering, economics, and education majors are brought together in working groups to complete real case studies. This creates a space for interaction that not only enriches academic substance but also hones adaptability and cross-cultural communication. Additionally, it was found that there is a campus policy requiring the use of online discussions between different classes, so that students become accustomed to the diversity of perspectives from the beginning of lectures. The application of blended learning with multicultural discussion forums is also one approach that has been proven to improve the quality of student participation and creativity. These practices demonstrate that diversity, when managed through effective learning design, can be a significant source of pedagogical innovation. Departing from this, the form of diversity-based collaboration found is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Diversity-Based Collaboration in Education**

The study's findings indicate that the diversity of students fosters more creative and contextual collaborative learning dynamics. Students with diverse cultural and academic backgrounds demonstrate complementary abilities when working together on tasks. The collaboration produces ideas that are more varied, reflective, and applicable. It is also seen that there is an increase in communication skills, tolerance, and appreciation for differences. In the context of education management, diversity is not just a challenge but has been transformed into a learning potential that forms an adaptive and inclusive academic environment. Learning designs that facilitate cross-cultural interaction have been proven to strengthen students' critical thinking and innovation competencies. Thus, diversity is a pedagogical force that can encourage a sustainable transformation of the quality of higher education.

### Challenges of Cross-Cultural Student Integration in the Higher Education Environment

Cross-cultural integration encompasses a student's ability to fit in socially, academically, and emotionally within an education system that is often dominated by the norms of the majority. In the context of education management, this integration challenge is a strategic issue that warrants serious attention, as it can impact student participation, achievement, and well-being. These challenges include language barriers, differences in communication styles, social stereotypes, and access to campus support services. Therefore, understanding the challenges of cross-cultural integration is essential for designing policies and programs that support equality and social cohesion in a multicultural campus environment.

An academic supervisor conveyed his observation of student dynamics, "Some students from certain regions look more passive in class. They admitted that they felt insecure because their way of speaking or habits were different from what is common here." Meanwhile, a student from outside Java shared his experience, "At first, I felt unfamiliar and did not know where to ask. There are many campus activities that I do not understand, and that makes me often alone." This statement highlights the experience gap faced by students across cultures, in terms of both social acceptance and access to information. This is an indicator that the integration process has not run optimally and requires more attention from higher education managers.

Additionally, not all institutions have a dedicated mechanism to support new students from minority cultural backgrounds. Some campuses still do not provide adaptation programs that take into account the diversity of languages and learning habits of students. On the other hand, there are good examples where universities establish peer mentoring systems for new students from outside the region, as well as hold intercultural training sessions for lecturers and academic staff. These practices show that the readiness of institutions in managing integration greatly determines the success of students in adapting academically and socially. The unpreparedness of the system can strengthen exclusion and weaken campus social cohesion.

Building on this, the findings reveal that the challenges of cross-cultural student integration stem from various aspects, including differences in communication styles and a lack of institutional support. Integration will not happen automatically without systematic intervention from the campus. Students from minority backgrounds need safe spaces, clear information, and a diversity-sensitive approach. Education management needs to establish a structured admission and mentoring system so that diversity truly becomes a social force on campus, rather than a source of alienation. Thus, integration challenges can be transformed into learning opportunities and a means of fostering solidarity among students more inclusively and sustainably.

## Discussion

The findings of this study emphatically emphasize that inclusive leadership is a central strategy in managing student diversity in multicultural universities in Indonesia. Approaches that ground flexibility, promote cross-cultural dialogue, and support minority empowerment, such as cultural orientation, diversity training, and flexible scheduling policies, demonstrate the alignment between field outcomes and the research objective: understanding how diversity is strategically managed to support social cohesion and equitable learning. The relevance of these findings is highly contextual in addressing the issue of inclusivity and diversity on multicultural campuses.

The findings show that campus leaders implement operationally inclusive strategies: faculty training, cultural orientation, cross-cultural forums, multicultural

counseling services, and flexible scheduling. This concept aligns with the theory of inclusive leadership, which not only fosters an inclusive climate but also actively builds it through concrete actions. Research on inclusive leadership has demonstrated that it enhances collaboration, team coordination, and knowledge exchange, ultimately improving organizational performance (Fang et al., 2021; Gong et al., 2021; Le et al., 2024). Meanwhile, several other studies also suggest that leadership values such as proactivity, humanism, and vision are essential for building inclusive higher education (Bollaert, 2025; Jing et al., 2025; Muhimmah et al., 2022). This supports field findings that position leadership as an agent of institutional transformation, not just a symbol. A study by Bettencourt (2021) shows that inclusive leadership and initiatives increase engagement through enhanced psychological safety. Collectively, the three studies reinforce the finding that inclusive leadership operational actions support student well-being and participation substantially.

This study describes diversity as a catalyst for creativity, facilitating cross-cultural discussions, fostering new ideas, and promoting deep reflection. This is consistent with the global literature, which suggests that inclusive and diverse teams yield more complex innovations and more creative solutions. Studies, such as the Compass Project at UC Berkeley, show that an emphasis on inclusive values in organizational structures strengthens diverse student learning and retention communities (Onyeador et al., 2024; Scarlet & Bărar, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Research by Mawaddah et al. (2025) also highlighted the importance of establishing systemic inclusive learning groups, especially for minority students, to improve the quality of the academic experience. Interdisciplinary collaborative learning, multicultural online forums, and blended learning align with an inclusive approach in the literature, which encourages cross-identity interaction as a critical and innovative learning medium.

The results also reveal real barriers to integration, including language barriers, differing communication styles, stereotypes, gaps in access to information, and a sense of alienation. Marks (2025) stated that structural barriers, such as institutional and bureaucratic culture, are obstacles to achieving inclusivity among faculty and staff. This aligns with your findings that, without systemic intervention, the integration of students from diverse cultural backgrounds remains weak. Furthermore, international studies indicate that inclusive leadership, which is not only symbolic but also implemented through training and support mechanisms such as peer mentoring and cultural adaptation, is essential. This relationship reinforces the analysis that integration requires responsive support structures: safe spaces, clear information, and a diversity-sensitive approach.

The findings of this study make a significant practical contribution to higher education managers in Indonesia by offering implementable guidance in managing student diversity through diversity training policies, cultural orientation, inclusive counseling services, and adaptive, flexible scheduling. This strategy can be optimized by strengthening units that handle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), organizing humanistic leadership training for institutional leaders, and establishing structural mentoring mechanisms, such as peer mentor programs and cross-cultural forums, to ensure the effective and sustainable integration of students across identities.

Theoretically, this study enriches the inclusive leadership discourse in the context of multicultural higher education in Indonesia by integrating the concepts of inclusivity, building a supportive organizational climate, and fostering psychological safety as the

foundation of the leadership approach. This research helps bridge the gap between global leadership theory and local practice, contributing to the development of contextual and relevant inclusive leadership theoretical frameworks that can be applied in Indonesia's increasingly diverse higher education environment.

Overall, this research confirms that inclusive leadership is an essential foundation for creating an inclusive and innovative higher education environment. Through strategic approaches, ranging from lecturer training to cultural orientation and cross-cultural forums, institutional leaders can build a climate that supports diversity and social cohesion. The findings also reveal that student diversity is a pedagogical strength if managed through collaborative learning design. On the other hand, the challenge of cross-cultural integration requires systemic interventions to form solidarity and engagement. For further research, it is recommended to expand the sample, incorporate student perspectives, and employ quantitative and longitudinal approaches to measure the impact of inclusive strategies more concretely. Thus, this study posits leadership as a catalyst for transformative, equitable, and inclusive higher education.

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms that inclusive leadership plays a strategic role in managing student diversity in multicultural universities in Indonesia. Through the implementation of policies and programs, such as diversity training, cultural orientations, cross-cultural forums, and diversity-sensitive academic services, institutional leaders can create an inclusive and supportive campus climate. Student diversity has proven to be a pedagogic resource that enriches the collaborative learning process and encourages academic innovation. On the other hand, the challenge of cross-cultural integration demonstrates the need for systematic intervention through humanistic approaches and responsive support structures. These findings reflect that diversity is not just a social condition, but a strategic opportunity to build an academic environment that is adaptive, equitable, and oriented towards social cohesion. Therefore, inclusive leadership must be positioned as a key foundation for the sustainable transformation of higher education.

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