

Addressing Challenges to Diversity and Inclusion: A Comprehensive Systematic Review

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Abstract

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are highly valued for equitable results in education, healthcare, and workplace domains, as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) worldwide. In spite of the increased awareness, many obstacles still stand in the way of authentic inclusion—the unconscious bias and embedded inequality, intersectional exclusion, the symbolic execution of practices without the structure, etc. This systematic review aims to analyze the published empirical studies over the last few years (2019-2025) on the challenges to D&I and assess the efficiency of different strategies used in the world in different contexts. Seven databases, such as PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science, were screened, and 20 articles were carefully chosen to be peer reviewed. The research cuts across developed and developing countries and covers various sectors. There were four dominant themes, including structural/systemic barriers, cultural insensitivity, intersectional exclusion, and tokenism. Some of the defined interventions, such as inclusive hiring practices, equity-oriented training, and a local policy framework, have a promising nature, whereas the other ones are not context-relevant or focus on causal factors. The results indicate that more complex, context-varying solutions that take into consideration cultural and regional variation as well as variation across institutions, are necessary. The review also indicates areas where research is lacking in areas that are underrepresented, like Africa and the Middle East. To conclude, the discussion of the D&I challenges demands long-term interdisciplinary investigations, the involvement of stakeholders, and global policy engagement to ensure meaningful and lasting inclusion.

Keywords: Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), equity, systemic barriers, intersectionality, inclusive practices, workplace diversity, educational inclusion, healthcare equity, global DEI strategies, organizational change

1. Introduction

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are essential factors in every industry and sphere of society, including education, health, business, and government, in a more globally connected era. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, 8, and 10 underline the necessity to decrease inequalities and provide inclusive, equitable access to opportunities to all individuals. The workforce has also been vastly globalized, and migration and cross-cultural work have made provision to support diverse people, including those with different identities, such as race, gender, ability, age, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, even more essential.

The problem is that, despite these achievements, significant challenges remain. Ignorance and systematic discrimination, in addition to cultural insensitivities, have always been barriers to inclusion. Most institutions find it hard to get out of the superficial diversity and tend to have neither the structural support nor the cultural resolve that can bring about sustainable change. This difference between talk of policymakers and the realities on the ground is most pronounced in the sectors of education, healthcare, and employment, where marginalized groups continue to experience disproportionate levels of access, representation, and outcomes.

The proposed systematic review will examine the main challenges and solutions identified in the global literature between 2019 and 2025 regarding diversity and inclusion (D&I) approaches in various sectors and regions. Combining the results of empirical investigations in various countries, the paper identifies trends, interventions, and knowledge gaps that can be reflected in more effective and inclusive practice.

The review is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the major challenges to implementing diversity and inclusion globally?
2. What strategies have been employed to overcome these challenges across sectors?
3. What evidence exists regarding the impact and limitations of these strategies?

Through this analysis, the review seeks to support practitioners, educators, policymakers, and researchers in designing more inclusive, equitable environments worldwide

2. Method

2.1 Search Strategy

To guarantee an inclusive and credible review of the literature, a systematic search of the seven well-known academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Google Scholar, was completed. These databases were chosen because they can cover a wide scope of multidisciplinary research in the fields of education, health, psychology, and organizational studies, all of which apply to the research on diversity and inclusion (D&I). It encompassed the search strategy with the targeted keywords and Boolean

operators to be able to encompass a broad scope of relevant literature. Search terms included combinations such as:

“diversity AND inclusion AND challenge”, “equity AND barrier”, “DEI strategies”, “systemic discrimination AND workplace”, “inclusive education AND intervention”, and “multiculturalism AND organizational change”.

The wildcard symbol () was used to broaden results by capturing multiple word endings (e.g., “challenge” and “challenges”).

The review was limited to seeking peer-reviewed journal articles and systematic reviews dated between 2019 and 2025 in pursuit of the changes and reactions to modern development due to the increased awareness of equality and inclusion in education and the workplace following the global movements of racial justice, inclusive education reform, and equity initiatives in the workplace movements following the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To have a relevant, high-quality, and extensive systematic review, transparent inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined. Inclusion criteria included peer-reviewed journal articles, which specifically described the barriers or challenges to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in different world contexts. The type of studies was chosen between developed and developing worlds to gain as much comparative perspective on DEI nations with different perspectives in socioeconomic and cultural environments. To be as broad in the scope of challenges, articles were considered in different fields, including both workplace environments, educational establishments, and health systems. The chosen articles had to be published between 2019 and 2025 to include recent tendencies, practices, and social movements affecting the DEI discourse in the international community.

In contrast, the exclusion criteria eliminated non-peer-reviewed media, including opinion articles, blog posts, and editorial commentaries, which could not be as rigorously empirical. Studies in which DEI issues were not directly addressed, i.e., studies devoted only to the advantages or results of diversity without consideration of barriers inherent to the studied environment, were also filtered out. Moreover, other articles that had not been published in English were excluded unless they had been translated and the publication was peer-reviewed, so they provide uniformity and reliability in data analysis. Finally, the older studies that were published before the year 2010 were not included, essentially because there was an intention to consider only those writings that would be termed as relevant and influential. All these criteria were applied systematically to provide methodological rigor and focus, but still provided various insights and global applicability in the effective response to DEI challenges.

2.3 Study Selection Procedure

The selection process of the studies was guided by a strict systematic approach to exclude the non-relevant and poor-quality research articles in the review. At the first stage, the entire data retrieved from the searched databases was sifted according to titles and abstracts. It was a preliminary stage by which the duplicates and studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria

were excluded. Articles that seemed to be relevant according to the title and abstract were reviewed in full text. This elaborate screening was done in testing each article according to its preset inclusion and exclusion criteria. The eligibility criteria of the studies included their consideration of diversity and inclusion (D&I) barriers or obstacles in different spheres, such as the education sector, healthcare, and the workplace, publications during the period of 2019-2025. Opinion papers and a study in which the outcome was the sole focus, and without an attempt to tackle a special challenge, were excluded.

The selection process sought to represent broad geographical and sectoral representation, involving the developed and developing regions. The studies had to be in English and peer-reviewed. The whole process of selection was tracked and systematized with the help of a PRISMA flow diagram, which displays the number of articles that were identified, screened, and excluded before the final list of articles included in the review.

2.4 PRISMA Flow Chart

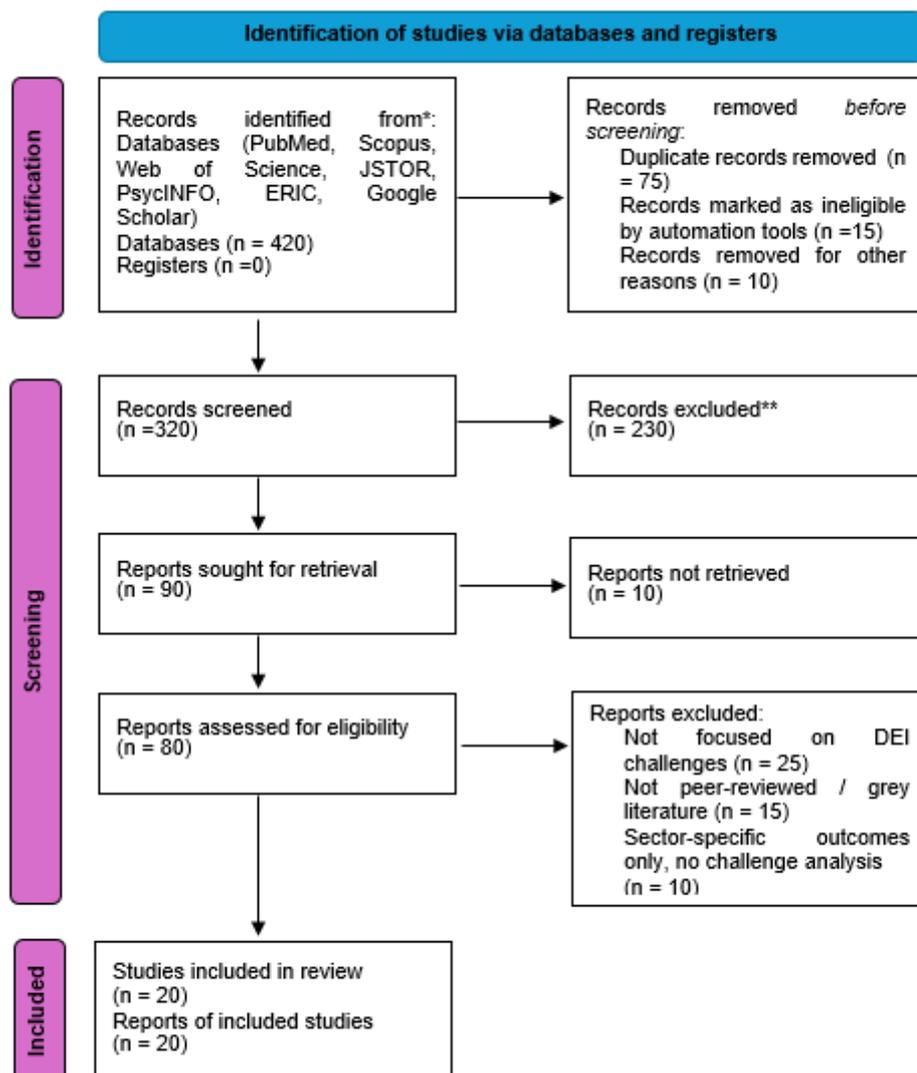


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Chart (visual representation of the selection process)

3. Results

The systematic review examined the results of 20 peer-reviewed articles published in 2019-2025 in various sectors, including education, health care, corporate office, and government services in both developed and developing economies. Some of the most frequent obstacles to diversity and inclusion (D&I) noted in these studies were unconscious bias, affirmative leadership, structural discrimination, language variations, and poor policy execution. Intersectional aspects like disability, race, gender, and socioeconomic status frequently exacerbate these barriers.

To overcome these issues, research suggested a broad range of interventions to be used, including hiring inclusive recruitment, bias elimination training, policy direction changes, cross-cultural skills teaching sessions, and the systems of accountability of leaders. However, it is interesting to note that a lot of high-impact interventions focused on organizational transformation coupled with personal awareness.

The effects of the strategies differed by context, but several studies observed that employee retention increased, student engagement improved, and health outcomes were better in establishments that implemented comprehensive D&I practices. The drawbacks were limited short-term data, the absence of longitudinal analysis, and inadequate representation of the voices of the oppressed in the identification of interventions.

Similarities/differences of the key challenges, strategies, findings, and limitations of each of the 20 chosen studies will be shown in the table below. This synthesis will give us an idea of what is working all over the world and the areas where this is critically lacking.

Table 1. Empirical Studies on Diversity and Inclusion (2019 - 2025)

Author(s) & Year	Country / Region	Sector / Field	Study Design & Methodology	Key Challenges to D&I Identified	Strategies / Interventions Proposed	Findings / Impact	Limitations
1. Palid et al. 2023	United States	Higher Education (STEM)	Systematic Review of 82 SIP studies	Underrepresentation of women and racially/ethnically minoritized groups in STEM, lack of disaggregated analysis, limited comparative research across programs	Supplemental learning, mentorship, bridge programs, skill-building, financial aid, and socializing components in multi-component interventions	Multi-component SIPs are effective in improving student outcomes for minoritized groups; mentoring and supplemental learning had the strongest evidence base; financial aid and bridge programs also showed promise; multi-component designs better address institutional barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited to undergraduates publication bias present lacked subgroup analysis minimal statistical rigor
2. Fernández et al. 2019	Focus on North America, Europe,	Higher Education (Universities)	Mixed-methods: Quantitative survey with	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low institutionalization of diversity outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of diversity outreach strategic plans 	Institutionalization of diversity outreach is still in early stages globally; strongest progress found	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language diversity affected understanding of tools and access to

	Asia	ies)	diversity outreach managers + Qualitative content analysis of institutional websites and strategic plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic diversity statements • Language and communication barriers on websites • Lack of unified frameworks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of diversity statements and definitions • Alignment with social justice principles 	in North America.	data; institutional websites varied in transparency and up-to-date content	
3.	Campbell (2021)	Canada (Ontario)	Public Education (K–12)	Policy analysis with qualitative review of government strategies and demographic data	Long-standing systemic inequities, especially for Indigenous peoples Persistent racism, homophobia, gender-based violence, and gaps for ELL and special education students	Two-pronged approach: (1) improve achievement and reduce gaps (2) system-wide Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy with updated diversity definitions	<p>a. Student achievement improved gaps reduced among ELL and special needs groups</p> <p>b. Stronger equity policy framework</p> <p>c. Inclusive definitions guide classrooms and curricula</p>	Measures did not fully address structural discrimination or specific inequities for Indigenous and racialized students Policy impact varies regionally
4.	Carvalho et al. (2023)	Portugal / International	Public Education Policy	Thematic and policy analysis of 33 legal and institutional texts	Tensions between equity and school autonomy; vague translation of global frameworks	Equity-based legislation, school autonomy, community participation, diversity recognition	Legal frameworks support equity, but autonomy doesn't always translate into equitable outcomes	Limited to Portuguese context; unclear generalizability to other national systems
5.	Paragarin & Gewerc (2022)	Latin America (Venezuela, Costa Rica, Uruguay)	Higher Education / EdTech	Qualitative; grounded theory, biographical method, digital ethnography Interviews with 9 women academics	Gender inequality in academia, exclusion from research spaces, limited recognition, increased gender gaps post-pandemic	Participation in Open Education (OE) as empowerment; fostering agency and innovation in academic identity formation	<p>a) OE offers women academics a space for professional agency, innovation, and identity formation</p> <p>b) Open practices promote empowerment</p> <p>c) Territorial and gender identity shape academic trajectories</p> <p>d) Critical agency supports OER adoption and challenges gendered academic norms</p>	Small sample size; regional and cultural context may limit broader generalizability
6.	Mikaeili & Tagliabue (2025)	Global (focus on U.S.)	Organizational Behaviour / Workplace D&I	Systematic literature review (PRISMA-based); preregistered	<p>a) Limited D&I research in workplace</p> <p>b) Bias in hiring and decision-making</p>	Use of nudging (non-coercive behavioural interventions) to influence inclusion, hiring,	<p>Nudging techniques positively influenced workplace diversity and inclusion</p> <p>Reduced bias, improved inclusive perception,</p>	<p>Small number of studies</p> <p>Possible autonomy concerns</p> <p>Effectiveness varies by context; need</p>

				protocol on g OSF; 9 studies reviewed using multiple databases	c) DEI fatigue d) Lack of evidence-based interventions	retention, and employee engagement	aided recruitment and retention of underrepresented groups; best when tailored to organizational context	more comparative analysis of nudge types
7.	Shams et al. (2025)	Global	Artificial Intelligence / Tech Ethics	Systematic Literature Review (48 papers, 2017–2022); open coding; PRISMA-compliant; expert-reviewed protocol	Bias, fairness, transparency gaps, digital discrimination, lack of demographic diversity in AI design and governance	Fairness-aware algorithms, demographic-aware design, transparency-enhancing tools, governance frameworks	Identified 55 D&I-in-AI challenges and 33 solutions; 24 challenges and 23 solutions for AI-for-D&I; gender dominates D&I focus; gaps in race, age, and religion representation. most solutions are conceptual and lack implementation evidence. AI can support or harm inclusion depending on design	1) Limited empirical validation of proposed solutions 2) Underrepresentation of marginalized attributes and AI system types
8.	Khelifa & Mahdjou (2022)	Global	Academia / Scientific Publishing	Conceptual framework (KLOB model); theoretical and intersectional analysis of barriers to academic success	Cumulative inequities related to knowledge access, language proficiency, local obligations, and biases in publishing systems	KLOB framework: Knowledge exchange, Language, Obligations, and Biases; multiscale local-global approach to dismantle barriers	Highlights intersectional barriers limiting academic success Proposes systemic reform to support underrepresented scholars Underscores need for global equity in research ecosystems	a) Conceptual b) Lacks empirical validation c) No quantitative measurement or testing of framework implementation
9.	Thomas & Macnab (2022)	UK + International	Education (Schools & Policy)	Literature review informed by national (UK-based) and international advisory groups; narrative synthesis; co-constructed themes	Conflicting notions of inclusion, performative vs. authentic inclusion, insular school communities (bonding not bridging)	a) Community framing model. b) Distinction between bonding and bridging (Putnam) c) Inclusive policy grounded in intersectionality	Inclusion is facilitated when school and local communities foster bridging (inclusive, outward connections) vs. bonding (exclusive, inward ties). Framing community through this lens can help design better inclusion practices. Highlights the contradiction in schools where exclusion is relabelled as inclusion under systemic pressures.	a) Lacks empirical testing. b) Highly theoretical c) Further research needed on applying bridging community models in real-world school settings
10.	Kumari (2025)	India	Corporate HR / Gender Equity	Literature review (PRISMA-based)	Glass ceiling, unconscious bias, uneven work-life policies,	Diversity hiring, inclusive HR, mentorship, flexibility, childcare, legal	Structured HR policies (Infosys, ICICI, Tata Steel) helped increase female leadership; biases persist; flexible work and	Sectoral inconsistency; policies unevenly enforced; deep-rooted

					gendered leadership norms	mandates (e.g., board quotas)	sponsorship improve retention and progression	cultural norms remain a challenge.
11.	Bratianu & Paiuc (2023)	UK	Corporate leadership during COVID-19 (2019–2022)	Bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer (Scopus data)	a) Lack of sustained D&I focus in organizations b) Underrepresentation based on physical/mental ability, race, ethnicity, and education	Agile repositioning of D&I within multinational leadership frameworks	a) D&I became a core focus in leadership during COVID-19. b) Diversity linked to 19% higher revenues. c) Race, ability & education identified as primary D&I dimensions	Focused on bibliometric data (Scopus only); lacks qualitative or real-world intervention analysis; limited regional/contextual depth.
12.	Price & Winchester (2025)	Global (focus on UK HE)	Higher Education / Blended Learning	Scoping review using Arksey & O'Malley (2005) framework; literature review method	- Digital divide & literacy gaps - Faculty unpreparedness - Perceived segregation in hybrid learning - Limited inclusive design practices	- Faculty training in inclusive pedagogy - Course redesign for synchronous & asynchronous parity - Support services for digital competence	- Blended learning can enhance access, but doesn't ensure equity - Co-presence & inclusivity need design attention - Equity demands ongoing institutional support	- Lacks empirical testing - Mostly Western-focused literature - No direct student outcome data included
13.	Oswal et al. (2025)	UAE	Higher Education / Inclusive Education	Systematic Literature Review of 41 articles using PRISMA framework and thematic analysis	Faculty unpreparedness, lack of IEPs in HEIs, limited assistive tech use, poor transition from secondary to tertiary education, and institutional fragmentation	Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), assistive technologies, structured transitions, and staff training	Positive intent toward inclusion globally and in UAE, but major implementation gaps persist; assistive tech effective but underused; inclusive practices fragmented	Underrepresentation of non-Western case studies; lack of longitudinal evidence; most studies focus on policy over outcomes.
14.	Lukkien et al. (2025)	Global	Higher Education / Academia	Systematic Literature Review of 38 empirical studies (1990–2022) using PRISMA and thematic analysis	Structural exclusion, lack of intersectional policies, power imbalances, flawed recruitment & promotion practices, marginalization of minority faculty	Multi-level recommendation s: individual resilience & advocacy; organizational changes in recruitment, tenure, mentorship; institutional policy reforms	EDI initiatives helpful but insufficient alone; meaningful intersectional inclusion needs context-specific and layered approaches	Limited empirical evaluation of praxis; fragmented evidence across disciplines; risk of reductionism in applying intersectionality.
15.	Eshete & Birbirssa (2024)	Global	Human Resource Management	Systematic Literature Review of 78 peer-reviewed	Organizational bias, limited leadership involvement,	Aligning D&I with mission/vision; inclusive	SHRM can drive inclusive workplaces when aligned with leadership, policy, and training,	Limited empirical validation of integrated frameworks,

				articles (2010–2023)	weak policy implementation, employee disengagement	recruitment and training; manager training; performance appraisal systems that value inclusion	Line managers play a key role in implementation	Context-specific application not deeply explored.
16.	Karikari (2025).	West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal)	Higher Education, Global Citizenship	Qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis; PRISMA-guided literature synthesis	Limited funding, inconsistent implementation, cultural resistance, lack of policy uniformity	Diversity offices, gender equality programs, inclusive pedagogy, intercultural training, women's empowerment centres	D&I initiatives improve intercultural competence, civic awareness, and social responsibility among students; support global citizenship goals	a) Uneven policy application across institutions b) Limited scalability c) Funding shortfalls for wider institutional adoption
17.	Al Kubaisi (2024)	Qatar	School Education	Systematic literature review, policy analysis, and thematic synthesis	a) Heavy reliance on expatriate educators b) Lack of cultural competence; limited PD opportunities c) High turnover; weak diversity-focused policies	Targeted recruitment from diverse institutions; inclusive hiring practices; mentorship; tailored professional development; institutional support for retention	D&I initiatives can enhance student outcomes, reduce attrition, and improve cultural responsiveness; need for holistic systemic reform to sustain impact	Limited by structural dependency on foreign staff and variable institutional readiness for sustained D&I implementation.
18.	Nkya & Kibona (2024).	Tanzania	Primary Education	Systematic literature review of 22 studies using quasi-experimental designs, statistical effect size analysis, and thematic synthesis via univariate methods	Gender disparities in access & achievement; limited long-term impact studies; teacher training gaps; marginalization in rural areas	Teacher training; community engagement; gender-sensitive curriculum reform; inclusive pedagogy; local policy alignment	Positive impact on academic performance, social inclusion, reduced gender-based violence; teacher role critical in promoting equity and inclusion	Lack of longitudinal data; variability in intervention outcomes and rigor of research designs across studies
19.	Salahi et al. (2023)	United Kingdom	Inclusive Education / ASD	Qualitative Systematic Review; PRISMA framework; narrative synthesis	Integration into mainstream schools alone does not meet psychosocial needs of CYP-AS; social isolation; poor belonging	Co-designed ASD training; social clubs based on shared interests; quiet spaces; inclusive policies; therapeutic support;	Social connectedness and belonging are key to improving school experience for CYP-AS; interventions that focus on empathy, engagement, and shared activities positively impact psychosocial well-being	Limited longitudinal data; heterogeneity in school contexts; subjective reporting in qualitative data.

inclusive ethos

20.	Verwijns & Russo (2023)	Global (161 teams)	Software Teams / Tech	Quantitative; 1,118 participants; CB-SEM; CEM theoretical model	Gender diversity linked to relational conflict; limited effects of other diversity types; oversimplified diversity assumptions	Promoting psychological safety to reduce relational conflict and improve team performance; embracing nuanced frameworks like CEM for understanding diverse team dynamics	Age diversity improved team effectiveness; gender diversity increased relational psychological safety enhanced team outcomes directly but did not moderate diversity–effectiveness link. Diversity's impact is highly context-dependent.	Cultural and role diversity effects were inconclusive; no moderation by psychological safety; lacked longitudinal data; potential unmeasured variables like task interdependence or diversity mindset
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3.1 Thematic Synthesis of Key Challenges

The systematic review of 20 global studies uncovered four dominant themes that represent persistent challenges to diversity and inclusion (D&I) across sectors and regions:

1. Structural and Systemic Barriers

Numerous works recognized deep-rooted institutional frameworks that discriminate against some groups. Campbell (2021) found that even though Ontario had progressive education policies, Indigenous students had to struggle with system inequities. Correspondingly, Carvalho et al. (2023) discovered that even though the international education policies can lead to equity, autonomy vs. support has become the main issue that hinders their practical implementation in Portugal. These issues were also reiterated by Oswal et al. (2025) in the UAE, wherein they also indicated disconnections between policy and classroom practice of students with disabilities.

2. Intersectional and Identity-Based Exclusion

Multiple studies highlighted the additive nature of the intersection of different identities, including gender, race and disability. Khelifa & Mahdjoub (2022) proposed the KLOB framework to investigate how knowledge, language, obligations, and biases intertwine to aggravate difficulties in academia. Lukkien et al. (2025) disclosed how institutional exclusion remains present in colleges and universities regardless of the superficial commitments of the EDI, especially among diverse faculty dealing with various sources of marginalization. According to Paragarino & Gewerc (2022), gendered norms also restrict the academic identities of Latin American women, including the periods of crisis such as COVID-19.

3. Cultural Insensitivity and Normative Bias

In works like Kumari (2025) and Kubaisi (2024), researchers revealed how ingrained cultural demands, such as expectations of traditional gender roles in India or expat-local divisions in Qatar, constrain effective D&I practices. Salahi et al. (2023) also showed that cultural insensitivity in UK schools influences the psychosocial well-being of children with autism because inclusion on its own is not enough.

4. Tokenism and Symbolic Inclusion

One question that continued to surface is the lack of bridging the distance between institutional rhetoric and implementable tactics. The article by Fernandez et al. (2019) discovered that diversity initiatives were widespread to the point that they constituted a normal practice within the global university, yet most of them could not be measured in their implementation. The article by Thomas & Macnab (2022) criticized the school's contribution to inclusion due to the performative, but not integrative, policies to support inclusion that instead reinscribe exclusion in the form of compliance.

Throughout these studies, what is unveiled is that D&I issues are ingrained or inherent in the institutional cultures, and they also interrelate with societal injustices. All these are structural, identity-based, cultural, and symbolic problems that should be resolved as a whole to promote inclusion in a significant way.

3.2 Summary of Interventions and Approaches

The interventions used in studies were varied, and an extensive selection was identified, which indicates the differences in global contexts and institutional needs. Effective strategies usually encompass structural reforms, individual empowerment, and cultural transformation.

The interventions that stood out, especially, were multicomponent. Palid et al. (2023) discovered that STEM Intervention Programs that provide mentorship, supplemental learning, and bridge programs have a tremendous effect on improving the outcomes of women and racially minoritized students. The results support the necessity to simultaneously work on various institutional barriers (academic, social, and economic ones). Leadership responsibility and democratic policy formulation were also vital. Whereas the publication by Campbell (2021) has been widely circulated due to its mention of Ontario and its dual-strand strategy to implement targeted equity programs and cultural change, Eshete & Birbirssa (2024) put forward strategic human resource management as the means of integrating D&I across the lifecycle of the recruitment process and into workplace culture.

Behavioural nudging turned out to be a new but useful instrument. Mikaeili & Tagliabue (2025) demonstrated ways of minimizing the bias and enhancing inclusive hiring through such minuscule measures as rephrased job advertisements and decision-making processes. They, however, warned not to embrace nudging alone.

At the institutional level, the factors of inclusive pedagogy and digital accessibility were the key ones in studying such works as Price & Winchester (2025), who claimed that blended learning models highly demanded a deliberate design to be fair. At a similar note, Karikari

(2025) observed that in West Africa, intercultural training and gender support programs encouraged civic activism and global citizenship.

Overall, the review implies that effective interventions are contextual, intersectional, and underpinned by long-term institutional commitments. Universal solutions lack competence as compared to integrated, multi-faceted, evidence-based, community-based, and structural policy reform.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of Findings

The systematic review identifies major trends and shortcomings of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives across the academic, business, and technology challenges. The common theme is that a multi-component intervention is the most successful. STEM studies have found that mentorship, supplemental instruction, and financial aid programs have a tremendously positive effect on retention of underrepresented people (Palid et al., 2023). On the same note, the two-strand equity approach used in Ontario, where both curricular inequities and system inequities are addressed, proves to be an improvement, but Indigenous students continue to experience structural barriers (Campbell, 2021). There are still implementation voids. Colleges across the world have not done enough to institutionalize D&I beyond any superficial promises (Fernandez et al., 2019; Andrew, 2025), and schools are desperate in their uneven application of policies, especially with neurodiverse students (Salahi et al., 2023; Oswal et al., 2025).

Other barriers include structural and intersectional barriers that make things difficult about D&I. Organizational behaviors, as identified by workplace studies, thwart gender equity through unconscious bias and restrictive organizational cultures (Hamori & Koyuncu, 2014; Kumari, 2025; Doiron, 2025), whereas the AI system drives the exclusion of individuals if diversity features such as race and disability are ignored (Shams et al., 2025). The importance of a multiplicity of barriers, including language, bias, and systemic inequities, all of which undermine marginalized academics, lies within the framework of KLOB (Khelifa & Mahdjoub, 2022). In the same strain, contextual issues define the outcomes of the interventions: behavioral nudging to increase inclusion in the workplace has the hazard of eroding autonomy (Mikaeili & Tagliabue, 2025), and the blended-learning approach increases inequality without explicit design (Price & Winchester, 2025).

Policy and leadership alignment emerge as one of the relevant enablers. It includes strategic HR practices that can promote inclusion when leaders are the main advocates of equity (Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Akande et al., 2025), and community-based bridging (Thomas & Macnab, 2022) and teacher training in the local setting (Nkya & Kibona, 2024) contribute to inclusion in education. However, the long-term funding is still insufficient, be it in assistive technologies (Oswal et al., 2025) or D&I programs in West African universities (Karikari, 2025). The review highlights that only systemic intervention, but not individual programs, can help to change the situation, as systemic change should carry measurable accountability,

intersectional approaches, and a culturally responsive paradigm, to enable the turn of equity into practice.

4.2 Strengths and Limitation

The strength associated with this review is its extensive international scope. It offers a global overview of ways in which D&I is conceptualized and operationalized by examining research from different continents and sectors. It also includes mixtures of qualitative and quantitative evidence, and in this sense, a more thematic synthesis is possible. Relevancy and currency are ensured by the inclusion of recent research findings, including those carried out after 2020, focusing on the effect of COVID-19 on underserved populations.

Yet, there are a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. To begin with, only English language publications were included in the review, and this could have omitted important contributions made in other countries not known to be Anglophone. Such a linguistic inclination may create an imbalance in the theme and restrict knowledge of local and non-Western constructs of the concept of D&I.

Second, there was a diverse methodology of the studies, hampering synthesis. Studies were either rigorously designed mixed-method, conceptual articles, or case studies of small scales. There were no uniformities in definitions, populations, and outcome measures that complicated direct comparison. As an example, although certain studies used quantitative measures, such as retention level or diversity indices, other studies used subjective self-reports or qualitative stories.

Third, a single researcher conducted the review, which means that, provided the constraints regarding scope and capacity, one may have unintentionally biased selection and thematic interpretation. The attempt to keep the process as transparent and rigorous in coding and analysis was provided, but dual-reviewer validation was not applied to emphasize the reliability of thematic synthesis.

Lastly, there was a disparity in sectoral representation. Education gained undue emphasis as opposed to the place and health facility environment. It could be indicative of trends in funding and policy focus, as well as indicating that more empirical research is required in areas where there is less of an obvious informal power structure and exclusion, but where it is equally harmful.

4.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of the review article emphasize the need to consider context and take a context-sensitive approach when developing diversity and inclusion (D&I) policies. Successful interventions must mirror local cultures, socio-economic realities, and power relations to be successful. One size is not going to fit all since problems of inclusion vary in sectors and geographies. Cultural representation in lessons and inclusive curricula in institutions is crucial to education, whereas culturally competent healthcare and equitable access are crucial in the medical field. The workplaces should focus on bias training, employment practices, and diverse leadership.

The other key implication is the necessity to have standardized metrics to gauge the D&I performance. Most research studies did not provide coherent models, which made it hard to measure long-term effectiveness. Universal benchmarks, including the ratios of representation, retention statistics, and inclusion rates, can enhance accountability and help compare the organization and regions.

Engaging stakeholders across the hierarchies also associates the people who are underrepresented in hierarchies, and not mere design inclusion, makes interventions more believable as being viewed as solutions that look beyond the concept of design. There is a need to have policymakers, employers, educators, and health care providers work together to co-create sustainable solutions. In this way, the diversity and inclusion work can stop being a necessity to comply with the law, and turn into a substantive change, structurally changing the society in order to benefit everyone.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review analyzed the diversity and inclusion (D&I) challenges that are multifaceted in any sector across the globe, such as education, healthcare, and the workplace. Some perceived obstacles are unconscious bias, systemic discrimination, cultural incompetence, and structural inequity. Such issues exist in developed as well as developing contexts and underline the universality of the necessity of deliberate action. Effective measures added up to all-inclusive leadership and involvement of the community, to specific training, policy corrections, and accountability in figures. The results support the fact that, although some improvement was realized, there is no single solution. Effective interventions will be based on a certain cultural, institutional, and regional context. Also, the absence of common uniform definitions and outcome measurements among the studies indicates the acute necessity for standard evaluation tools of D&I. Interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research recommends continuing to identify hidden barriers and optimize best practices. The partnership between specialists, educators, policymakers, medical workers, employers, and marginalized groups will help to initiate long-term improvements. An international, collaborative approach to developing diversity and inclusion based on empathy, fairness, and evidence will result in diversity and inclusion not as a dream, but a reality entrenched throughout society.

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