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Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Governance in Australian Universities: Chancellery Appointments and the Voices of Under-Represented Groups

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Abstract

This study provides an in-depth exploration of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) efforts within the landscape of Australian higher education. The primary focus is on the representation of EDI initiatives in critical strategic positions and the role played by specialized leadership in advancing these initiatives. The Universities Accord initiative has catalysed a compelling demand for more robust diversity governance across the sector. In response, this paper seeks to unravel and map the diverse approaches employed by Australian universities in supporting their EDI endeavours to reach the strategic level. A comprehensive examination of university organizational structures was conducted to identify specific EDI appointments within the Chancellery and pinpoint EDI attribute governance groups that have a direct reporting line to the highest echelons of Chancellery leadership. Drawing upon existing scholarly research and insights from the United States of America, where Chief Diversity Officers have been instrumental in shaping diversity initiatives in higher education the paper to provides recommendations to foster inclusive leadership practices and amplify the voices of historically underrepresented communities at the strategic level of Australian higher education institutions.

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Practitioner notes

1. Under-represented groups in Higher Education often face difficulties translating EDI concerns into strategic institutional action.
2. Australian universities vary considerably in the visibility and authority given to EDI governance structures.
3. Direct reporting relationships between EDI bodies and senior executives can strengthen representation and accountability.
4. Embedding EDI leadership at executive level may support more sustainable and institution-wide approaches to inclusion.

Keywords

EDI policy, EDI leadership, Chief Diversity Officer, Strategic inclusion

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Introduction

Over recent decades, Australian universities have become increasingly diverse, with greater participation from staff and students from non-traditional backgrounds. Yet presence in higher education does not automatically translate into equitable experiences or outcomes (Harpur et al., 2023; Munro, 2011). Differences in support and experiences result in vulnerabilities among diverse groups, leaving them susceptible to failure, heightened mental health difficulties, and discrimination (Carreira & Lopes, 2021). To illustrate, the Productivity Commission (2019) reported a 22% drop-out rate for disadvantaged students compared to 12% for the general population. Indeed, a high number of these university leavers exit in their first year, before they have had a chance to create social networks or become familiar with the new environment (Benson, 2022). The lack of equal treatment and outcomes extends to staff within the institutions, such as for neurodivergent staff who still report stigma and discrimination, though this is gradually becoming more positive (Mellifont, 2021). Concurrently, staff from other marginalised backgrounds (such as those who are culturally and racially marginalised, have a disability, or are from a lower social class) continue to have low representation or visibility e in university leadership (Arkins & Kortesidou, 2024; Harpur & Szucs, 2022).

One significant factor affecting the success of diverse members within universities is the limited strategic prioritisation of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives. Individuals or small groups seeking to address EDI-related issues often face complex and unclear pathways to secure strategic attention, funding, or support, especially within the uniquely opaque systems of university bureaucracies (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Selwyn et al., 2018; Woelert, 2021). They may need to navigate unions, school or faculty committees, or university-wide groups, often without clear understanding of who holds responsibility and navigating ‘hidden curricula’ with unclear criteria and assumptions (Koutsouris et al., 2021). This can require repeated back-and-forth communications or step-by-step escalation. When issues affect large cohorts, such as improving physical accessibility on campus, approaching offices such as Properties and Facilities does not guarantee that concerns will be taken seriously or acted upon without endorsement from higher leadership. This is especially the case for universities, which are highly fragmented organisations where authority and responsibility are dispersed rather than neatly centralised (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019). For many, simply initiating contact with university leaders and administration can feel daunting or even impossible due to perceived power imbalances, so may never be seen as an option for initiating change, especially for minority group students (Koutsouris et al., 2021). Consequently, these critical concerns are frequently sidelined or insufficiently linked to leadership priorities, limiting the capacity for effective strategic-level action (Harpur et al., 2023).

To understand the significance of the direct reporting process, it is important to provide an explanation of typical university executive structures. Currently, there are groups that exist to represent diverse and minority communities and allow strategic representation. In this study, these groups were inspected for impact and their ability to be present and have an active voice directly to the highest levels of the Chancellery. Although all universities have slight variations in their executive and operational structures, the following definitions are representative of the Australian sector (Universities Australia, n.d.) and will be collectively called ‘the Chancellery’ in this paper. Other roles that may be present in the Chancellery have been excluded, as the

following roles are consistent between universities, and no other role involving EDI identified through an examination of Australian university organisation charts outside of these roles or reporting pipelines. Figure 1 provides an example of the positioning of the Vice-Chancellor and in relation to other roles in the Chancellery, including their portfolios, and their reporting pipelines.

Table 1

Key definitions

Term	Definition
Chancellery	The Chancellery consists of governing boards, called Councils, Senates and Trusts, as well as the executives who run the university, including Vice Chancellors.
Vice Chancellor (VC)	'The Vice-Chancellor is the principal academic and administrative officer of the University' (University of Cambridge, n.d.). They have considerable power and are considered the strategic head of the university. They are also often appointed as the CEO or President.
Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC)	This role works as complimentary to the VC and often has a specialised portfolio that is significant to the running of the university, such as Education, Research, Indigenous Leadership or Global Partnerships. They may also be known as a Vice-President, depending on the institution and context.
Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC)	This role supports the DVC in their activities and strategic leadership. Their specialised roles often reflect those of DVCs, though are more specialised.

This paper argues that a lack of emphasis on EDI in the Chancellery perpetuates structural inequities and contributes to poorer outcomes for diverse community members. Despite the research landscape showing a wealth of knowledge surrounding EDI in various facets, a significant gap appears when it comes to understanding how EDI issues navigate university hierarchies to benefit from strategic recognition. While existing studies have demonstrated challenges faced by diverse cohorts, a thorough exploration of the mechanisms, or the absence of such mechanisms, is required (Meuleman et al., 2015; Munro, 2011; Carreira & Lopes, 2021; Macqueen, et al., 2023). This gap in the research underscores the need for an in-depth investigation into the inner workings of EDI implementation across Australian Higher Education.

By mapping the route of EDI attributes to strategic and policy levels, this research aims to understand the extent to which EDI is present at the highest levels in order to improve strategy and policy processes and disarm barriers to EDI groups. The key research question is:

> What institutional mechanisms or individuals are formally established to facilitate the process of elevating EDI-related issues to the strategic level within the university governance structure?

Figure 1

Organisational structure of the University of Queensland Senior Leadership (University of Queensland, 2025)



While this study focuses on the Australian higher education sector, the governance challenges and strategic gaps identified are not unique to Australia. Similar tensions between policy rhetoric and institutional practice, including the creation of strategic level EDI roles, have been observed globally (Jospehy & Yu, 2025; Leon, 2014). By examining how EDI initiatives are structurally embedded, or excluded, from university leadership, this paper contributes to a broader international conversation about inclusive governance. The Australian context, shaped by global human rights norms and evolving national frameworks, offers a compelling case study with transferable insights for higher education systems worldwide seeking to move beyond symbolic commitments toward meaningful structural change (United Nations, 2022).

Literature Review

EDI in higher education has increasingly moved from peripheral concern to strategic priority, yet the mechanisms by which diverse voices reach institutional leadership remain underexplored. Similarly, low amounts of research and attention paid to the situation of staff that students, such as the collection of wider data (Piano et al., 2024) is evident with very few available academic sources on wider diverse staff status and experiences. This is also demonstrated by the existence of strategies and support initiatives aimed at supporting student participation, but excluding staff from the same category (Harpur et al., 2023).

Definitions of EDI

EDI within higher education refers to the participation of those who have been traditionally excluded and marginalised due to systemic and societal barriers (Meuleman et al., 2015). For example, Australian university enrolments have traditionally been dominated by students of upper-middle-class and above, metropolitan students, and/or students from academically established families (Productivity Commission, 2019). This has naturally led to staff historically coming from similar backgrounds (Marcus, 2000). Even though demographic data is not collected around staff as it is students, similar patterns can be partially implied from the fact that many university roles require university degrees, even outside of academic roles where it is fully essential (Queensland Government, 2019). There are also long-established patterns that further demonstrate disparities, such as how men are typically given leadership and professional roles in academia, even within traditionally female-dominated industries such as nursing (Aspinall et al., 2022; Morley, 1994; Zhuge et al., 2011).

In this paper, the term EDI is used to refer to: Disability, First-in-Family, Regional/Remote, Carer, Gender Equity, Low Socio-economic Status, Culturally and Racially Marginalised, Mature Aged, and LGBTIAQ+. This listing is based on a comprehensive study of Australian strategic plans by Harpur et al. (2022), representing the strategically prioritised cohort, though is not exhaustive of those that could be considered an EDI cohort. Collectively, these groups are widely part of Australian universities, and or have long been present in higher education but have not been well-represented or open about their status (such as carers, or individuals with invisible disabilities) (Munro, 2011). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are excluded from the definition due to the specialisation needed to support First Nations people as advocated for by those with lived experience who lead those communities (Anderson et al., 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are also covered by dedicated strategies and commitments, as they may be neglected or misunderstood by a wider EDI system considered to be rooted in colonial thought

(Ruwhiu et al., 2024). However, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals also experience intersectionality with these main EDI areas, and cultural safety and inclusion should still be included in EDI efforts. While some areas have more relevance to students than staff, such as low socio-economic status or first-in-family status, the overlap in diversity areas is significant. As such, the same categories are used to refer to both students and staff.

Specific Challenges Faced by Diverse University Cohorts

High levels of exit rates, poor sense of belonging, and mental health concerns consistently appear as barriers for students from non-traditional backgrounds, although the exact barriers and impacts vary depending on the exact EDI groups or sub-groups (Benson, 2022; Crawford et al., 2022; Munro, 2011; Productivity Commission, 2019). For example, outcomes within disability cohorts are not homogenous, with some groups experiencing substantially poorer university outcomes than others. To illustrate, only 5.2% of autistic individuals have a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 19.7% of all people with a disability and 35.3% of people without a disability (ABS, 2022). These disparities cannot be attributed to innate ability alone, but rather a lack of belonging, inaccessible systems, and lack of relevant resources, which are deeply connected to university dropout and associated employability and mental health outcomes (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020).

Discrimination, bias, and a lack of tailored support beyond an ad hoc basis further exacerbate the difficulties faced by general diverse university student cohorts (Macqueen et al., 2023) and a variety of EDI student cohorts often encounter specific challenges during their university studies. For example, accessibility barriers, both physical and digital, can impede students with disabilities from fully participating in educational and extracurricular activities when diverse cohorts aren't considered in strategic planning or policy. This is already apparent in Australian universities, as shown by a review of disability and general strategic plans by Szucs and Harpur (2023), and is also reflected globally for other areas, such as culturally and racially marginalised students in the United States of America (Southern, 2026). For mature-aged students, balancing the demands of education with other life responsibilities and the inherent feeling of being an outsider based on your age can be a significant challenge that often leads to incomplete degrees (Crawford et al., 2022; Stone & O'Shea, 2013).

The intersectionality of identities, such as being a part of multiple marginalised groups, can compound these challenges (Crenshaw, 1991; Harpur et al., 2022; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). For example, artificially separating or siloing attributes means that LGBTIAQ+ students with disabilities are consistently required to navigate separate systems and networks to gain the necessary support through their institutions, or find materials on one part of their identity physically inaccessible to them (Miller, 2018). Similarly, regional students who are also mature aged deal with both relocation and age-based alienation, meaning that two different pathways to peer support have more barriers in place (Crawford et al., 2022).

It is apparent that there are barriers to access for non-traditional groups within Australian Higher Education. Addressing these challenges at the strategic level is essential for creating an inclusive and equitable higher education environment where all students and staff can thrive. For this reason, it is imperative to move away from treating diverse populations as special cases and

instead ensuring that their inclusion is strategically embedded to help address inequalities and human rights issues at higher education institutions.

Legal Obligations and Compliance

Addressing the inconstancy of inclusion for diverse groups within education, employment, and society at large, there are a variety of legal frameworks that impose obligations on institutions to address inequity. For example, various laws at both state and federal levels in Australia, including the *Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* and national legislation (e.g. *Age Discrimination Act 2004, Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Racial Discrimination Act 1975, and Sex Discrimination Act 1984*) protect diversity groups by declaring some forms of discrimination unlawful and empower those who experience discrimination. International frameworks such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* also influence national regulations in countries including the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Harpur & Stein, 2018). However, meeting regulatory requirements alone won't achieve full equality, rather it establishes a baseline minimum (Productivity Commission, 2019; Department of Education, 2023). Achieving a more inclusive higher education system requires proactive conduct from all actors.

Institutions can also participate in voluntary compliance activities to help create a more inclusive sector and operate well above base compliance, e.g. Science in Australia Gender Equity taking part in the international Athena Swan initiative (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Science in Australia Gender Equity, 2021). These initiatives encompass varying participatory obligations, frameworks, and recognition tiers, reflecting the diverse success of institutional implementation through strategic blueprints. Such initiatives are aimed toward boosting participation through precisely targeted strategic measures and are often accompanied by detailed action plans. There is no clear academic literature on the concrete impacts of this program in Australia, though public reporting from the universities show clear and measurable positive outcomes around improved promotion, retention, and more, depending on the institution (Monash University, n.d.; University of Newcastle, n.d.; University of Technology Sydney, n.d.). For a more concrete number, collective results from institutions participating in the Athena Swan initiative in the United States of America suggest increases in women's leadership in STEM have increased by six per cent during the period of participation (Rosser et al., 2019). Notably, the same article suggests that the role of a PVC or equivalent having leadership over the implementation is recommended for this success.

Actions taken at the university level are underscored by the long held public perception of universities as needing to operate for 'the public good', and therefore the expectations for universities specifically to take actions that improve society as a whole (Calhoun, 2006; Hazelkorn & Gibson, 2019; Marginson, 2011). Voluntary action plans are often supported by statutory frameworks, such as those found in part 3 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.). These action plans can lead to various compliance measures that advance inclusion. While disability action plans vary in scope, they commonly emphasise shared institutional values and provide procedural guidance for students, including the disclosure of disability and the implementation of reasonable academic adjustments as required by Australian law (Edwards et al., 2022). There is, however, very limited research or public reporting on the success and impact of such measures (Harpur et al., 2023).

Current Status of EDI Initiatives

While universities have responded to the changing landscape of their staff and students through varying compliance measures, they can struggle to prioritise all areas of EDI and the absence of coordinated initiatives across universities and the broader sector, coupled with a lack of transparent reporting, is impeding the effective and efficient implementation of reforms (Harpur et al., 2023). For example, although 28 universities in Australia are committed to the Athena Swan ideals, only two are part of the age-friendly university program (Age Friendly University, n.d.; SAGE, 2025). This is despite evidence of consistent and long held systemic barriers for mature aged students, as well as a lack of retention or career development opportunities for older workers (Earl et al., 2018b; Heagney & Benson, 2017).

Aside from university-implemented initiatives, most actions to improve inclusion are performed on an ad hoc basis by passionate and knowledgeable individuals (Macqueen et al., 2023). However, such efforts usually do not continue once this individual is either burnt out from EDI work specific issues, such as working additional hours or feeling under-valued, or no longer in their role (Pemberton & Kisamore, 2022). This emphasises the need to create diversity governance structures which are resourced and sustainable and are not reliant on charismatic diversity leaders but on EDI in governance frameworks.

The higher education industry and the Australian Department of Education currently report the promotion of equal opportunities a top reform priority, with outputs such as Regional University Study Hubs already actively engaging students (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024; Department of Education, 2023; O'Kane 2023). However, challenges persist as underrepresentation remains a significant issue. For example, while 34% of the general Australian population aged 15 – 74 years hold a bachelor's degree, the rate among people with disability is considerably lower at 21.4%, noting that this category includes a broad spectrum of disability types (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). Attainment statistics aren't as well recorded for other EDI groups, key government statistics highlight those from regional and remote background, and low socio-economic status backgrounds continue to participate below parity. That is, students from regional and remote backgrounds comprise approximately 19 – 20% of enrolled domestic university students despite representing around 27% of the population, while students from low socioeconomic backgrounds account for about 16% of enrolments despite comprising roughly 25% of Australians (Department of Education, n.d.). Despite significant efforts and legislation over a sustained period of time, these statistics show expectations of equality have fallen short, indicating the ongoing necessity for comprehensive change (Birrell & Edwards, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2019).

The Chief Diversity Officer

When considering models of strategic leadership at a global scale, the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) model emerges as particularly relevant to the Australian higher education context. This relevance stems from similarities in EDI groupings, as well as comparable cultural, social and institutional structures across universities. In the United States of America, the role of CDOs in higher education is well established, serving as leaders in developing university-wide diversity strategies (Williams & Wade, 2013). Williams and Wade's (2013) definitive report, based on interviews with over 100 university CDOs, highlights their critical role in driving organisational

change, collecting data for diversity efforts, and enhancing institutional capabilities. Specifically, Williams & Wade (2013) highlight how these roles, in different forms, can be essential to changing an institution's response to one that is proactive rather than reactive, and enforcing EDI as an institutional priority, with results. While these roles have been consistently gaining prominence and have been so far perceived as efficient and impactful, the political pushback against EDI in the United States of America is yet to be fully understood, especially in understanding the role of strategic embedment in protecting EDI efforts from government interference (Stanley et al., 2019).

While acknowledging that diversity efforts require having a collective university approach and a designated individual, such as a CDO, overseeing and coordinating diversity initiatives across all university areas is seen as crucial. Particularly with the correct supports and a culture ready to accept them (Nixon, 2017). This role would be considered equivalent to a PVC or DVC of EDI and provides a framework for such a Chancellery appointment. Accordingly, this model will be used as a comparator to help validate and contextualise the findings of this study.

Methods

Data Collection

A list of all universities in Australia (n = 43) was identified via the Study Australia website, which lists all universities with campuses in Australia, including those with overseas origins (Study Australia n.d.). The 43 universities were then searched for diversity and inclusion related committees, working groups, and functionally equivalent groups under non-standard names. Searches were conducted in July 2022, September 2023, and August 2025 in response to a rapidly changing landscape and world-wide influences.

For each of the 43 universities, an online search strategy was undertaken. Search terms included combinations of: '[University Name] + Equity Committee', 'Diversity Group', 'Inclusion Working Group', and 'EDI reporting'. General search engines were used initially to capture indexed pages not easily accessible via internal site navigation, especially when the university used non-standard language that would not appear when searched directly for EDI, (such as the Australian National University Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (*IDEA)* Governance Committee (Australian National University, n.d.). In cases where no relevant information was found, a thorough examination of the university's EDI pages, and Strategic Plans was conducted to reduce the risk that pertinent data was overlooked.

Committees were included if they were institution-wide, publicly documented, and had a clear EDI focus. Groups were excluded if they operated only at faculty or school level, lacked transparency, or only included EDI as part of a wider portfolio such as people and culture, which were identified during the data collection process but not included as EDI committees While variations of people and culture committees were found at the senate level, these were not included as the focus is often on the student experience and misconduct, though it may include EDI in their consideration (University of Wollongong, n.d.; University of Newcastle, 2022). An EDI committee, predominantly concentrates on fostering EDI across the institution, including promoting representation of underrepresented groups, addressing bias and discrimination, and ensuring inclusivity in various university policies and practices. As such, people and culture committees were identified during the data collection process but not included as EDI committees.

Upon identification of the diversity and inclusion committees, their direct reporting line to the university's Chancellery was ascertained by analysing the committee's Terms of Reference or dedicated webpage for any mention of the highest-ranking members listed, particularly from the Chancellery, or indications of direct reporting relationships. These were categorised depending on their positioning within the Chancellery hierarchy. To identify members of the Chancellery dedicated to EDI (Table 1), all of the publicly listed organisational charts of each Australian university were identified through a search of their official website for explicit mentions of members that had EDI, or variants thereof, in their title. EDI roles were often not included in organisational charts as these charts are typically updated annually, at most, and the role may have come into being since the last website update. As such, universities' websites were searched for press releases about the topic, which provided more evidence of roles than from the official organisational charts. Roles dedicated to the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in higher education were noted but not included due to the core differences in their focus, operation, and mission.

Analysis

The data was analysed using a qualitative document analysis approach, with a focus on mapping governance structures and reporting pathways for EDI-related entities in Australian universities. The findings were then synthesised to identify patterns of representation, gaps in strategic access, and the implications for inclusive governance. Documents were analysed inductively to identify patterns in committee focus, reporting structures, and leadership roles. Data were coded into categories (e.g., committee type, reporting level, EDI attribute focus) and synthesised to identify trends and gaps in strategic representation.

Results

This study examines the governance structures supporting EDI across Australian universities, with a particular focus on how these structures enable or constrain strategic-level engagement with underrepresented groups in higher education. The findings are presented in three thematic areas: (1) Committee structures and strategic reporting; (2) Executive leadership roles; and (3) Sector-wide trends.

Committee Structures and Strategic Reporting

As seen in Table 2, across the 43 Australian universities examined, 22 were found to have institution-wide EDI committees or equivalent governance groups at any stage. These committees varied in name, scope, and reporting authority. A comparative analysis between 2023 and 2025 revealed several key developments.

Table 2

Australian University EDI Committees

University	Committees (2023)	Highest Reporting Confirmed (2023)	Committees (2025)	Highest Reporting Confirmed (2025)
Australian National University (n.d.)	IDEA Oversight Committee	Reports direct to VC	No change	DVC is Chair
Charles Darwin University (2023)	-	-	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee	Reports direct to VC, DVC Indigenous is a member
Charles Sturt University (2021)	Equity and Diversity Committee	Reports direct to VC	No change	Reports direct to VC, PVC Student Success member
Curtin University	-	-	Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Committee (DIBC)*	Reports to VC, DVC Academic member
Edith Cowan University	-	-	Equity and Diversity Committee (Edith Cowan University, 2024) ECU Athena SWAN Charter Committee (Edith Cowan University, 2025)	Unclear DVC Regional Futures is the Chair
Federation University Inclusion Committee	-	-	Inclusion Committee (Federation University, 2023)	VC is a member
Flinders University	Disability and Access Committee	Reports direct to VC	Diversity and Inclusion Committee (Flinders University., 2024) Disability and Access Committee now listed as a sub-group of this committee	Reports direct to VC, PVC Indigenous member
Griffith University	Equity Committee	Reports to DVC level	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee	Reports direct to VC, appointed Chair need be member of the Executive Group. (Griffith University, 2025)

University	Committees (2023)	Highest Reporting Confirmed (2023)	Committees (2025)	Highest Reporting Confirmed (2025)
La Trobe University	- (La Trobe University, 2025)	-	La Trobe University's Senior Executive Group Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee*	VC is Chair
Monash University	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (Monash University, 2025)	Reports to VC via Committee	No change	Reports direct to VC, has multiple DVC members including DVC Education Chair
Murdoch University	Equity and Diversity Committee. (Murdoch University, n.d.b)	Reports to Academic Board.	No longer listed	-
RMIT University	-	-	RMIT University Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee (RMIT University, 2016)	Reports direct to VC, has DVC Research and Innovation Chair
University of Adelaide	Gender Equity Committee	Reports to VC via VC Executive.	Staff Gender Equity Committee (SGEC) (University of Adelaide, 2024)	Reports to VC via VC Executive (University of Adelaide, 2019)
University of Melbourne	-	-	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Sub- Committee (University of Melbourne, n.d.)	Unclear (Staff only access)
University of New South Wales	The EDI Board	Unclear, no ToR provided	Renamed to: Equity Diversity Inclusion Sustainability and Governance (EDI SG) Board (UNSW, n.d.)	Unclear, no ToR provided
University of Queensland	Ally Action Committee Senate Committee on EDI	Unclear Reports directly to VC	Senate Committee on EDI renamed to: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Management Committee (University of Queensland, 2023)	Reports directly to VC, Deputy Provost Chair, includes DVC members

University	Committees (2023)	Highest Reporting Confirmed (2023)	Committees (2025)	Highest Reporting Confirmed (2025)
University of Tasmania	Equity Committee	Reports to Provost	No longer listed	NA
University of South Australia	-	Unclear	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee (University of Southern Australia, 2021)	Unclear
University of the Sunshine Coast	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee	Reports direct to VC	No change	Reports direct to VC. (University of the Sunshine Coast, n.d.)
Western Sydney University	Vice-Chancellor's Gender Equity Committee	Reports direct to VC	Add: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee Gender Equity Committee no longer listed. (Western Sydney University, 2025)	VC chairs the committee.
University of Wollongong	-	-	The Committee for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (CEDI). (University of Wollongong, 2025)	VC chairs the committee

*Existed previous to 2025 but was not publicly listed online at the time of the previous search; ('-') = data unavailable.

Growth

The number of EDI committees increased from 13 in 2023 to 20 in 2025. However, 2 of the 13 universities that had such committees in 2023 didn't report any in 2025, though a total of 20 universities reported having an EDI committee in 2025.

Elevation of EDI to Executive Oversight

Seven universities (Griffith, Monash, La Trobe, RMIT, UQ, WSU, Wollongong) have positioned EDI committees to report directly to the Vice-Chancellor or mandated senior executive membership. This shift signals a reframing of EDI as a strategic priority, aligning it with core governance domains such as research, education, and finance.

Centralisation versus Devolution

Two institutions (La Trobe, WSU) have centralised EDI governance through senior executive committees chaired by the VC or DVC. Others (e.g., UTAS, Murdoch) have dissolved central committees, embedding EDI responsibilities into portfolios or faculty-level structures. These models potentially reflect differing institutional philosophies, one prioritising symbolic visibility, the other operational integration.

Renaming and Scope Expansion

Several universities have broadened the remit of their EDI committees. For instance, UNSW's "EDI Board" became the "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Sustainability and Governance Board," and Curtin introduced a "Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Committee." These changes reflect a sector-wide shift toward holistic approaches that integrate belonging, culture, and sustainability, concepts increasingly relevant to inclusive teaching and learning environments.

Persistence of Specialist Committees

While umbrella EDI committees are the most common, some universities retain specialist groups (e.g., in Table 2, University of Adelaide Gender Equity Committee, the University of Queensland Ally Committee) as subcommittees. This dual structure potentially aims supports both intersectional governance and targeted accountability, which are essential for addressing the nuanced needs of diverse learners and staff, particularly if a particular group has been identified as in need of support.

Volatility and Rebranding

Between 2023 and 2025, five committees were restructured (not including reporting) or renamed, and three appear to have been dissolved. This flux may be attributed to leadership changes, resource constraints, or symbolic repositioning, though does not represent a downward trajectory as the overall numbers are higher.

Inconsistency of Groups

Wider 'EDI' priority groups had widely inconsistent groups included in the aims or objectives of their terms of reference or descriptions. For example, some universities included broad terms (Figure 2), which is an example from the description/Terms of Reference of the ANU IDEA Oversight Committee.

*O*ther universities show a standardised version, such as this representative example from Federation University (2023): "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with a disability, people from LGBTIQA+ communities, people from low socio-economic backgrounds and people from regional areas;" (p. 1). These two examples are representative of the general lists provided by university webpages, however some groups were consistently included, such as disability and gender, while other groups such as age were often not included. All of these factors have implications for how specific EDI issues are prioritised and platformed.

Executive Leadership Roles

As indicated in Table 3, EDI roles in the Chancellery are a relatively new, yet rapidly expanding phenomenon in Australia, mirroring the trajectory and commitment seen to the CDO in the United States of America (Leon, 2014; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023).

A further review of senior executive portfolios between 2022 and 2025 demonstrates the shifting institutionalisation of EDI in Australian higher education. In numbers, there are three eligible roles in 2022, six in 2023, and nine in 2025.

Figure 2

Sample of listed priority groups (Australian National University, n.d.b.)

The scope of the Framework is to advise on inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility matters pertaining to groups which are historically marginalised and/or face structural discrimination that can be addressed from the University's position. This includes, but is not limited to, consideration of matters and areas of strategic impact to the university, such as those pertaining to:

- social inclusion,
- wellbeing,
- mental health,
- Indigenous and First Nations people,
- people with diverse sexualities and genders, or those who are marked by discrimination as a result of their gender or sexuality,
- people with disability,
- culturally and linguistically diverse people,
- people of colour,
- people with parental and caring responsibilities,
- people from typically disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds,
- people marked by age-based discrimination,
- any other group which is historically marginalised or faces structural discrimination that can be addressed from the University's position, and
- others as identified by the Strategic Leadership Group.

Sector-wide trends

Fluctuating Seniority of EDI Portfolios

At UNSW the expansion of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (EDI) portfolio into a Vice-President for Societal Impact, Equity and Engagement (Table 3), signalled the embedding of EDI within broader strategic agendas of social responsibility and external engagement as the role has been elevated into a higher executive position. Similarly, the introduction of a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Community and Leadership) at the University of Sydney (Table 3) has been expanded to include inclusion as part of its cultural remit. Conversely, two institutions have downgraded their EDI executive structures, with a Deputy Vice-Chancellor role discontinued and responsibilities reassigned to an Associate Director at Victoria University, and a DVC level EDI role downgraded to the PVC level (Table 3). On the surface, this could represent a significant loss of symbolic and practical influence in the senior executive sphere, though it could also reflect the best suited role for operational needs. However, along with other universities, Victoria University also has a public and clear commitment to EDI, for example Victoria University and Griffith University sport an overwhelmingly ‘non-traditional’ cohort and, as one of the first Athena Swan participants in Australia, Griffith University has been recognised for promoting inclusive societies (Griffith University, n.d.; Victoria University, n.d.). As such, it can’t be assumed that a downgrading of EDI executive structures translates directly to a move away from EDI, but rather that EDI may be positioned as ‘everyone’s role’ or embedded into other senior portfolios.

Table 3

Change in senior executive portfolios

University	Title (2022)	Title (2023)	Title (2025)
Edith Cowan University (2024)	DVC Equity and Indigenous	DVC Students, Equity and Indigenous	No change
Griffith University	-	DVC Indigenous, Diversity and Inclusion, (Griffith University, 2023).	Deputy Vice Chancellor (Indigenous). Some responsibilities embedded in DVC Education (Griffith University, 2024).
Murdoch University (n.d.)	DVC Education and Equity	PVC Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (Murdoch University (n.d.)	No Change
University of NSW	DVC EDI	DVC EDI	Vice-President role Societal Impact, Equity, and Engagement (UNSW, 2025).
University of Technology Sydney	-	PVC Social Justice and Inclusion	No change (University of Technology Sydney, 2025).
University of Melbourne	-	-	Pro Vice-Chancellor (People and Equity) (University of Melbourne, 2025).
University of Newcastle	-	-	Deputy Vice-Chancellor - Engagement and Equity (University of Newcastle, 2025).
University of Queensland	-	-	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Campus Culture and Leadership) (with explicit remit for inclusion)
University of Sydney	-	-	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Community and Leadership) (University of Sydney, 2025)
Victoria University	-	DVC Indigenous, Equity & Inclusion (Victoria University, 2023)	Role no longer active Associate Director of Equality, Inclusion and Belonging (Victoria University, 2025)

('-') = data unavailable

Role Renaming and Redistribution

Three roles were restructured or changed during the collection period (Griffith University, Edith Cowan University, University of New South Wales), with different implications. Griffith University shows a change where EDI responsibilities are reportedly embedded into a role with more overarching authority, in what could be interpreted as institutionalising EDI as business-as-usual practice. This suggests that while inclusion remains institutionally recognised and prioritised, it is no longer articulated as a standalone executive focus. This is may not necessarily indicate reduced prioritisation of EDI, instead it may be interpreted as a redistributing of responsibility to reposition EDI as a shared responsibility amongst portfolios in opposition to the role of one person or area, though it could be interpreted as a de-prioritisation of EDI if this ideal isn't met.

This redistribution points to tensions between mainstreaming EDI (embedding across existing portfolios) and maintaining visibility through a dedicated executive leader.

Shift from 'Equity'-based Language

Three institutions have adopted role titles that don't use the traditional equity terminology but have EDI as explicit remits. At the University of Queensland, the newly created PVC (Campus Culture and Leadership) incorporates inclusion within a broader remit of organisational culture (The University of Queensland, n.d.). Similarly, at the University of Sydney, a similar role is frames as a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Community and Leadership). At the University of Technology Sydney, the PVC (Social Justice and Inclusion) explicitly links EDI to justice-oriented values.

Sectoral Divergence in Executive Structures

By 2025, Australian universities display no uniform model for senior EDI leadership (Table 3). Some maintain dedicated Deputy Vice-Chancellor roles (e.g., Newcastle University, The University of Sydney), others house responsibilities at the Pro-Vice-Chancellor level (e.g., Melbourne University, The University of Queensland, Murdoch University), and some have disbanded dedicated roles entirely (e.g., Victoria University). This divergence indicates that, while EDI is recognised across the sector, institutions differ in how far they are willing to institutionalise inclusion as a strategic executive priority versus embedding it into existing functions such as education or engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex and evolving landscape of EDI governance within Australian universities. While there is evidence of progress, such as the elevation of EDI committees to report directly to Vice-Chancellors and the emergence of dedicated executive roles, the variability in committee structures, reporting pipelines, and leadership portfolios suggests that EDI is still negotiating its place within institutional hierarchies.

The fact that only around half of universities have EDI groups, and fewer still that are positioned to report at the most senior strategic levels, highlights a significant structural gap. This absence not only perpetuates existing inequities but also makes it difficult for the broader university community to envision clear pathways for achieving meaningful, institution-wide change (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Woelert, 2021). Where EDI is not embedded at the top levels of decision-making, opportunities to influence strategy are constrained, often resulting in marginalised perspectives being overlooked or insufficiently integrated into policy and practice (Harpur et al.,

2023). This lack of strategic positioning can limit access to administrative funding, hinder the institutionalisation of inclusion initiatives as business as usual, and reduce the extent to which the lived experiences of marginalised groups shape organisational priorities. At the same time, it restricts opportunities for self-determination and leadership among these communities who could helm such committees, despite strong calls for greater representation and agency in decision-making processes from wider diversity community voices (Jones et al., 2025; Opoku & Nketsia, 2021).

The results of this research indicate a hierarchy or dominant narrative over which groups are included in EDI focused committees, as is reflected in the wider literature on EDI inclusion (Crenshaw, 1989; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). For example, there were no high-level groups for carers, or those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and they were not always listed on committee definitions of EDI or ToRs, so they cannot be expected to be automatically included in the group's aims or priorities and may find it difficult to be considered EDI or relevant to such committees by their definition. While members of these groups could approach other university committees, such as academic boards, this may not be the most appropriate avenue as it may not considered relevant to the aims of such non-EDI bodies and, therefore may not be approved for platforming or prioritised in actioning (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019). The fact that the results of this research could not locate a wide range of committees representing EDI at a high level indicates that it may be difficult for individuals wanting to access these groups themselves, which is not an adequate response to addressing needs for strategic intervention and support.

Being able to report to the Chancellery will help the agendas of further marginalised groups within EDI to enable change at the strategic level. However, not all Chancellery roles are equally equipped to champion the case of diversity in their role. For example, qualitative research by Harpur et al. (2025), interviewing members of Australian Chancelleries, shows that a PVC that has a number of non-EDI specific appointments may not necessarily have the most relevant portfolio and may struggle to prioritise EDI in their role. For example, with a primary focus on research-related tasks, such as securing funding and driving academic excellence, the PVC's portfolio may not inherently encompass EDI considerations, which may be simply considered an add-on by their staff and superiors. That is, competing demands for research targets and resource allocation, along with the absence of clear reporting pathways and institutional support for EDI, can hinder their ability to effectively champion EDI initiatives alongside their research-oriented responsibilities. Equally, individuals in broad or generalised EDI roles may not possess the networks, lived experience, or resources required to effectively champion specific equity groups (Harpur et al., 2025). Consequently, this work may be redistributed to others within EDI portfolios who often have less institutional authority and fewer resources to create change, while also facing increased risks of burnout (Ahmed, 2012; Ueda et al., 2024). Where such responsibilities are not institutionalised, their continuity and long-term sustainability cannot be guaranteed, as has been established by a number of scholars focused on furthering EDI in higher education (Ahmed, 2012).

It is difficult to decipher the intentions of Griffith and Victoria Universities dissolving their dedicated EDI Chancellery roles, especially as they are universities both known for appealing to non-traditional students. A dedicated EDI Chancellery role (e.g. a CDO) is widely recognised as a proven effective response to these structural and strategic challenges, particularly within higher

education systems where the role has been established and evaluated over time. Evidence from the United States demonstrates that CDOs have been effective in elevating EDI to the strategic level, embedding it within institutional planning, and driving measurable organisational change, in the way that an Australian PVC or DVC would (Williams & Wade, 2013). By consolidating responsibility within a clearly defined, senior leadership position, the CDO model addresses the fragmentation, limited authority, and lack of continuity that often characterise more ad hoc or distributed approaches to EDI (Leon, 2014). With direct reporting lines to the Chancellery and a mandate focused specifically on equity outcomes, CDOs have been shown to enhance coordination across portfolios, strengthen accountability, and ensure that marginalised perspectives are incorporated into core decision-making processes (Leon, 2014; Stanley et al., 2019). Importantly, the established track record of these roles highlights their capacity to move EDI beyond symbolic commitment toward sustained, institution-wide transformation, positioning the CDO as not only a theoretical solution but a demonstrably effective model for advancing strategic change (Nixon, 2017; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

A key consideration for the need to appoint dedicated roles, is whether incidental representation within university Chancellery structures is sufficient to achieve the goals of EDI advocates. That is, while the presence of individuals with lived experience of marginalised identities in senior leadership may appear to signal progress, evidence suggests this alone does not reliably translate into improved outcomes for those groups (Croucher et al., 2020). Although such representation can enhance visibility and provide important role models, it does not necessarily ensure that EDI is prioritised within strategic decision-making. As previously discussed, leaders with broad or non-EDI-specific portfolios may lack both the mandate and capacity to advance equity initiatives, regardless of their personal identities or commitments.

Moreover, individuals in Chancellery roles may face structural and cultural pressures that limit their ability, or willingness, to advocate openly for EDI, even if they are a representative of the relevant EDI group (Harpur et al., 2025). For example, senior leaders may choose not to disclose certain identities, such as disability, due to persistent stigma, thereby constraining the potential for lived experience to inform institutional change (Harpur & Szucs, 2023). The case of age further illustrates this limitation: despite the majority of Australian Chancellery members being over the age of 50 years, this has not translated into systematic prioritisation of age-related equity issues in governance processes or institutional strategies (Croucher et al., 2020). Australia's relatively low participation in the Age Friendly Universities network (two participants), compared to over 100 members in the United States, reinforces this disconnect (The Gerontological Society of America, n.d.). Similarly, the presence of older leaders has not been shown to result in stronger support for late-career staff, mature-age students, or age-inclusive policy design (Earl et al., 2018a). These examples demonstrate that representation alone cannot be relied upon as a substitute for structured, strategic approaches to EDI. The presence of individuals from marginalised groups within leadership does not automatically produce systemic change, nor does it guarantee that diverse perspectives are consistently embedded in institutional priorities (Crawford et al., 2022). In contrast, the CDO model offers a proven response to these limitations by moving beyond incidental representation toward intentional, structurally embedded leadership, creating a strong template for Australian Universities to follow when addressing our own inequalities in Higher Education (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023). By establishing a dedicated, senior role with a clear

mandate, accountability, and resourcing for EDI, universities can ensure that equity considerations are consistently prioritised at the strategic level.

Limitations and Further Research

This study is situated within a highly dynamic and evolving institutional landscape. University structures, committees, and senior leadership roles are frequently reconfigured, renamed, or expanded to incorporate shifting priorities and portfolios. As a result, it is difficult to provide a definitive account of EDI governance structures at any single point in time. For instance, during this project, Griffith University introduced a DVC EDI and Indigenous role in 2023, which was subsequently restructured in 2024 to focus exclusively on Indigenous portfolios, requiring the research team to revisit the analysis (Griffith University, 2023, 2024). The analysis is limited to publicly accessible information, including university websites and published governance materials. Consequently, recent or internal structural changes that have not yet been made publicly available, particularly those behind staff login systems, may not be captured. While most universities demonstrate a commitment to transparency in reporting leadership structures, the findings reflect the landscape as it was presented at the time of data collection. This study also focuses on the presence and positioning of EDI roles and committees rather than their effectiveness. As such, it does not assess whether these structures lead to measurable improvements in outcomes for underrepresented groups.

Future research would benefit from incorporating qualitative approaches to complement this structural analysis. Interviews with senior leaders and EDI practitioners could provide insight into the rationale behind role creation, restructuring, and portfolio design, including whether such changes support or constrain the operationalisation of EDI. Further work is also needed to evaluate the impact of EDI governance structures. In particular, research should examine whether leadership roles, reporting lines, and committee placement translate into measurable improvements for marginalised groups. The variation in access to strategic decision making identified in this study also warrants deeper investigation. Future research could explore the organisational, cultural, and structural factors that enable or constrain engagement with senior leadership, including reporting pathways, resourcing, and informal power dynamics.

Conclusion

This study provides a foundational mapping of EDI governance structures within Australian universities, offering insight into how diverse communities are represented within institutional strategy and decision-making. Across 43 universities examined, only 20 currently report distinct EDI committees and 9 senior EDI leadership roles were identified highlighting the scale and distribution of formal EDI governance across the sector. Through examining reporting pathways and governance arrangements across the sector, the findings demonstrate that while many universities have established EDI-related committees, portfolios, and leadership positions, pathways to senior decision-makers often remain fragmented, opaque, and inconsistent. In many cases, it is difficult to determine the extent to which institutions are substantively committed to equity and inclusion beyond symbolic or compliance-oriented measures.

The findings highlight the challenges universities face in ensuring that EDI concerns reach strategic and policy levels of institutional governance. Limited direct reporting pathways to senior

executive leadership or Chancellery structures may restrict the capacity of EDI groups to influence institutional priorities, particularly where responsibility is dispersed across generalised portfolios with limited authority or resourcing. Moreover, the uneven presence of specialised groups dedicated to specific equity cohorts leaves some communities with comparatively limited opportunities for meaningful representation and advocacy.

Rather than framing these cohorts as inherently vulnerable, this paper identifies structural exclusion and marginalisation as ongoing institutional challenges. The absence of formalised governance pathways for groups such as low socioeconomic status, first-in-family, and mature-aged students suggests a need for more transparent, embedded, and accountable equity structures within university governance. Although the sector has seen a growth in EDI-related leadership positions and initiatives, these developments remain uneven across Australian universities, raising questions regarding consistency, institutional prioritisation, and long-term sustainability.

Importantly, while a number of positive developments across the sector are encouraging, universities must avoid complacency. At a time when EDI initiatives internationally are increasingly subject to political and institutional pushback, Australian universities must ensure that equity and inclusion are safeguarded at strategic, structural, and policy levels rather than remaining dependent on individual champions or temporary initiatives. Greater transparency in governance structures, clearer reporting pathways, and stronger institutional accountability will be essential if universities are to meaningfully embed equity into both institutional documentation and everyday practice.

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Harpur: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision.

Szucs: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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