



Inclusion Organisation in Universities

How Commitments Work

Roxana D. Baltaru

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*If it weren't possible for Europeans to qualify for scholarships in the UK,
I probably would not have ended up researching inclusion in the UK
higher education system. I dedicate this book to policies that open access
to universities beyond national borders.*

FOREWORD

How do we make sense of the tendency of universities worldwide to proclaim that they are inclusionary organisations? Focusing on universities in the United Kingdom, this book contends that inclusionary commitments are designed to not only increase the diversity of students and faculty but also to gain legitimacy within what the author calls an inclusion-oriented organisational field. This is the central thesis Roxana D. Baltaru advances, drawing on and integrating key ideas from both earlier institutional scholars (think Selznick) and from more recent ones (think Meyer). Thus, the commitments to inclusion can be justified with both instrumental resource-acquiring rationales as well as with more equity-oriented ones. The resources came from key funding government councils as well as charities that were key actors in the development of the inclusion-oriented organisational field. The focus on equity garnered university reputational benefits in a system that was rapidly moving from celebrating ‘managing diversity’ to ‘managing for diversity’ (see Chavez and Weisinger).

In the United Kingdom (and elsewhere), universities were historically exclusionary institutions designed for a few good men, from men of the cloth to men of noble blood to men of the coin. But as Baltaru points out, the winds of change favoured expanding higher education, at times invoking fairness ideals, but often imagining that the national interest would be best served via increased human capital. In a globalised and

competitive world, national policy makers would call for increases in post-secondary enrolments. To positively answer that call, universities were expected to open their doors to categories of persons previously excluded, from women to ethnic and racial groups to persons with disabilities. Of course, this logic of inclusion also applied to the working class. However, this book shows that socio-economic background was less emphasised both as regards to how universities displayed inclusionary commitments to the wider organisational field as well as how universities sought to diversify their demographic composition over the last decades. This is ironic, given how much society and university in the United Kingdom have been profoundly class stratified. But then again social class has not been central to the recent valorisation of diversity and inclusion. References to first generational students as inclusionary targets are more recent and arguably command less attention than the excluded that this book examines.

Much of the literature on the prominence of inclusionary logics in contemporary universities revolves around the distinction between ‘talk’ and ‘walk’. This distinction is central to *Inclusion Organization in Universities*. Baltaru eschews the fashionable cynicism that inclusion commitments are just talk, and worse, that the talk may actually make it easier for universities to not really be more inclusive. However, she does not indulge in the naivete that the talk naturally leads to the walk. Instead, she contends that inclusion commitments have both a people and an institution-centred function. The latter often involves a discourse that includes mission statements and strategic plans and functions to enhance the legitimacy of the university, while the former refers to the purported effectiveness of inclusionary commitments to make universities more demographically inclusive. Of course, what ‘inclusive’ means has evolved beyond opening doors to the excluded. Terms of inclusion issues arise, and the inclusion walk now demands curricular changes and pedagogical innovations that add up to a more welcoming climate.

Baltaru recognises and reflects on the more demanding cultural changes universities face in the name of inclusion. However, her main theoretical contribution lies in going beyond ‘loose coupling’ or ‘organisational hypocrisy’ ideas to forcefully argue that universities actively talking inclusion become included in an organisational field that itself actively legitimates universities with inclusionary mission statements and strategic plans. Evidence supporting this position is found in an impressive analysis of the inclusion-oriented websites of 124 universities as of 2018.

This analysis sheds light on how universities formally present themselves and to which external organisations and legislation do they refer. Readers will be struck by both the explicitness and extensiveness of the references. A thick and robust inclusion-oriented organisational field emerges from this rigorous analysis.

Baltaru also directly addresses the interface between talk and walk. Here the question is whether changes in the numbers of women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities are positively associated with university inclusionary commitments reflected in their websites or in equality charter memberships. The analyses are undertaken for students, staff, and professors. Not surprisingly, the results, taken as a whole, are a mixed bag. There are indeed positive changes, but these are not especially influenced by inclusionary talk. The most consistent and interesting finding is that in very recent years the more elite Russell Group universities underwent greater changes in demographic inclusion than the other universities. Perhaps those more in the public eye universities are more aware of what the winds of change call for and more eager to act as inclusion leaders. They certainly do not appear to suffer from an inhibiting organisation inertia. To the extent that a follow the leader mentality prevails, what happens in the Russell Group universities may influence what happens in other universities.

But what if the winds of change blow in the opposite direction? What if valorised inclusiveness gets contested, now reframed as undermining meritocracy or cancelling free speech and academic freedom? Baltaru acknowledges that contestations are already underway in different countries and that inclusion commitments are increasingly under stress. Will both discursive and structural commitments diminish? Or, ironically, will demographic inclusionary changes persist even as mission statements and other university declarations get edited, with EDI re-branded as ‘belonging’ for example? If university commitments are more authentic than their critics imagine, more inclusion walk and less inclusion talk may become an unintended consequence of a more challenging environment. This may be a special case of what Baltaru calls ‘over-coupling’, that is, the continued commitment of resources to goals already attained. In many universities, women have achieved or even exceeded numerical parity, but a broader understanding of inclusion that takes into account terms of inclusion issues may favour ‘over-coupling’.

This is a strikingly original and valuable contribution to organisational scholarship focused on changes in universities as institutions. A

compelling dual function argument is advanced to understand how inclusion commitments are made. Original data is assembled and analysed to discern an inclusion organisational field and to assess the influence of discursive commitments on demographic changes. Confidence in the resilience of the inclusion organisational field in the United Kingdom is expressed, albeit with an awareness of challenges. The emergence, expansion, and contestation of the inclusionary turn in universities is much more than an interesting issue. Whether to include and how to include have become searing policy debates often associated with more fire than light. Add this book to a short list of both engaged and enlightening studies of university inclusion commitments.

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PREFACE

In the UK universities, there is an ongoing celebration of inclusion. No matter how demographically diverse they are, most universities will designate equality ‘champions’ and officers. University staff will attend, as part of the less glamorous aspect of championship, inclusion-oriented meetings, stand in equality committees, and develop applications for awards that flag their employer’s commitment to inclusion.

Women, ethnic minorities, and other minority groups may find themselves appointed to fit these tasks into their schedules. An infrastructure of equality and diversity organisational sub-divisions is designated to make sure that people with characteristics protected by the equality legislation do not face discrimination. Paradoxically or perhaps as a by-product, students and staff report feeling ‘raced’, ‘classed’, and ‘gendered’ by the systems supposed to support them. Academics are expected to tag along *what* and *how* the organisation decides to pursue. Some of them long for the days with less administrative duties, and little responsibility for inclusion organisation. Others are motivated to support university’s commitments to inclusion, which may resonate with their own biographies and ambitions to enact social change. Meanwhile, in the public sphere, there is a growing perception that the ‘talk’ of inclusion in the UK higher education, i.e., universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion, has become disconnected from the ‘walk’ of inclusion at the structural level. Is this the case, and if so, why?

This book draws on organisational and sociological institutionalist theory to examine the perceived dislocation between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion and to understand whether and how organisational commitments to inclusion work. Just as existing research has been doing, this book takes into account the needs of individuals from historically underrepresented demographic groups to be included in higher education. It then moves beyond that, to consider the needs of universities themselves to be ‘included’ into the organisational field(s) in which they operate, where inclusion is valued as a social good.

The possibility emerges that when it comes to inclusion organisation, commitments hold multiple functions (for individuals and social groups, but also for universities themselves as adapting institutions), which may nurture as well as inhibit each other. This book is a journey of exploring how commitments work, and in doing so, understanding the perceived gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion.

Bergen, Norway

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roxana D. Baltaru is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Bergen. Prior to this, she has taught and conducted research at the University of Warwick and the University of Essex. Her research brings together sociological and institutional perspectives to study cultural trends and organisational transformations, especially in higher education. Her most recent investigations problematise issues faced by universities worldwide, from administrative expansion and financial sustainability to the emergence of new university missions such as inclusion, equality and diversity, and internationalisation.

ABBREVIATIONS

AS	Athena Swan
BAME	Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
DEL	The Department for Employment and Learning
DfE	Department for Education
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
E.S.	Author initials. Only Initials Are Provided in the Original Article.
FHEA	The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992
FSM	Free School Meals
Function 1 (F1)	The People-Centred Function, i.e., the Function of Organisational Commitments to Include People in Universities.
Function 2 (F2)	The Institution-Centred Function, i.e., the Function of Organisational Commitments to Include Universities in the Organisational Field.
Gov.uk	Government United Kingdom Official Information Platform
HE	Higher Education
HEA	The Higher Education Act of 2004
HEFCE	The Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEIPR	Higher Education Initial Participation Rate
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency

IO	Inclusion Organisation
IOF	Inclusion-Oriented Organisational Field
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NIHR	The National Institute for Health and Care Research
NPM	New Public Management
OCIs	Organisational Commitments to Inclusion
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	The Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation Of Local Areas (POLAR)
POLAR4	A recent iteration of POLAR
RAE	Research Assessment Exercises
REC	Race Equality Charter
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RG	Russell Group
SFC	The Scottish Funding Council
SIC	Schools Inquiry Commission
SLC	Student Loans Company
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
STEMM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine
UCAS	The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UGC	University Grants Committee
UUK	Universities UK

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Introduction: Universities Committing to Inclusion

INCLUSION—THE ‘TALK’ AND THE ‘WALK’

Talking without walking has become a social issue. Our efforts to construct sustainable and fair societies have materialised into formal commitments but these do not always translate into meaningful progress. Growth in formal commitments appears to have outrun structural change (much ‘talk’ but too little ‘walk’) or even replaced it (the ‘talk’ becomes the new ‘walk’). Commitments to increase access to higher education have spread across the globe, even in countries that are struggling to provide elementary education. Anti-racist protests are met by magnificent amounts of formal recognition while activists warn against the dangers of ‘symbolic’ victories. Economic outcomes are unevenly distributed in ‘advanced’ economies, despite the highly publicised commitments to tackle inequality, as in the 2019 G7 Summit. A much-criticised gap between commitments and structural change appears to inhibit humanity’s efforts of mitigating the disastrous effects of climate change. The relationship between formal commitments and structural change is important across many spheres of social action where societal goals meet formal organisation.

This book will focus on *inclusion organisation*: the arena in which the talk and the walk of inclusion evolve. Inclusion organisation (IO) occurs when norms and values such as equality and individual empowerment are being pursued as institutional goals, i.e., subject to formalisation and organisation. IO has broad applicability, from the widening of access

to goods and services, to ensuring that individuals are not discriminated against by the institutions they interact with. Within IO one can distinguish the *talk*, i.e., inclusion-oriented schemes, mission statements, strategic plans, policies, as distinct from the *walk*. For educational institutions, the ‘walk’ may lead to a point where anyone qualified and willing to advance their education can do so; for the police, a point where people feel protected and safe irrespective of their ethnic background; for health care systems, being able to provide support for everyone that needs it, irrespective of their socio-economic background. Distinguishing between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ gives a voice to those who feel that institutions do not follow-up on their commitments (Penklis, 2024). This value-led angle may also provide an impetus for scholars to question whether there is a functional relationship between what an institution says and what it does.

This book will theorise inclusion organisation in higher education, using the UK universities as a case study. The booming of organisational commitments to inclusion in the UK universities over the last couple of decades provides a unique case study to understand whether and how the talk about inclusion drives change at the structural, demographic level, for instance, when looking at the composition of the student and staff demographics.

The question becomes.

Do UK Universities ‘Walk the Talk’ When It Comes to Inclusion?

A clearer picture on whether organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) impact the student and staff demographics can inform policies concerning fair access to higher education and the tackling of discrimination among those who work and study in higher education. In the UK university sector, interrogating the relationship between the talk and the walk encourages us to evaluate whether the introduction of equality charters and the proliferation of inclusion-oriented institutional statements work. While the current research will focus on the university sector in the United Kingdom, the findings may inspire ways of thinking about the pursuit of inclusion in other higher education systems around the world and in other institutional settings, beyond higher education.

More broadly, this book strives to advance our existing knowledge about the possibilities and the limitations of the organised pursuit of societal goals, in relation to inclusion (the focus of this book) but also with

relevance to societal goals beyond inclusion. The preoccupation here is to understand organisational commitments and how they work. This book bridges early and new institutionalist perspectives from sociology into a comprehensive conceptual framework; the *two-way function* of organisational commitments (i.e., *Function 1* and *Function 2* of OCIs) will be proposed and theorised in Chapter 3. The possibility of this conceptual framework to inform an applied research programme is illustrated in the empirical chapters (Chapters 4 and 5).

Key to this model is reconceptualising the inclusion-oriented ‘talk’. This book does not see universities’ ‘talk’ of inclusion as merely directed to including people in higher education (its explicit purpose, or *Function 1*). As the inclusion-oriented talk may also work to purvey universities with legitimacy, a second function of the ‘talk’ emerges: that of including universities into the organisational field in which they operate, especially when the organisational field valorises inclusion (an overlooked but key purpose, which I shall term *Function 2*). The angle of this book is the following: *inclusion organisation* ought to be analysed as an arena where universities’ quest of becoming included into the organisational field (by becoming committed to inclusion) collides with the quest of including people into universities (the explicit purpose that commitments articulate). This conceptualisation advances the existing body of literature concerning inclusion in higher education (HE) with a sociological and institutionalist perspective.

The organisational pursuit of inclusion, equality, and diversity has also been widely explored in management research. As this book aims to bring a cultural sociological perspective to understanding the pursuit of inclusion in universities, when it comes to developing a conceptual framework the focus will be on: (a) newer sociological institutionalist literature and organisational theory that helps problematising why organisational commitments are formulated by institutions who, for most of their existence, had a taken for granted purpose and lacked formal organisation (Baltaru & Soysal, 2017; Meyer & Bromley, 2014; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; see also DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1991); and (b) earlier sociological institutionalist approaches that inform a broader understanding of ‘function’ as an artefact of a shared system of representation, which is especially relevant to conceptualising how commitments work for universities turned into organisational actors (see Chapter 3). The engagement with management literature will be limited to acknowledging managerial fashions and discursive narratives linked with the terms

‘inclusion’, ‘equality’, and ‘diversity’ (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Oswick & Noon, 2014), and locating those functionalist arguments according to which one may expect an organisation’s personnel to be consequential for whether equality-oriented actions translate into outcomes (Dennissen et al., 2018; Briscoe & Joshi, 2017; see also Dwivedi et al. [2024] for an overview).

FROM ‘INCLUSION’ TO ‘INCLUSION ORGANISATION’

Inclusion is a versatile analytical framework which can be applied to understand the trajectory and experiences of individuals in higher education, as well as the structures they inhabit, from systems of governance and organisation to the higher education institutions themselves and the disciplinary and professional fields they harbour.

At the macro- and meso-levels, considerations of inclusion (and exclusion, thereof) emerge when exploring diversification, reputation, and dominance across HE models and types of HEIs (Marginson, 2013, 2017; Morphew, 2009; Teichler, 2007) and the stratified HE systems that universities occupy (Baltaru et al., 2022; Boliver, 2015; Davies & Zarifa, 2012; Raffé & Croxford, 2015). The way in which HEIs evolve is further determined by the hierarchies of institutional logics and values at a given point in time (Clegg & Rowland, 2010; Dakka, 2019) and geopolitical patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Majee & Ress, 2018; Marginson, 2025). At the micro-level, the focus is on who gets to study and work in universities, and how various demographic groups have fared in higher education. Much of this research is concerned with the participation, experiences, and educational attainment of historically underrepresented students, notably in respect to socio-economic background (Clancy, 2024; Mullen, 2013; Reay et al., 2009), gender (Boring & Brown, 2024; David, 2015; Maupin & McCannon, 2024), race and ethnicity (Boliver, 2015; Brophy, 2024; Bunce et al., 2019) and disability (Lid et al., 2024; Oliver & Barnes, 2013). The representation and experiences of historically disadvantaged groups working in academia are also increasingly investigated (Ayyildiz & Banoglu, 2024; Baltaru, 2023; Drange et al., 2023; McGee, 2024; Merchant et al., 2020). Inclusivity considerations linked with salient identities (Morris et al., 2021; Sagaria, 2007) have further expanded to consider epistemic hierarchies (Pearse et al., 2019; Pereira, 2014) and the diversification of the curriculum (Mills & Ayre,

2003; Rasi et al., 2015; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2022). Indeed, considerations of inclusion/exclusion are also relevant when studying academic disciplines, the academic profession, and HE professionals at large, with professional identities being unequally impacted by the socio-economic and cultural developments in the HE field (Baltaru, 2022; Middleton, 2013).

The remarkably wide reach of inclusion-oriented research in higher education is put into perspective by the growing valorisation of individual empowerment, along the expectation that higher education can consolidate democracies and alleviate the corrosive effects of colonialism, globalisation and neoliberalism across national contexts starting with the embodiment of democratic values at its core (Tierney, 2021). Not surprisingly, the institutional perspectives on inclusion in HE have been concerned with the extent to which the composition of HEIs reflects the diverse demographic makeup in society, and how HEIs have been changing in the process of becoming more inclusive (Smith, 2014). The development and enactment of inclusion-oriented policies, practices, and commitments at the institutional level are being investigated (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Matthews et al., 2023; Nash et al., 2020; Orupabo & Mangset, 2021). Researchers have been paying attention to the implications that these developments have for the broader missions of the university (Kwak et al., 2019; see also Soysal & Baltaru, 2021) and for the expanding area of diversity work in universities (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2023) and the higher education professionals inhabiting it (Baltaru, 2019). This stream of institutional research questions policy directions and practices in higher education, one of the main issues at stake being whether universities are becoming truly inclusive. This issue has been accentuated by a perceived disconnection between universities' inclusion-oriented commitments and practice (Ahmed, 2006; Ahmet, 2021; Baltaru, 2020; Kimura, 2014), few arguing that commitments can effectively prioritise some demographic groups over others (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023; Taylor et al., 2019).

Over the last decade, we have been witnessing the emergence of much-needed systematic empirical research on whether organisational commitments to inclusion work (Baltaru, 2023; Campion & Clark, 2022; Gregory-Smith, 2017; Nwosu, 2024). While calling for this research (Baltaru, 2020, 2023), I have been arguing that the appeal of organisational commitments should be understood against the backdrop of broader cultural pressures, whereby universities are increasingly expected

to act as strategic, goal-oriented, formal organisations (Baltaru & Soysal, 2017). From this sociological institutionalist perspective to question whether organisational commitments work is to interrogate the effectiveness of purposive organisational action (Baltaru, 2018, 2020 see also Keith, 2001). We ‘debunk’, in Berger’s words (1963), the shared, cultural system of norms and values which ‘represents’ organisational commitments as legitimate and even desirable ways of pursuing societal goals in universities and beyond (see also Meyer et al., 2007). The premise of the current book is simple: organisational commitments cannot be assessed in isolation of the broader environmental (institutional and cultural) pressures that universities are facing.

Towards this end, this book utilises the term ‘inclusion’ two-fold. On the one hand, it is used to capture the inclusion of people in universities: what is most often meant by the ‘walk of inclusion’ in the public discourse, and what this book refers to as *Function 1* of organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs). On the other hand, it refers to the inclusion of universities into the organisational field in which they operate: what is overlooked in the public discourse, and what this book theorises as *Function 2* of OCIs. Thus ‘inclusion’ is utilised in its broadest sense: as the state of being included within a structure. When referring to the inclusion of individuals, the structure is the HE sector, and when referring to the inclusion of universities, the structure refers to the organisational field in which they operate.

The ‘Walk’—Including People in Universities

There is no sole perspective of approaching the *walk* towards inclusion in higher education. Much consideration has been given to individual experiences, often explored from a qualitative lens. Higher education studies investigate the multiplicity of salient identities (Harris & Patton, 2018; Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Showunmi, 2020), from a perspective that problematises whether identity descriptors accurately represent individuals for whom multiple layers of disadvantage apply (Crenshaw, 1989). In organisational, legal, and psychological scholarships, the focus is on stigmatised social identities (Beatty & Kirby, 2006; McLaughlin et al., 2004), implicit biases (Fiske & Krieger, 2013; Greenwald & Krieger, 2006), and microaggressions (Midgette & Mulvey, 2024; Sue et al., 2007). Approaching inclusion from the angle of individual experience has the merit of challenging what meaningful inclusion looks like.

However, in order to map inclusion at the institutional and system levels, one must operate with predefined criteria for classifying vulnerable and underrepresented groups, usually prescribed by policy makers and practitioners in different national contexts (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). For example, the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is an important source of data for quantitative studies on inclusion in the UK HE, and a major data source used in this book. The demographic grouping used by HESA in data collection enables us to trace the 'walk' of inclusion across demographic characteristics highlighted by UK's equality legislation, including, but not limited to, gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Quantitative studies can be used to track demographic patterns across substantive dimensions such as: who participates in higher education (Stoet & Geary, 2020); who is admitted among those that apply (Boliver, 2013); trends in educational attainment (Van de Werfhorst, 2019) and graduation outcomes (Lažetić, 2020). This enables researchers to assess inclusion structurally, i.e., in relation to the trends and patterns that are applicable across the university sector and in which individual-level experiences are embedded. For example, some studies look at the probabilities of individuals from varied demographic groups to pursue higher education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2020). Others assess demographic changes in absolute numbers or alternatively, in the participation of specific socio-economic groups in HE relative to others and/or relative to the spread of the group in the general population (Orr et al., 2011; Usher & Cervenán, 2005). Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2020) note that differences between operationalisations reflect distinct theoretical perspectives and analytical angles. Participation measured in absolute numbers is based on the *inclusion perspective* which is concerned with 'the significance of improvement in participation of any particular group, irrespective of how other groups have fared' (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 146). Participation in relative numbers or the proportional distribution of study places is based on the *fairness perspective* which involves ensuring that social circumstances linked with belonging to a specific demographic group do not prevent one from achieving their educational potential (Santiago et al., 2008). Quantitative investigations can be used to map inclusion at the meso- and macro-levels, i.e., the demographic makeup of higher education institutions (HEIs) and/or of HE systems, as well as the micro-level, i.e., attitudes and behaviours of people seeking higher education or studying or being employed by HEIs.

This book is concerned with the former. Inclusion statistics across the UK university sector will be used to capture changes in demographic groups prioritised by UK's equality legislation and by inclusion-oriented charters and schemes. The 'walk' of inclusion will be measured based on absolute and relative changes in the number of students and staff from historically underrepresented backgrounds in respect to gender, ethnicity, and disability, and students from low-participation neighbourhoods, in the early 2000s. With a quantitative lens, the 'walk' will be treated as a *structural issue*, i.e., in terms of the demographic makeup of the university sector, which ultimately shapes the way in which individuals experience these institutions. Importantly, in addition to developing indices for the 'walk', in respect to the inclusion of people in universities, in Chapter 4 the 'talk' will also be measured, i.e., whether and to what extent inclusion-oriented commitments (such as references to equality legislation and to equality charters) are articulated by universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations. In Chapter 5, multivariate regression analyses will be used to determine whether the inclusion-oriented 'talk' drives change at the demographic level, specifically among the historically underrepresented students and staff targeted by commitments.

The 'Talk'—Including Universities into the Organisational Field

Universities talk about inclusion more than ever before. The 'talk' can take the form of institutional statements, strategic plans, memberships in inclusion-oriented schemes, or even the presence of a webpage or physical brochure dedicated to inclusion, equality, and diversity (IE&D). Universities also 'talk' inclusion by developing inclusion-oriented offices and organisational sub-divisions and by hiring human resources to do 'diversity work' (Baltaru, 2020). The 'talk' is viewed as a prerequisite for the 'walk', i.e., organisational commitments set the institution on a path to change at the structural level (Pathik, 2021). The burning issue when it comes to organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) is whether they do what they say they do. Instances where OCIs have failed to bring about meaningful change are increasingly discussed. For example, Ahmed (2006) argues that organisational commitments 'work precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name' (p. 105). This understanding provides a much-needed angle into why organisational commitments may fail to deliver inclusion. However, it also risks locking the debate into a

cul-de-sac, whereby OCIs are bound not to work because of them being inherently ‘non-performative’.

This book puts forward an alternative way of seeing the ‘talk’, in the hope that this will generate a more productive way of exploring the interdependencies between commitments and change at the structural level. We shall not see universities’ inclusion-oriented ‘talk’ as being solely about including people into universities. Instead, this book argues that the ‘talk’ is *simultaneously* concerned with a different type of inclusion, i.e., that of the institution (in this case, the university) into the organisational field in which it operates. A university that signals its commitment to diversify its demographic becomes attuned to inclusion as a culturally desirable societal goal and as a result it consolidates legitimacy and reputation among other universities, institutions, and organisations that it interacts with. To the extent to which inclusion, as a normative goal, and organisational proactiveness, as a model of institutional actorhood, are valued in society (the new institutionalist argument, see Chapter 3), a university that fails to declare its commitment to inclusion isolates itself. This is why in the scenario of a university openly opposing inclusion, one may expect decreasing student enrolments, challenges to receive funding from the government or from third parties, and the loss of connections with other universities.

The idea that institutions adapt to their external environments has been developed in sociological and institutionalist research. Applied to higher education, this perspective suggests that universities expand and diversify in line with societal pressures. The adoption of access and equity policies can be used to differentiate between higher education institutions at the horizontal level (Teichler, 2007; see also Birnbaum, 1988). The reasons why inclusion-oriented policies become increasingly popular among universities may be indicative of organisational isomorphism in universities’ responses to changing societal expectations regarding what universities should be about. Universities may be coerced to change, but they may also follow a normative standard or merely copy each other (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Scholars working in the sociological institutionalist tradition suggest that the transformation of universities into formal organisations makes them attuned to the norms and values shared by other organisations in their environment (Baltaru, 2020; Krücken, 2011).

This book will interrogate whether organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) can deliver meaningful change at the structural demographic level. Whether OCIs work or not will no longer be a rhetorical question, nor constrained by a deterministic approach whereby OCIs are prone to fail. The conceptual framework that this book will develop and apply (the *two-way function* of organisational commitments) will inform two hypothesis: (a) that OCIs work at the structural level, to include people in universities (*Function 1*); and (b) that OCIs work at the institutional level, to facilitate the adaptation of universities to the organisational field in which they operate (*Function 2*). In Chapter 6, the perceived gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ will be revisited with a consideration for how these functions may nurture or inhibit each other, as the pursuit of inclusion in higher education will be discussed against universities’ own legitimacy needs.

‘INCLUSION’, ‘EQUALITY’, AND ‘DIVERSITY’—WHAT DO THE TERMS MEAN?

A web-census of UK universities’ inclusion-oriented web pages revealed that most universities utilise three terms in their inclusion-oriented web pages (‘inclusion’, ‘equality’, ‘diversity’), which are combined in various ways, e.g., ‘equality and diversity’, ‘equality and inclusion’, ‘inclusion and diversity’, ‘inclusion, equality and diversity’ (Baltaru, 2020). Indeed, the terms tend to be used interchangeably.

Providing textbook definitions for ‘inclusion’, ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ would be to assume that substantive differences between these keywords are purposefully highlighted by universities. Let us approach these terms as signifiers that snowballed through different periods of time. This approach does not lose sight of these terms’ transient meanings; instead, it draws attention to how distinct eras propelled different expectations to which universities had to adapt. Furthermore, while any discussion of inclusion, equality and diversity considers individuals and populations of individuals, it should not stop there. We must also take into account the unification and/or diversification of higher education institutions themselves, in other words, seeing the HE sector as a stratified population of organisations with their own needs of being included into a wider organisational field. This task goes back to the sociologists of institutions, who can develop and maintain a comprehensive understanding of inclusion that is not locked as merely a property of individuals.

Below I provide such an overview of ‘inclusion’, ‘equality’, and ‘diversity’ by: (a) considering the relationship between universities and society in historical perspective (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021); (b) accounting for the succession of various ‘managerial fashions’ to deal with discrimination and underrepresentation since the 1970s (Oswick & Noon, 2014); and (c) illustrating how these forces have been shaping UK’s higher education policy. A more elaborated overview of the historical periods and policy-oriented directions accompanying the popularity of each term is provided in Chapter 2 and in the first part of Chapter 3.

*‘Equality’ in the UK HE—From Anti-Elitism to Meritocracy
and Opportunity*

The normality of the university as a privilege of the few was challenged by the anti-elitist sentiment of the nineteenth century, buttressed, among others, by the expansion of elementary education and an aspiring bourgeoisie. In the early 1800s, universities of Oxford and Cambridge were mainly populated by wealthy White men and favoured Anglicans (Lund, 1978). Very few institutions got to be called ‘universities’, i.e., the ‘7 ancients’ across England, Scotland, and Ireland, and in the 1820s/1830s newer universities, such as University College London and University of Durham were established.¹ The notion of ‘equality’ became relevant to universities starting with the mid-1800s and up until 1950s, a period of ‘elite reconfiguration’ of higher education (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021). Equality meant breaking away from the demographic restrictions of the medieval universities, for example, by allowing Black students, women, and non-Anglicans study and graduate university degrees. Concomitantly, intellectual ‘merit’ could ‘abstract’ poorer pupils from their socio-economic conditions (E.S. [sic], 1974, p. 5). Anti-elitism was not only consequential for individuals, but also for universities. In the early 1900s, a wave of new ‘civic’ universities enlarged the elitist circle of the older ancient and pre-Victorian universities with new higher education providers. More industry-oriented (Sanderson, 1988), the newcomers represented a move away from the Oxbridge tradition (Dimitriou, 2023).

¹ When the term ‘1800s’ is used, I refer to the entire century (not only to the first ten years). Early ‘1800s’ means early in the nineteenth century. The notation is consistently applied (e.g., 1900s refers to the entire twentieth century).

Furthermore, in the mid-1900s, the British government concentrated on strengthening the social fabric of the post-war society by enhancing its economic competitiveness (Taylor, 2018) and welfare provisions (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021). The state-subsidisation of the costs of HE did not mean that everyone was supposed to have a university degree; in other words, the government did not pursue equality of outcome (Platt, 2019). The vision was that everyone should have the same *opportunity* to go to university if they were qualified to do it (Robbins Report, 1963). It was also expected that equal opportunity to access HE would widen the pool of skilled graduates required by the industry. This fell neatly into the government's plans to widen participation to HE and turn the sector into an 'engine of socio-economic development' (Robbins Report, 1963). By the 1960s, UK universities reached what many recall as the 'Golden Era' of higher education, where the government subsidised the costs of higher education in line with its commitment to equality of opportunity. Not only individuals were presented with the 'opportunity' to access higher education if they were qualified to do so. New institutions, notably the polytechnics, could join the sector and carve their own distinctive contribution to higher education without having to be universities (Morgan, 2018).

Key point: the term *equality* in the UK higher education has been historically associated with anti-elitism, meritocracy, and equality of opportunity. Anti-elitism widened both the demographics that could access higher education and the population of institutions making the HE sector.

'Diversity' in the UK HE—Tackling Anti-discrimination Throughout Financial Deregulation

In the second half of the twentieth century, HE policy documents started using the word 'diversity' in relation to widening participation but also when referring to their personnel. While this period can be broadly identified as a 'democratic reconfiguration' of higher education (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021), it should be noted that the meaning of diversity underwent an important shift from 'anti-discrimination' to 'diversity management'. Approaching diversity as an organisational attribute rather than a structural outcome has been subject to much criticism, some denouncing a shift away from social justice arguments to economic arguments (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Oswick & Noon, 2014).

In the United Kingdom, diversity was to be facilitated by the various anti-discrimination reforms, notably in relation to race and ethnicity (Race Relations Act[s] of 1965, 1968, 1976) and gender (Equal Pay Act, 1970; Sex Discrimination Act, 1975). This era was characterised by the problematisation of individual differences in line with concerns surrounding demographic representation as well as the tackling of institutional biases and broader societal and cultural barriers. In the Robbins Report, for example, the student population is discussed with reference to demographic attributes such as sex and age, while the academic freedom of the teaching personnel is defined in terms of ‘the absence of discriminatory treatment on grounds of race, sex, religion and politics’ (1963, p. 229). If in the 1800s universities started opening their doors following an anti-elitist principle, in the mid-1900s the democratisation of higher education followed an anti-discrimination rhetoric. With much of the anti-discrimination legislation being concentrated on employment rights, this new emphasis on diversity did not only concern students, but increasingly, university staff.

In late 1980s and early 1990s, HE policy also became preoccupied with the diversity of HE providers and their ‘opportunity to improve their efficiency and effectiveness’ (Jarratt Report, 1985, p. 16). The transferability of the notions of ‘diversity’ and ‘opportunity’ from the individual level to the institutional level speaks to a broader fusion between diversity and management. Diversity management found a fertile soil in the UK HE sector in the 1980s as UK’s universities were subject to financial cuts and managerial scrutiny. Once praised for widening participation, universities were now criticised for accepting too many students. The Jarratt Report of 1985 ironically remarked that this was ‘partly from a belief that they should afford a university education to as many qualified students as possible and partly to acquire some extra income in the form of additional tuition fees’ (p. 14). The preoccupation for equality shifted to the institutional level. For example, calls for ‘equality of status’ between academic and vocational qualifications in the name of institutional diversity (White Paper, 1991) contributed to polytechnics becoming universities (Further and HE Act, 1992).

From the 1990s, we witnessed the blending of diversity management with dominant political philosophies (Jewson & Mason, 1994). In the United States, diversity approaches were an alternative to affirmative action (AA) such as the use of ‘quotas’ (Summers, 1995). In the

United Kingdom, where AA has not been implemented (UK Government, 2023), a move away from state intervention was reflected in a gradual process of financial deregulation, i.e., universities started being allowed to charge and subsequently increase tuition fees. In the famous report recommending the introduction of tuition fees for all students, Lord Dearing (1997) painted a diminishing role of the state in the pursuit of equality of opportunity: ‘We, like Robbins, believe that higher education should promote greater equality of social and economic opportunity, although we recognise that much depends on the earlier stages of education’ (p. 79). On its first page, the report conveniently announced that its widening participation plans prioritise demographic characteristics other than socio-economic status: ‘provision of higher education should be expanded to allow for widening participation, particularly among women, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities’.

The ongoing concern with diversity was sustained from more than one direction. Although socio-economic concerns started ranking lower on the policy discourse, in the practitioner-oriented literature diversity was seen as economically beneficial for the organisation (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000). A diverse pool of input and skills was believed to enhance performance, enlarge customer bases and increase profits (Edelman et al., 2001). Being committed to diversity could itself become a reputational asset for the company, for example, by denoting social responsibility (Hartmann & Carmenate, 2021). At the same time, a concern to facilitate the access of disabled individuals to higher education emerged as a belated development in anti-discrimination legislation (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995). HE policy also started paying attention to mature students (Dearing, 1997; White Paper, 1991). Portrayed as being most aware of their personal development needs, mature students were often invoked when discussing diversity as a matter of managing student experience; universities had to have: ‘the ability to address the needs of mature students who may want a programme that incorporates elements of higher and further education at particular points of their career’ (Dearing Report, 1997, p. 22).

Key Point: the term *diversity* in the UK higher education has been historically embedded in social movements and anti-discrimination legislation, while being contemporaneous with the loosening of state regulation on the use of tuition fees.

*‘Inclusion’—Shifting Responsibility From the Government
to Universities*

The term ‘inclusion’ increased in popularity since the 1990s and continued to do so in the early 2000s (Oswick & Noon, 2014). In the practitioner-oriented literature, inclusion is described as expanding the ‘diversity’ approach with a focus on celebrating difference as an ‘asset’ (Okatta et al., 2024) and taking a proactive approach to managing diversity rather than merely complying to legal requirements (Oswick & Noon, 2014). The latter dimension, concerning organisational proactiveness, is well suited to describe the pursuit of inclusion in the UK universities at the turn of the millennium, when significant developments in higher education funding and equality legislation reinforced the idea that universities themselves should cater for diversity.

First, the government reduced its regulatory grasp by gradually lifting the caps on tuition fees (The Higher Education Act, 2004; White Paper, 2003, 2011). To charge higher tuition fees (up to £9,000), universities were expected to develop access agreements approved by the Office for Fair Access (Hubble & Bolton, 2018). The responsibility for inclusion symbolically shifted from the government onto universities, which had to take a more active role to ensure it (Baltaru, 2020). Second, new equality legislation placed statutory duties on public institutions (universities included), expecting them to develop institutional-level provisions against discrimination, the so-called ‘positive actions’, e.g., the Race Equality Duty of 2001; the Disability Duty of 2006; the Gender Equality Duty of 2007. This accentuated the expectation of proactiveness on behalf of universities. Third, the generalised Equality Duty of 2010 expanded the range of ‘protected characteristics’ to cover age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, and sexual orientation, highlighting the continuous significance of individual differences (*sans* socio-economic background) (see Equality Act, 2010, Section 149). The early 2000s also coincided with a growing awareness of globalisation in HE (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021). Not only were UK universities taking a ‘proactive’ approach to catering for inclusion, but ‘diversity’ was increasingly linked with excellence on the international scene. As Chavez and Weisinger said, ‘inclusion’ brought a shift from ‘managing diversity’ to managing ‘for diversity’, such that individual differences were valued ‘regardless of changing legal, demographic and economic conditions’ (2008, p. 337).

Key Point: the term *inclusion* in the UK higher education introduces an emphasis on organisational proactiveness, as universities ought to actively nurture diversity in the context of financial deregulation, competition between universities, and internationalisation.

THE USE OF THE TERM ‘INCLUSION’ IN THIS BOOK

The reader will note that the term ‘inclusion’ is used when referring to universities’ organisational commitments, i.e., we talk about *organisational commitments to inclusion* (OCIs) rather than to ‘equality’ or ‘diversity’. This choice was made as organisational commitments in universities have flourished especially over the last two decades. This is precisely when the term ‘inclusion’ become popular among practitioners (Oswick & Noon, 2014), while the emphasis on organisational proactiveness, which is specific to the ‘inclusion’-oriented approach, is well suited to describe the active role that UK universities have been taking in widening participation and tackling discrimination (Baltaru, 2020).

As argued earlier in this chapter, at the analytical level this book proposes a broader definition of inclusion. We need to understand not only what underpins the *inclusion of people* into universities, but also what underpins *the inclusion of universities* into the cultural and institutional environments of different historical eras. Perhaps an inclusive university would have struggled to survive in elitist and colonial societies where wealthy donors played an important role, just like today it is virtually impossible to find a university that would refuse to commit itself to inclusion and still preserve a good reputation. Furthermore, the cultural valorisation of diversity and difference has shaped not only individuals’ access to higher education, but also the access of new HE providers to the HE sector/quasi-market, the massification of HE in the UK being underpinned by an increase in the number of universities, including ex-polytechnics.

In addition to this broad conceptualisation of inclusion which enables us to analyse universities as evolving institutions as well as their changing student and staff demographic, this book will draw on a sociological institutionalist approach. It will consider the cultural and institutional environment in which universities have been developing inclusion-oriented organisational commitments: the cultural valorisation of equality and individual difference, and the expectation that universities should act as goal-oriented, formal organisations. An overview of policy developments

for the UK HE sector will be provided to shed light on the interdependency between culture and regulation, and the narratives employed to govern in culturally validated terms. For example, the concern with diversity was underpinned by anti-discrimination legislation, but the legislation itself developed in the context of essentialist assumptions about individual differences, borrowed from natural sciences (Litvin, 1997).

The meanings of ‘inclusion’, ‘equality’, and ‘diversity’ are transient and best understood in historical context. When talking about ‘inclusion organisation’ I refer to institutional transformations in relation to the inclusion of people in higher education, and in relation to the inclusion of universities into the institutional and organisational fields in which they operate. *Inclusion organisation* is a concept that will enable this investigation to cut through individual and institutional levels. From this angle, universities are *including* and being *included*. Understanding this dynamic can shed light on the paradoxes of inclusion in higher education, such as the gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’.

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CHAPTER 2

Inclusion Organisation in the UK Higher Education Sector

In order to understand the perceived dislocation between the ‘talk’ and ‘walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion, one must consider what has historically purveyed universities with uniqueness and legitimacy, and when did inclusion start becoming relevant for universities. Selectivity is deeply ingrained in universities and is consequential for the exclusion of individuals and groups of individuals from higher education (HE). Up until the mid-twentieth century, the UK universities have made demarcations between *who* can and who cannot access a university education, as well as *what* constitutes higher learning. Among the ancient English universities, some of the earliest anti-discriminatory directions, e.g., the dropping of admission criteria based on religion, are less than two centuries old. Furthermore, even when the student body became more socio-economically diverse, the differential allocation of prestige to classical subjects as opposed to applied subjects, maintained stratification within the system. University degrees from the newer ‘red brick universities’ were less prestigious than the degrees from the ancient, pre-Victorian universities (Godshaw Memel, 2017). Only by noting the appeal that ‘exclusion’ has had in universities for over a millennium can we embark into understanding the pursuit of inclusion over the last decades.

AT THE BEGINNING THERE WAS EXCLUSION

Selectivity is deeply ingrained in universities' pedigree. Universities like Oxford and Cambridge upheld the established social order by educating the future clergy and purveying the offspring of large landowners and country gentry with status (Hadingham, 2016). Through the nineteenth century graduates from the English universities would also become the elite to fuel the public services in Victorian society, while playing an important part in preserving the imperial legacy of Britain (Beloff, 1998). In the United Kingdom as well as in other European countries and in the United States, the student demographic was dominated by White men from socio-economically privileged strata. In England specifically, University of Oxford (where evidence of teaching existed since 1096), and University of Cambridge, founded in 1209, have monopolised the 'sector' until the early nineteenth century.¹ In the oldest English universities, a parallel can be drawn between the elitist approach to student recruitment and a curriculum focused on classics (at Oxford) and mathematics (at Cambridge) (Hadingham, 2016). Meanwhile, in the oldest Scottish universities (St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh), which harboured the model of the 'democratic intellectual', there was a progression from classical subjects to professional training in fields such as medicine or law (Dimitriou, 2023; Hadingham, 2016).

Selectivity in the UK universities, as in other universities around the world, was not solely concerned with intellectual ability. It was also enacted, be it formally or informally, along differences of socio-economic backgrounds, race, gender, and religion. Selectivity by intellectual ability is deeply embedded in the cultural heritage of universities. It is underpinned by long-standing ideas about the pursuit of knowledge as a 'faculty of the mind', which concerns, in its earliest Athenian versions, both science and virtues (Nybom, 2003). While selectivity by ability enjoys legitimacy up to this day in the form of 'entry standards', selectivity based on demographic background such as race and gender ceased to be practiced, and it is now illegal. To understand the cultural journey that universities underwent from 'exclusion' to 'inclusion', it is paramount to realise that the democratisation of higher education access is a relatively

¹ While the foundation date of the University of Oxford is unclear, on the official website of the organisation the first evidence of teaching is traced back to 1096 (University of Oxford, 2025).

recent development, at least in the universities who have been around for centuries.

Policies to widen access to university for people from poorer backgrounds and the abolition of discriminatory legislation and practices preventing women, non-Anglicans, and people of colour to graduate with a university degree materialised from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Under the 1871 Universities Tests Act, not only Anglicans, but also Roman Catholics, non-conformists, and non-Christians could take studentships, fellowships, and professorships, and occupy lay offices at the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham, while not being required to make a declaration of religious belief. The idea was that the three universities and the linked colleges would therefore become ‘freely accessible to the nation’ (1871, Chapter 26). The University of Cambridge records the first Black male graduate in the 1840s, and the first Black female is thought to have graduated in the 1940s around the time when women started being admitted as full members of the university (Black Cantabs Research Society, 2017). Comparable data are recorded for the University of Oxford, where the first Black male student left with a degree in the 1870s, while the first Black female student received a degree in the 1930s (St Hugh’s College University of Oxford, 2020; University of Oxford, 2017). The University of London was the first to allow women to sit the General Examination in 1868, and it was one decade later that women were admitted to a degree programme here (Carter, 2018). It was not until 1920 that women could be awarded degrees at the University of Oxford, and the late 1940s at the University of Cambridge (Cambridge University Libraries, 2025; University of Oxford, 2020). Fifty-one years earlier, a vote on women being conferred degrees at University of Cambridge had caused a riot (ibid., 2025).

Universities have been exclusive for longer than they have been inclusive. This was also reflected in the curriculum. The notion of ‘liberal arts’ was used to describe the curricula of mediaeval universities, i.e., the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (music, geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy) (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010). Rooted in the Latin *liberal artes*, the expression described a ‘free, unrestricted’ education reserved to the upper classes and to those holding full citizen rights; this was contrasted by Cicero with the ‘servile arts’ (Latin tr. *artes serviles*), i.e., mechanical and occupational skills, reserved to the lower classes (Lind, 2006; see also Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025). The Enlightenment provides another example of how anti-elitist movements

have implications for what is considered legitimate knowledge. Emphases on liberty and equality coincided with the challenging of Church elites and with an application of science and reason to social problems rather than theology, although the meanings of science and reason then do not directly translate now (Harrison, 2006).

This section recalled exclusionary dynamics in universities as a premise to understand the more recent pursuit of inclusion. By being selective, universities were integrated into the structures of elitist societies. But as society changes, so do universities.

THE EQUALITARIAN ‘WIND OF CHANGE’

Perhaps the exclusions that we have discussed throughout the 1800s are more visible precisely because of the anti-elitist ethos unfolding at the time. With socio-economic developments such as the abolition of slavery, the weakening power of the Church, the extension of the electoral franchise to previously excluded classes, and the movement of people from poorer rural places to industrialised cities, equality emerged as a desirable societal direction (E.S. [sic], 1974). This transition should be seen in the context of cultural and industrial developments starting at the dawn of the eighteenth century. Just as the French Revolution was linked with a shift of power from clergy, nobilities and oligarchies to peasant landowners and the bourgeoisie, and instituted the principle of equality before the law (Acemoglu et al., 2009), industrialisation has led to an increase in the working population in large cities (Williamson, 1990) and to socialist and communist political ideals highlighting equality and better employment conditions (Plekhanov, 1959).

Vanderstraeten and Biesta (2006) argue that from the mid-1700s, there was an increasing concern with the inclusion of people in education irrespective of social origins, a direction that becomes visible in the introduction of general school attendance directives in Prussia, Denmark, Spain, Argentina, and Scotland. This concern was underpinned by a philosophical shift from seeing education and social rank as naturally intertwined, to the Kantian view of the Enlightenment, that man could escape its ‘self-incurred tutelage’ (ibid., 2006, p. 163). Access to education became embedded into the equality ethos, in other words ‘education was the sure means of fitting human beings for the equality condition’ (E.S., 1974, p. 1). Concomitantly, through education governments could ‘initiate’ populations into a homogenous culture and citizenry. Mass-schooling

became a project of the nation state, as opposed to the legitimated class hierarchies of dynasties and empires (Ramirez, 1997).

In England, school attendance became obligatory between the ages of five and ten following the Education Act of 1880 (building on the Education Act of 1870), thus around the same time as universities started to confer degrees to non-Anglicans and people of colour and to allow women to sit general examinations, as outlined earlier in this chapter. The state played an important role in advancing social reforms in both compulsory schooling and higher education. The Education Act was also meant to stop child labour, as recommended by the 1876 Royal Commission on the Factory Acts. New funding from the state to universities (in addition to the existing funds universities sought from endowments, fees, businesses, and donors) could be used to support talented youth from modest social backgrounds, especially in the ‘civic’ university colleges which did not share the same wealth as Oxbridge. In the nineteenth century more English universities were founded, such as the University of Durham (in 1832) and the University of London (founded in 1836) and the first ‘red brick’/civic universities built in the main industrial cities from the late nineteenth century well into the mid-1900s (incl. Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester). Before the so-called ‘academic drift’, the orientation of these newer universities was to blend scientific research and professional training towards serving regional economic needs and opening access (Barnes, 1996).² According to Anderson (2016) from the 1880s local authorities started providing university scholarships, in addition to the scholarships and bursaries already offered by some universities, making ‘equality of opportunity’ a ‘political aspiration’ (p. 1). English universities were ‘catching up’ with their Scottish counterparts, in Scotland efforts to make HE affordable being made earlier via a combination of state grants and low fees (Robertson, 1976).

Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century access to higher education remained the privilege of the few. In addition to economic barriers and exclusionary practices surrounding who could get a university degree, pre-university educational arrangements contributed to this prolonged stratification. In the 1860s, the Schools Inquiry Commission (SIC) recommended that pupils from

² Barnes (1996) defines ‘academic drift’ as ‘a process whereby newer and/or second-rank institutions copy the curriculum and academic style of elite institutions’ (p. 1). In the case of the UK, this refers to the newer ‘civic’ universities copying the Oxbridge model.

higher socio-economic classes be allocated to study classical subjects up until the age of 18, while pupils from lower-middle classes studied applied subjects up until the age of 14 (Godshaw Memel, 2017). Because classical subjects were more prestigious compared to the applied subjects, the offspring of people from higher socio-economic classes were prepared for a university education while others were effectively moved away from it. The Crowther Report of 1959 noted that out of the 4,200 undergraduate students at Oxbridge in 1894, only about 2% came from public elementary schools which served the wider population. The structural barriers to a university education experienced in the Victorian era famously inspired Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the obscure*, which narrates the failure of a stonemason to become a scholar despite his desire 'to accumulate ideas, and impart them with others' (1895/1998, p. 398; see also Godshaw Memel 2017). As the Crowther Report remarked 'the door was not closed on a poor boy of talent, but it was not open very far' (1959, p. 11).

This section has shown that with the anti-elitist sentiment of the 1800s 'exclusion' started losing legitimacy as an organising principle. Selectivity continued to purvey status to universities, but it slowly became unacceptable for universities to (at least formally) select their students and staff based on criteria other than intellectual ability. The gradual increase in state funding in the early 1900s and the emergence of new 'civic' universities would further catalyse expectations to widen both the student demographic and the curriculum, towards a higher education more responsive to the perceived socio-economic needs of the nation.

INCLUSION ORGANISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

This section provides an overview of selected policy documents that have shaped the governance of HE in the United Kingdom. The aim is to track 'inclusion organisation' as a phenomenon consolidated over three waves of post-WW2 governmental reforms: (a) the 1960s conceptualisation of higher education as a 'sector' of public interest, whereby including people into a common culture and 'social citizenship' became part of universities' purpose; (b) the 1980s–1990s tensions between ambitions to widen participation and the gradual replacement of state funding with income from tuition fees, accompanied by the expansion of the HE sector with ex-polytechnics and the strengthening of universities' managerial bone; (c) the early 2000s intensification of market-oriented reforms and the

shifting of ‘inclusion’ from being a responsibility of the state (maintained through substantial state subsidies and capping of tuition fees) to a responsibility diffused across individual universities and third-party organisations, thus subject to their organisational capacities and strategic actions.

Elements that will later come to define ‘inclusion organisation’ are most visible in the policy rhetoric with regards to what universities are for, i.e., whether ‘inclusion’ is portrayed among the aims of higher education, and how they should be run, i.e., whether higher education can be planned and ‘organised’ as a system. After WW2, and especially since the 1960s, we witnessed a growing relevance of ‘inclusion’ in the UK HE, *culturally*, as something to be expected in a ‘democratic’ nation state, and *structurally*, in relation to a much-invoked ‘demand’ for HE. One also notes an increasing concern with ‘organisation’, whereby formal instrumental action is upheld as a golden standard, and a purported structural need for accommodating larger and more diverse student and staff populations in the policy rationale. I will show how, by the early 2000s, ‘inclusion’, as higher education purpose, and (formal) ‘organisation’, as an approach to social action, established a fully-fledged arena of ‘inclusion organisation’ within and across universities. This is the arena in which the inclusion-oriented ‘walk’ and ‘talk’ have been evolving.

Post-WW2 and the Beginnings of Inclusion Organisation

In the early 1960s, the rate of participation in HE in the United Kingdom was approximately 6% and one of the lowest in the OECD (Wyness, 2010). According to a survey of 21 years olds born in 1940/1, only 3% of the children whose fathers worked in manual occupations, including skilled and semi-skilled occupations, reached full-time (degree-level) higher education, compared to 50% of the surveyed youth whose fathers worked in non-manual occupations (Robbins Report, 1963). Women’s participation rate in (all) higher education in Great Britain as of 1962, as percentage of the age group entering higher education, was 7.9% compared to 22.4% for men (ibid., 1963). While in the 1880s, the government’s contribution to financing universities was limited (isolated treasury grants in England and in Wales) (Anderson, 2016), by the 1960s, the government covered the bill for higher education (Wyness, 2010). As participation in higher education was growing globally (Schofer & Meyer, 2005) and many OECD countries were outperforming the United

Kingdom in this respect (Barr & Crawford, 2005), the government drove the expansion and organisation of universities as a unified HE sector of national relevance.

The establishment of the University Grants Committee (UGC) in 1919 marked an important step in the formalisation of financial support from the state to universities, and towards an ‘internally consistent’ national policy in this regard (Berdahl, 1959, p. 48). Four decades later, a coherent system of grants was organised (The Anderson Report, 1960) and local education authorities in the United Kingdom were mandated to pay for the tuition fees of full-time students who started their first-degree university course (or a comparable degree) and to support them with maintenance grants (The Education Act, 1962). The flexibility of the ‘block grants’ allocated via the UGC ensured that universities were not giving up their autonomy in exchange for state funding. This was a privilege that ancient universities such as Oxford and Cambridge were accustomed too, their large endowments and fees paid by wealthy students shielding them from state intervention. Anderson (2016) notes that the allocation of state funding in ‘block grants’ was reassuring as it reinforced the position of the UGC as a ‘buffer’ zone between the Treasury and the universities: ‘Its members were academics sympathetic to university values, and they allowed the universities a high degree of autonomy, giving them “block grants” to spend without detailed control’ (p. 1).

I argue that the growing slice of university funding coming from the state has propelled two ways of thinking about HE that universities will have to adjust to. First, a renewed interest in the *purpose of universities*, with the expectation that this purpose should align with the national interest (as articulated by the government). Second, the idea of a *consolidated HE sector*, propped by higher education reviews and policies with a national reach, which made universities pliable to standardised planning and organisation (see also Berdahl, 1959). These two ways of thinking about HE evolved into key exponents of ‘inclusion organisation’, as follows:

- (1) Defining the purpose of higher education enabled the *articulation of ‘inclusion’* among its aims, justified by the ‘national interest’.

- (2) Portraying universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) as a consolidated HE sector made them subject to *organisation and planning*, justified by the receipt of state funding.
- (3) The purpose of HE, in relation to the ‘national interest’, and the financial means to achieve it (notably, state subsidies), drove inclusion-oriented organisational change in HE, following a *rationalised* fusion between means and purpose.

Inclusion—An Attribute of HE Purpose, Justified by the National Interest

After WW2 there was a renewed interest in the purpose of higher education. Of course, this is not to say that up until that point universities did not serve a known purpose. Their societal role was implied as a by-product of the broader pursuit of knowledge and truth. Although in the nineteenth century, men educated at Oxbridge would end up occupying high status occupations as politicians, clergymen, and increasingly, civil servants, the production of highly skilled employees was not a formal purpose of universities. A university education was not important for all types of skilled work, for example, the professions had their own regulations in order to determine admissions (Dimitriou, 2023). With a liberal rather than theological education, universities shaped their students into ‘culturally rounded’ citizens, a vision famously outlined in John Henry Newman’s ‘idea of a university’ (Newman, 1891; see also Bara, 2015). The ability of a university degree to purvey social status increased the appeal of higher education to those looking to establish themselves in the ranks of the gentry, such as the sons of the wealthy factory owners. If one was already enjoying a high social status by virtue of being born into the aristocracy, then a university education was desirable but not sought to the same extent. Indeed, many British prime ministers did not go to university (that includes Winston Churchill) (Churchill, 1930), and it was not until 1970 that a British Monarch, Charles III, achieved a university degree (Bhardwa, 2023).

The new universities, especially the ‘civic’ universities of the early 1900s, aimed to serve the diverse middle-class powered by the expansion of industrialised cities, and meet the practical, mechanical, and artistic needs of manufacturers (Shattock, 2002). The purpose of these universities was more directly linked to national socio-economic progress and by the 1960s this function will become attributed to the higher education

sector as a whole. Consider the four higher education aims proposed by the Robbins Committee, which was appointed to evaluate the need of expansion in the sector and to develop a plan for universities (Robbins Report, 1963). The first aim was the instruction of graduates into the labour market, while the historical role of universities in nurturing ‘the general powers of the mind’ was relocated as a second, ‘background’ aim that ought not to be forgotten (1963, p. 6). The third aim was the advancement of learning, and the fourth aim was to pass over ‘a common culture and common standards of citizenship’ (p. 6). Just as schools have been doing, the committee argued higher education institutions too should educate individuals into ‘a background of culture and social habit’, as a way of ensuring a ‘healthy society’ (ibidem).

Inclusion, worded in the Robbins Report as ‘equality of opportunity’, fell under the umbrella of this fourth aim of higher education. The formalisation of inclusion as an institutional ‘goal’ was therefore afforded by the committee’s exercise of ‘breaking down’ the purpose of higher education. Interestingly, the preoccupation with inclusion is cited as an external cultural tide ‘this function, important at all times, is perhaps especially important in an age that has set for itself the ideal of equality of opportunity’ (Robbins Report, 1963, p. 6). Its enactment is articulated in terms of demographic, socio-economic inclusion ‘providing places for students from all classes’, along a vaguely defined ambition of ‘providing, in the atmosphere of the institutions in which students live and work, influences that in some measure compensate for any inequalities of home background’ (ibidem). Perhaps this ‘ideal of the equality of opportunity’ alluded to the utilitarian flair and regional commitment of the new universities, and to the technical colleges which could supply the industry with more highly skilled workers, often coming from modest backgrounds. The braiding of inclusion into the economic narrative is also reflected in how national interest was defined in the Robbins Report: *first*, as a structural demographic pressure, stemming from the extension of educational opportunity in schools, and a desire and demand for higher education among the young people; *second*, as an economic principle whereby national development depends ‘upon the education of its population’ (ibid., 1963, p. 5).

The policy-narrative emphasising the purported reliance of the country’s economy on its educated population was rather surprising, given that the participation rate in HE was only about 5% pre-1963 (Wyness, 2010). It may also raise eyebrows that the report portrayed

educational opportunity as a matter of cultural and social standards of citizenship (Robbins Report, 1963, p. 7), despite the previously outlined economic imperative. These inconsistencies unveil gaps in the functionalist narrative of policy development. If higher education had not been a main driver of economic development up to that point, then why was it portrayed so? If the widening of educational opportunity was valuable as an economic imperative, then why was it presented as a desire to mainstream a common culture and standards of citizenship? Such gaps in the functionalist narrative can be filled by a sociological institutionalist perspective which considers the role of culture (Ramirez, 1997), in this case the global reimagining of higher education as an engine to national progress and socio-economic development, especially after the WW2 (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Chapter 3 will explore this theoretical perspective in greater detail.

Organisation—An Attribute of the HE System, Justified by State Funding

Post-WW2 HE reforms in the United Kingdom increasingly referred to a consolidated ‘higher education system’. This contrasts with the fragmented organisation of universities and colleges at the time. Some universities had large private endowments, e.g., the ancient universities, others received state funding from the start, e.g., the ‘plate glass’ universities, or relied on insecure subsidies from local industries, e.g., the new ‘civic’ universities (Anderson, 2016). The demographics served by universities also varied, e.g., ancient universities were educating predominantly wealthy students, while ‘civic’ universities were founded based on the distinct principle of democratising access to higher education. The type of education provided also differed greatly. On the one end, technical colleges, which did not have university status until the 1960s, taught practical subjects, while on the other end, ancient universities distinguished themselves with a ‘non-utilitarian’ general education emphasising the broader development of the mind and character (Brock & Curthoys, 2000; Dimitriou, 2023).

Talking about a ‘HE system’ was something new, even for the Robbins Commission which was asked to advise the government on the long-term development of full-time higher education in Britain, in other words, to think of a unified system of higher education. The Committee noted that ‘it would be a misnomer to speak of a system of higher education in

this country, if by system is meant a consciously coordinated organisation' (1963, p. 4). The idea of a unified higher education sector was barely forming, and so was the notion that such a collection of universities and colleges would yield themselves to centralised planning and more generally, to 'organisation'. Written at a point in time when the strengthening of organisational agency (in this case, on the behalf of the higher education sector) was not taken for granted as a self-explanatory and 'obvious' direction, the Robbins Committee notes that: 'there are many types of social activity where the absence of co-ordinating [sic] mechanism other than the framework of the law is not a disadvantage' and that 'the absence of a plan for everything is not necessarily an indication of chaos' (1963, p. 5). We shall return to this point later in the book, as we will question the appeal of purposive organisational action in the context of inclusion-oriented organisational commitments.

This section showed that the growing dependency of universities on state grants and the purported role of higher education in driving national development have enabled an unprecedented direction to centrally plan and organise the envisioned HE 'sector'. The pressing 'national interest' invoked by policy documents and the growth in state funding provided a fruitful avenue for reimagining higher education. This transition is epitomised by the following statement made in the Robbins Report: 'higher education is so obviously and rightly of great public concern, and so large a proportion of its finance is provided in one way or another from the public purse, that it is difficult to defend the continued absence of co-ordinating principles and of a general conception of objectives' (1963, p. 5).

Organising Universities into the Market—From 1980 to 1990s

From the 1960s, the bill for HE was mainly covered by the state, through a combination of UGC recurrent grants and state sponsored tuition fees. This was a 'golden era' for socio-economic inclusion, as the paywall between a university education and the individuals that had the credentials and desire to pursue it was crumbling. It was believed that the nation would benefit from its investment through the social and economic development fostered by research and a highly educated, tax-paying workforce. In addition, by becoming the main source of funding for higher education institutions, the government was able to plan the fully-fledged HE system centrally. State control was seen as benign. Access to HE became fairer:

from 1961, universities were required to organise admission procedures whereby all students were treated equally, while the allocation of state funding in block grants by the UGC allowed universities to decide how they spent the finances (Anderson, 2016). Inclusion in terms of ‘equality of opportunity’ was praised as a public good, even if universities were not generally seen as part of the welfare state (Soysal & Baltaru, 2021). They were broadly defined as charities and ‘independent self-governing bodies with a large degree of constitutional autonomy’ (Jarratt Report, 1985, p. 8; see also Synge, 2023).

This formula started being challenged in the 1970s. The dependency on state funding, accentuated by a presumed lack of incentive on the behalf of universities to nurture links with the local communities and the industry, made them vulnerable to economic challenges, or indeed, to the way in which governments handled economic crises. By the late 1980s, participation in higher education stalled at around 15%, and from 1963 to 1982, the real value of maintenance grants for students decreased by almost 20%, an issue exacerbated by the growing number of students (Wyness, 2010). Following the early 1980s recession, public spending became increasingly scrutinised. In the university arena, the Thatcher government introduced performance-based mechanisms for allocating research funding, known as the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) (Deer, 2004). In July 1981, universities faced funding cuts averaging 17% over the university system and the UGC attempted to restrict student numbers in order to maintain the unit of resource/grant per student (Jarratt Report, 1985, pp. 10, 14). From 1979/80 to 1984/85, there was an average reduction in student numbers of 5% across the system (ibid.).

Despite these pressures, the government did not drop its ambitions to expand the HE sector. With the saddles afforded by the post-WW2 HE reforms, it drove universities towards a new direction. This path was characterised by deregulation surrounding the use of tuition fees, mainstreaming of university status to other HEIs, and the strengthening of universities’ managerial backbone. In the following subsections, I take a closer look at these changes and at how the pursuit of inclusion was transformed as a result.

Implementing Tuition Fees

In the early 1980s, tuition fees started being charged from international students on a ‘full-cost’ basis (Williams, 1984). Less than a decade

later, the government's White Paper on Student Loans considered loans as a means through which students across the board could financially contribute to the cost of their maintenance grants (Barr, 1989 in Barr, 2012). The White Paper was followed by the First Student Loan Scheme in 1990, which split the cost of student maintenance as 50% grant and 50% student loan. Student loans were payable in a mortgage style and managed by the newly created Student Loans Company (SLC) which was run by the Treasury (Wyness, 2010).

The idea that universities could draw on funding from their students aligned with a broader trend of diversification in the funding of public services in Anglo-Saxon countries as part of the 1980s New Public Management (NPM) reforms (Christensen, 2011). In 1998 means-tested tuition fees of up to £1,000 were introduced for the first time in Britain for all home and EU students, under the Labour Government headed by Tony Blair, with the rationale that 'the only other immediate source of resources, apart from the taxpayer, is the parents of students' (Dearing Report, 1997, p. 368; see also Lewis et al., 2014). The public purse for HE was further tightened by cutting and ultimately abolishing student grants, a move that went against the recommendation of the Dearing Report (Wyness, 2010). Indeed, the report maintained that 'the various beneficiaries of higher education should share its costs, and public subsidies should be distributed equitably so that individuals are not denied access to higher education through lack of financial means' (Dearing Report, 1997, p. 85).

The introduction of tuition fees was highly controversial. Many feared that the organisation of HE in market lines was incompatible with the widening participation principle famously stated in the Robbins Report, namely that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (1963, p. 8; see also Brown & Carasso, 2013). Research on HE participation up until 2001 would show that after the introduction of tuition fees there was little change in the proportion of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, but income contingent loans were recommended as a way of supporting prospective students from low-income backgrounds (Greenaway & Haynes, 2003). Scotland, able to make its laws in devolved areas as a result of the 1997 Referendum, opted to abolish upfront tuition fees for the Scottish and EU students and re-introduce grants for the poorest students shortly after the devolution

(Cubie, 1999; Wyness, 2010). Scotland became famous for maintaining higher education as a ‘public good’ (Campbell, 2020).

Expanding the University Sector with Ex-polytechnics

While tuition fees represented a potential barrier for socio-economically disadvantaged students to apply to university, plans to expand the higher education sector did not cease. Policies started being concerned with which HEIs counted as universities and what demographic groups, other than low-income students, should be encouraged to participate in higher education.

The higher education sector was further expanded by the abolition of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities. Under the Further and Higher Education Act (FHEA) of 1992, over thirty polytechnics across England, Scotland, and Wales were granted university status (Brennan & Williams, 2008). The White Paper of 1991, which laid down plans for ‘a new framework’ for higher education, quoted the growing participation rate in higher education up to that time and an aspiration for ‘moving towards the year 2000 and beyond’ with the vision of expanding access to higher education (p. 4). The abolition of the binary divide between polytechnics and universities was driven by a desire to include mature students, bringing a new angle to widening participation, i.e., across the age range, as distinct from the traditional concern with widening participation across the socio-economic strata. As the White Paper claimed: ‘More mature students than young people now enter part-time and full-time courses in higher education each year. Higher education is more accessible to people from all sections of society’ (White Paper, 1991, p. 8).

While the FHEA of 1992 had called for more quality assurance in the unified HE system, symptoms of a two-tiered system were present, with the students graduating from prestigious and research-intensive universities getting a higher return from their degrees compared to students graduating from the so-called ‘post-1992 universities’ (Pigden & Garford Moore, 2018). Thus, it is arguable whether students enrolling at universities that were ex-polytechnics benefited from the same quality of education and the same status of having a ‘university degree’ as students enrolled at historically established universities.

The expansion of the university sector with ex-polytechnics encouraged a higher education that would equip graduates with the applied skills

required in the labour market, an attribute traditionally attached to vocational courses, such as those offered by the polytechnics formed between 1969 and 1973 (Emms, 2022). This means that students entering the post-1992 universities, notably students from less privileged social strata compared to the student demographic in elite universities, were included in a HE system more geared towards the ‘needs’ of the economy. However, one could also say that these students were directed, once more, away from the prestigious ‘generalist’ forms of education specific to the ‘ancient’ universities (Brock & Curthoys, 2000, see also Dimitriou, 2023).

Strengthening Universities’ Managerial Backbone

We have seen how the growing role of the state in funding universities enabled the (re)organisation of higher education as a sector of national interest. The subsequent funding diversification, which started in the early 1980s with the introduction of tuition fees for international students on a ‘full-cost’ basis, could be read as a process of deregulation but also as a ‘re-regulation’ of universities as accountable organisations with managerial capacities.

The Jarratt Report of 1985 was commissioned to coordinate a range of studies which ‘properly concentrated on the internal efficiency of the universities’ (p. 13). The report noted that in the mid-1980s, universities had a large degree of constitutional autonomy. In most cases their autonomy and framework of operation was outlined and guaranteed by a Charter and Statutes, with fewer universities having their position incorporated in an act of parliament. University duties, as outlined in the Charter, were divided between the governing body with financial and employment responsibilities, i.e., the Council (‘Court’ in Scotland), and the body responsible for academic matters, i.e., the Senate. The traditional division between the Council and the Senate in the governing of individual universities was highlighted in the Jarratt Report as something ‘not familiar to senior managers in industry or even in local authorities and civil service departments’ (1985, p. 8). It was argued that in times of financial constraint one may expect more friction between the Council and the Senate, especially as universities were dependent on state funds, for example, via the UGC, income from the fees of home students, and from the Research Councils. Quoting the principle of Parliamentary accountability for public money, the Jarratt Report spelled out the premise for the (re)organisation of the higher education sector: ‘the State,

through Government and Parliament, requires to know whether universities manage these funds well and whether they provide good value for money' (1985, p. 8/9).

This renewed interest in how universities were managed resembled public sector reforms in other Anglo-Saxon countries, as part of the new way of organising public services (Hood, 1991). Aligning with the New Public Management (NPM), the Jarratt Report proposed more strategic planning in HE. The committee was concerned that the objectives and aims of universities were articulated 'only in very broad terms' and that there was little allocation of funding based on performance criteria (Jarratt Report, 1985 p. 17). Performance-based funding allocation, a key feature of the NPM, ranked high in the Jarratt Report. The committee recommended the development of performance indicators 'covering both inputs and outputs', which would not only be used internally by universities but also for comparing them (*ibid.*, 1985, p. 36). One year later, the allocation of research funding in the United Kingdom was made based on performance criteria via the RAE. The mechanism was replaced by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014 and continues to shape the distribution of research funding in the present.

Among the challenges to management quoted by the Jarratt Report were the range of academic activity (for instance, the number of academic departments), the presence of professional 'loyalties' as opposed to membership to the university organisation, and the 'tradition of self-government' (*ibid.*, 1985, p. 9/10). With an instrumental ethos, the Jarratt Report stood in contrast with the perceived values of the academic profession, another controversial feature of the NPM in higher education (Christensen, 2011).

Managing Inclusion as 'Volume' and 'Difference'—Organisation and Diversification

What have financial deregulation, expansion and managerialism meant for the pursuit of inclusion in the UK HE? Throughout the 1980s/1990s reforms, the traditional purpose of widening access to people from socio-economically disadvantaged strata became subject to discursive ambiguity and contradictory financial policy.

Ensuring the expansion of the HE sector by introducing tuition fees appeared paradoxical given the possibility that fees could deter youth from the most disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to apply for a university degree. However, this was no longer the only 'type' of inclusion

at stake. The Dearing Report (1997) proposed a more comprehensive consideration of widening participation across a varied range of attributes (notably sex, ethnicity, and disability), aligning with a wider shift in the conceptualisation of equality from ‘redistribution’ to ‘recognition’ in the late twentieth century (Fraser, 1995).

The expanding higher education sector provided a rationale for universities: (a) to be (re)organised, i.e., towards greater planning, accountability, and efficiency and (b) to become themselves organisers or ‘caterers’ of the diversified student bodies (see also Baltaru, 2019). Inclusion became abstracted from the struggles of individuals into a consideration of ‘volume’ and ‘difference’ that universities ought to deal with at the organisational level. This transition is evident in how the purpose of universities has been worded in the Jarratt Report compared to the Robbins Report two decades earlier. Then the ‘objectives’ of universities had been directly concerned with learning and purveying a ‘common culture’ and ‘standards of citizenship’, while the Jarratt Report proclaimed, in an indirect fashion, that ‘the primary function of a university is *the attainment* of these objectives’ (1985, p. 10). Being in universities’ purpose to cater for their functions is not merely an indirect form of speech; it reflects the instrumental ethos of management. Not surprisingly, ‘student support’ and responsiveness to ‘employment needs’ became frequently quoted in HE policy papers (Dearing Report, 1997).

The consideration of inclusion as ‘volume’ transpired in cross-national metaphors of a society transformed by the *massification* of higher education, in the UK’s ambition, towards a participation rate of 50% for those aged 18–30 years old (HE White Paper, 2003, p. 33). The ‘learning society’ that the Dearing Report envisioned for the UK in the late 1990s was paralleled, in the European Council planning for HE, by the ‘knowledge-based economy’ metaphor (Lisbon Strategy, 2000). The late 1990s/early 2000s developments in UK’s higher education policy have been underpinned by the awareness that universities ought to adapt to an increasingly globalised field of collaborators and competitors (Robertson, 2010).

To understand the inclusion of people from varied social groups in universities, one should not overlook the transformations undergone by universities in their own quest to survive financially and maintain reputation. At the turn of the millennium, HE was expected ‘to adapt to the needs of a rapidly changing world’ (Dearing Report, 1997, p. 11).

*Inclusion as the Responsibility of Universities—‘Agentic Inclusion’
in the Early 2000s*

From the 1960s and through the 1980s, we witnessed the framing of higher education purpose as a matter of ‘national interest’ and changes of its funding mechanism, initially towards state-subsidisation, and then away from it. The aim of widening participation was caught in-between contradictory logics, as a condition for national development, yet vulnerable to budgetary cuts and financial deregulation. By the end of the century universities could charge tuition fees, while being expected to become better at managing their finances, students, and personnel and to deliver on their broader societal functions. These directions, I argue, have transformed the pursuit of inclusion in the early 2000s into a fully-fledged domain of ‘inclusion organisation’: the growing reliance of universities on tuition fees and the transformation of ‘inclusion’ from a governmental concern into a goal that ought to be pursued by universities themselves through self-management and strategic planning.

The Higher Education Act (HEA) of 2004 introduced variable tuition fees up to £3,000 per year, with effect from 2006/07. The rationale for the increase in tuition fees three times over the previous level was to financially sustain the continuous expansion of the HE sector (White Paper, 2003). In a market-oriented fashion, the HE system was described as a national ‘asset’ (ibid., 2003, p. 4). However, it is the Browne Review of 2010 that will remain, in the UK’s recent history, as the hallmark of marketisation of higher education. The review recommended removing the cap on tuition fees, which at that point was £3,290 (ibid., 2010, see also Porter, 2020). One year later, the White Paper entitled ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ welcomed the proposal with the argument that the private benefit an individual gets from accessing higher education is more than the public benefit (2011). In the White Paper’s words, this was seen as a way of positioning students ‘at the heart of the system’, but many criticised the reduction of ‘students’ to ‘customers’ (Molesworth et al., 2011; Tomlinson, 2016). In 2012, a majority of universities raised tuition fees up to the new maximum of £9,000 (Hubble & Bolton, 2018). The commodification of HE from a ‘public good’ to a ‘private benefit’ was subject to much criticism from scholars and from the civic society (Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Collini, 2012). Students have been placed ‘at the heart of the system’ despite their protests (Mulholland, 2012).

The government's desire to expand the HE sector did not come to a halt. Measures have been proposed to make it easier for new HE providers to join the HE 'market' (HE Green Paper, 2015; White Paper, 2016). The Higher Education and Research Act of 2017 established the Office for Students (OfS) to regulate and facilitate the expansion of the university sector with new providers. Two years later, the entire 'post-18 education' came under the policy radar. The Augar Review proposed expanding vocational education in England and moving away from 'low value degrees' (2019, p. 10). In the Consultation Response of July 2023, plans were laid out to provide new employer-approved Higher Technical Qualifications, incentivised by a Lifelong Loan Entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education that individuals can use as they develop their careers. The technical-oriented provision would serve socio-economically deprived students in particular: 'we know students from a disadvantaged background already make up a large proportion of Level 4 and 5 students and anticipate that reforms to improve the flexibility and attractiveness of such provision will help more disadvantaged students to access high-quality Level 4 and 5 courses' (ibid., 2023, p. 8). The Consultation Response also outlined an intention to limit the fees that can be charged by foundation year courses. This would redirect students that are not well-equipped for university degrees to other forms of HE such as apprenticeships and limit the number of students that can be recruited towards degrees of 'questionable value' in terms of employability, industry relevance, and retention rates. Of course, it is unclear whether these benefits can be equated with the opportunities that a university degree, especially one from an established, prestigious university, can afford. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, it is that generalist forms of education that have been historically reserved for the few (consider the earlier, 'liberal arts' curriculum), while youth from modest backgrounds have been historically routed to applied forms of education.

The government continued to proclaim its concern with inclusion, notably in relation to demographic characteristics protected by the equality legislation (Equality Act 2010). Independent regulators, professional associations, and charities took the role of monitoring and assessing universities' strategies for widening participation and their compliance with equality provisions, for instance, the Office for Fair Access or the Equality Challenge Unit. As the meaning of 'widening participation' has itself widened to include criteria beyond socio-economic disadvantage (in particular, legally 'protected characteristics' such as gender, ethnicity, and

disability), responsibility for inclusion moved away from the state across universities and third-party organisations. The braiding of the ‘recognitional’ turn in the pursuit of equality (Fraser, 1995, see also Fraser & Honneth, 2003) with the gradual retreat of the state from its steering (Baltaru, 2020) is contemporaneous with the deregulation of tuition fees, i.e., their implementation and subsequent lifting of the previously imposed caps, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

The possibility of HEIs to raise tuition fees up to £3,000 (HEA, 2004) was accompanied by two important developments which illustrate the delegation of responsibility for inclusion to external agencies as opposed to inclusion being an integral concern of financial regulation of the higher education sector. First, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) led by the Director of Fair Access was established in England. The role of this structure (formally, an independent, non-departmental, public body) was to foster the share of students from low-income groups, for instance, by not allowing HEIs to raise their fees above the standard level if they did not submit a compelling ‘access agreement’, i.e., a document where the university outlined its plans for safeguarding and promoting fair access (OFFA, 2004; see also Office for Fair Access, 2025). In other words, with loosened regulation on tuition fees, responsibility for widening participation to socio-economically disadvantaged students was shifted from the state to individual universities, OFFA acting as an independent regulator and mediator. Upon the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017, OFFA’s functions were incorporated into an agency which was not part of the government department but was invested with regulatory powers across the HE sector: the Office for Students (OfS). Second, three years after the introduction of tuition fees, in 2001, the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) was founded ‘to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK’, its core work being with higher education institutions (HEFCE, 2013, p. 1). Financed by key funding councils across the UK (the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], the Department for Employment and Learning [DEL] Northern Ireland, the Scottish Funding Council [SFC] and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [HEFCW]), in addition to Universities UK and GuildHE, ECU supported equality and diversity across both staff and students (ibid., 2013).

Formally a charitable company (Register of Charities, 2025a), ECU has enabled a systematic approach to universities' organisational commitments to inclusion. In 2005, it founded the Athena Swan, ECU's first equality charter used to support and recognise commitments to inclusion across the HE sector on a specific issue. Athena Swan was originally aimed at nurturing and supporting organisational commitments on behalf of higher education institutions to advance the careers of women in STEMM subjects, i.e., science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (Advance HE, 2019a). In 2014, the Race Equality Charter (REC) was trialled, and officially launched in 2016 (Advance HE, 2019b). An Athena Swan or REC membership makes it possible for HEIs to apply for an award in recognition of their inclusion-oriented commitments. Compelling submissions are required from HEIs based on self-assessments, where the applicants outline current equality progress and plans to foster inclusion (Advance HE, 2025). Just like the 'access agreements' of the OFFA, equality charters symbolically designate inclusion as the responsibility of individual universities, i.e., inclusion is framed as the object of institutional commitments and strategic planning. Unlike OFFA, ECU (now Advance) HE does not operate at arm's length from ministers, and charter submissions are on a voluntary basis (Advance HE, 2019b). An initiative that put into question the voluntary character of charter submissions is now closed, namely the controversial requirement for academic departments to hold at least an Athena Swan Silver award in order to apply for funding from the National Institute for Health and Research (Advance HE, 2020). In 2018, ECU was formally assimilated into a new body with charity status, Advance HE, along the Higher Education Academy and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (Advance HE, 2018; Register of Charities, 2025b).

Up until the time of writing this book, the equality charters have been continued by the Advance HE and the engagement of universities expected and scrutinised in the media (Rowse, 2024). As I will show in Chapter 4, a variety of other governmental schemes, companies, and charities have been catalysing universities' commitments to specific inclusion-oriented causes. Universities find themselves in a fully-fledged inclusion-oriented organisational field, composed of the government (via the equality legislation), independent regulators, designated charities, and equality schemes. Pressing expectations of equality have been institutionalised in higher education through almost two centuries of reform. Now

universities are expected to play a proactive role in catering for inclusion, equality, and diversity. As I have previously argued, this signals a paradigm shift from inclusion as a structural concern subject to centralised regulation of the HE sector, to ‘agentic inclusion’, i.e., which valorises universities’ own agency in the pursuit of inclusion (Baltaru, 2020).

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

This chapter has provided a chronological and policy-oriented overview of the pursuit of inclusion in the UK higher education. The overview provides the contextual basis for understanding the perceived dislocation between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in universities’ commitments to inclusion, an issue that will be theorised in Chapter 3, explored empirically in Chapters 4 and 5, and discussed and concluded in Chapter 6.

Figure 2.1 synthesises the arguments made in this chapter.

For centuries, a university education was provided by a handful of ‘ancient universities’ (Wyness, 2010). In the early 1800s, universities were ‘selective’ based on criteria that went beyond just intellectual ability: these included gender and religious orientation, notwithstanding the socio-cultural and economic barriers faced by minority ethnic students and students from poorer backgrounds. Universities were ‘exclusive’, and this character uniquely positioned them to sort the offspring of elites back

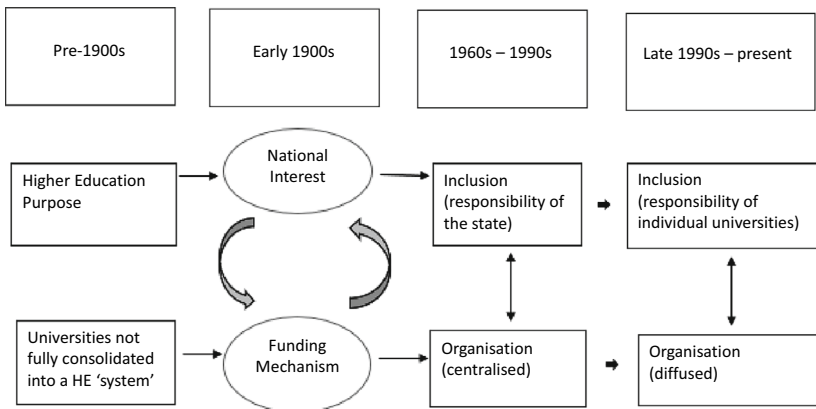


Fig. 2.1 Key epochs of inclusion and organisation in the UK universities

into privileged social strata. The equality-oriented reforms implemented in the 1800s, and the early 1900s reflected a reconsideration of HE purpose. If the paramount aim of universities is the pursuit of knowledge, then admissions should be made based on intellectual merit alone. Against the backdrop of the social reforms of the Victorian era, the significance of the university as a nationally important institution started taking shape. In the early 1900s, a fragmented collection of universities was planned as a nationally meaningful sector of activity (the ‘HE sector’). This transition was facilitated by the post-WW2 concerns with strengthening national development and the growing share of state funding into universities. Widening participation in higher education was one of the ways through which universities could help progress the nation. This may be seen as the first systemic, organised pursuit of inclusion in HE for which the government took direct responsibility by increasingly footing the bill for higher education. Starting from the 1980s (but especially from the 1990s onwards), this model was challenged financially and politically, culminating with the introduction of tuition fees and universities being gradually allowed to charge more. Throughout financial deregulation, the responsibility for inclusion shifted away from the government to individual universities, as mediated by a diffused network of independent public bodies (OFFA, OfS), charities (ECU, Advance HE), and numerous other companies monitoring and assessing universities’ commitments to inclusion.

In our journey of uncovering the apparent dislocation between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in the pursuit of inclusion, three lessons ought to be carried forward: (a) inclusion has not always been a concern of universities; (b) the inclusion of people in universities depends on factors beyond just universities’ own commitments, from the availability of state subsidies to prior educational resources; (c) currently universities are operating in an organisational environment that places value on their proactive commitment to inclusion.

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The Two-Way Function of Organisational Commitments

Do universities' organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) work?

When attempting to answer this question one must deal with contrasting propositions put forward by early scholars of institutions and by their successors. The latter saw institutions increasingly like 'organisations', a theoretical distinction that yields different empirical expectations compared to the earlier institutionalist insights. Sociology's new institutionalists highlight the role of the cultural environment in the emergence of organisational commitments, enabling us to move beyond those functionalist predicaments widely spread in the policy discourse, namely that commitments enable institutions to effectively reach their goals via instrumental action.

This chapter aims to develop an institutionalist conceptual framework that can be used to anticipate a diverse set of empirical realities when it comes to whether and how organisational commitments work. With this, the conceptual prerequisites for guiding the empirical analyses in the subsequent chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) will be set. The framework I propose, i.e. *the two-way function* of organisational commitments, achieves this purpose by: (a) conceptualising the idea of function from a phenomenological and social constructivist angle specific to new institutionalism and also found in some of the early sociological functionalist arguments (this will apply to what I call *Function 2* of organisational commitments); (b) recycling early institutionalist arguments in order to compensate for the limitation of new institutionalist theory in anticipating

that organisational commitments may also work for their designated purpose (this will apply to what I call *Function 1* of organisational commitments).

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I develop a characterisation of organisational commitments from early and new institutionalist perspectives. I adopt the widely spread, nevertheless crude distinction between early institutionalist (functionalist, or so-called ‘rationalist’) theories and new institutionalist approaches (especially sociology’s new institutionalism) (Finnemore, 1996). Early and new institutionalist insights are differentiated in relation to the following key issues: the external environment of organisations, the degree of individuality and purposiveness attributed to the organisation and to its personnel, and the usage of the term ‘organisation’, i.e., from denoting a corporate unit to describing an institutionalised set of practices and a model of institutional identity. Second, I propose *the two-way function* of organisational commitments. This conceptual framework articulates how formal instrumental approaches to inclusion ‘work’ from an early institutionalist angle, i.e., as effective ways of pursuing demographic inclusion (*Function 1*) and from combined early and new institutionalist sociological angles, i.e., as purveyors of legitimacy for universities within an external cultural environment that valorises formalisation and rationalisation (*Function 2*). I argue that early sociological conceptualisations of ‘function’ à la R Merton combined with the social constructivist perspective outlined by P Berger enable *the two-way function* to bridge sociological functionalism and new institutionalism, i.e., by imagining function as an artifact of a system of shared representation, as opposed to naturalizing any given social arrangements. For example, where universities are expected to actively pursue societal goals, and to the extent to which inclusion is culturally valued, inclusionary commitments acquire a *role* in consolidating university reputation, but this ‘function’ is culturally-bound. Finally, I note the conceptual challenge of considering the role of organisational commitments in aligning organisations with the external cultural environment without organisational purposiveness (be it in the form of ‘adaptation strategy’ or ‘hypocrisy’) being an essential premise to the argument.

* * *

Philip Selznick, one of the first scholars adopting a sociological approach to study organisations, worked with a definition of the organisation as ‘the arrangement of personnel for facilitating the accomplishment of some agreed purpose’ (Gaus et al., 1936, in Selznick, 1948, p. 25; see also Selznick, 1949). Personnel structuring and goal-orientation had been widely discussed features of organisation by economists and by sociologists who studied organisation in state bureaucracies (Weber, 1905/1930; Parsons, 1960; see also Aspers, 1999 for an overview of Alfred Marshall). Early institutionalists such as T. Parsons argued that what an organisation aims to accomplish differentiates it from another meso-level entity, thus integrating it into a system: ‘the output of the organization (e.g., a class of goods or service) is for some other systems, an input’ (1960, p. 17). In a structuralist functionalist fashion, *commitments* may enable an organisation to carve itself a space among other organisations.

Universities can be seen as goal-oriented meso-level units dwelling in macro-level institutional systems. What universities ‘are for’ ranges from the fundamental teaching and research functions to the more recent expectations that they should contribute to socio-economic development, an umbrella where the pursuit of inclusion falls (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).¹ Whether goals are achieved by an organisation, and how efficiently they are achieved in relation to the available resources, was seen by early institutionalists as depending on the internal structure of the organisation (especially its personnel) and on factors external to the organisation, for instance, ‘the price mechanism’ in economics (Coase, 1937; see also Selznick, 1948). In other words, organisational commitments are determined by the way in which an organisation calibrates its internal needs and capabilities to the external constraints and opportunities it identifies, such that it places itself in an optimal position to accomplish its goals.² More recently, however, scholars have questioned the degree to which commitments correspond to the internal needs and practices of institutions turned into ‘strategic organisations’. They begged a reconsideration of the role of external cultural factors

¹ By virtue of their social goals, universities operate within the institutional domain of education and intersect with organisations in other institutional domains such as the economy.

² For example, firms may decide to maximise their boundaries and get help from other companies that could do a cheaper and better job in delivering activities linked to specific (usually marginal) commitments (Coase, 1937; see also Stinchcombe, 1997).

in making collective entities (from firms to institutions) more similar to each other as they become formally organised, and considered the possibility that formal organisational actions are ritualistic as opposed to being functionally driven by the negotiation of internal needs and external pressures.³

Let us explore these two perspectives by unwrapping the way in which early institutionalist scholars conceptualised the *environment* of organisations and the relationship between organisations and their environment, then compare it with how it was done by new institutionalists (Meyer et al., 2009) and other ‘kindred’ scholars of organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 2023; Scott, 1991). Such a comprehensive understanding of organisational commitments is key to anticipating how they might work in institutional settings generally, and in the pursuit of inclusion in universities particularly.

THE ROLE OF THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT: EARLY AND NEW INSTITUTIONALIST VIEWS

Early institutionalist research paints the environment of organisations to be composed of institutions, as macro-level social and cultural formations, and the institutional domains they enable. Organisations operate in one or more institutional domains. Each sub-system has its own ‘forms of social coordination’, referred to by sociologists as generalised, symbolic media of exchange, and/or communication (Luhmann, 1997; Parsons, 1963; Parsons & Smelser, 1956) notwithstanding differences in the way in which the concept is used by various thinkers (Chernilo, 2003). For example, according to Parsons, ‘value-commitments’ is the medium of interchange of the fiduciary system, inhabitants of this system including churches and education institutions. While media are culturally infused (with their own norms, codes, and value principles) they travel through and reinforce structurally embedded conduits (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011). As a result, one may observe the contouring of institutional autonomies, e.g., law as distinct from religion, segmentation,

³ In his attempt to defend organisational commitments from the new institutionalist remark that they are ‘ritualistic’ (a point I shall elaborate later in this chapter), Stinchcombe insists that “contracts in the market come to be legitimate by the way they are constituted, by the mutual belief of the contracting parties that each is committed to the line of action promised in the contracts” (1997, p. 4).

stratification, and different modes of integration within and between institutional domains (ibid., 2011).

How do organisations relate to this culturally and structurally differentiated institutional environment according to the early institutionalists? Organisations are moulded by institutions, as the latter shape ‘the creations and functions of units in the market and the relations between them’ (Stinchcombe, 1997, p. 2). First, the old institutionalist school emphasises the *individuality* of the unit. Cultural heritage, human and financial resources, and organisational goals are calibrated in unique ways that make an organisation different from another. The institutions that make up the environment of organisations are themselves driven by unique combinations of institutional needs and ascribed societal goals and while they do interact within institutional domains, their uniqueness should not be underestimated (for instance, the moral values and norms each institution guards and reproduces) (Krueger, 2017). Second, the structural functionalist imaginary of organisations and of institutions interacting is based on a chain of *purposive action*: every organisation and institution seeks to thrive (or at least to survive), a premise which has been accepted as a ‘natural’ state of facts (see the evolutionary approach of J. Turner). Within thriving organisations are nested *thriving individuals*, with goals and motifs that may or may not align with those of the organisation (Selznick, 1948). Third, the interaction between these differentiated and purposive units and their environment is expected to foster *divergence* (Kraatz & Zajac, 1996). Organisational form, from size and outputs to commitments (if articulated at all), is an expression of how environmental influences have been edited onto the organisation’s internal structure and pedigree.

In the 1970s, scholars seeking to understand organisations started shifting their attention away from the internal characteristics of the organisations to the characteristics of their environments (Scott, 2008). The new institutionalists placed a larger weight on the role of the environment in explaining organisational transformations than the earlier institutionalists. Except for the new institutional economics, scholars across the new institutionalist wave were not convinced by the agency of organisations and the agency of the individuals populating them. In political studies, they ‘deemphasised the simple primacy of micro-level processes and efficient histories’ (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 738), and among historians this school of thought brought a friendly reminder that while individuals do not always follow the rule, neither can they be assumed to be

‘simply strategic actors who use rules to maximise their interest’ (Steinmo, 2012, p. 126). New institutionalists also conceptualised the environment differently than their predecessors. The nature of the macro-level domain(s) in which organisations were embedded no longer laid in the characteristics of the institutions populating these domains. The interest now revolved around the rules underpinning the interactions between and within institutions and organisations, as in the contexts of markets and other networks (Abrutyn and Turner 2011; see also Fligstein, 1996; Powell, 1999).

Within sociology’s ‘new’ institutionalism, also known as ‘sociological institutionalism’, and primarily represented by the Stanford School and the World Society Theory advanced by J. W. Meyer and R. L. Jepperson (Meyer et al., 2009), the distinction between institution and organisation becomes blurred. Two societal developments, especially pronounced after the WW2, have eroded this boundary: (a) the ideological emphasis on individual’s capacity of organising and being able to control its surroundings, in tandem with the heightened concern for individual empowerment (Frank et al., 1995); (b) the rules of interaction between meso- and macro-level increasingly following principles specific to organisations, such as rationalisation, purposiveness, and proactiveness (Finnemore, 1996). From a World Society theoretical perspective, institutions across the board, e.g., educational institutions, government institutions, needless to say, the institutions activating within the economic domain, increasingly behave like organisations. The university too has transformed from an institution with a taken for granted purpose into an ‘integrated, goal-oriented, and competitive entity in which management and leadership play an ever more important role’ (Krücken, 2011, p. 1; see also Krücken & Meier, 2006). Universities began to formalise their previously implicit societal contributions (e.g., drafting mission statements and strategic plans) and become ‘organisational actors’ (Krücken & Meier, 2006). This is a development also observed in hospitals, old-style family firms, recreational programs, traditional charities, and even religious congregations (Meyer & Bromley, 2014). In sociological institutionalist terminology the concept of *organisation* denotes more than the classic meso-level unit (e.g., the firm). It is also a principle of interaction, and it epitomises rational actorhood as a model of institutional identity and purpose, buttressed by a growing body of cross-national experts (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Meyer et al., 1997).

The institutionalisms of the late twentieth century see the importance of the environment in terms of its *pressures*, among others, cultural norms and ideologies (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and rules dictated by the polity and the law (Edelman & Schuman, 1997) (see Scott [2008] or Powell and DiMaggio [2023] for an overview). In their 1983 revisit of the Weberian ‘iron cage’ (1905/1930), DiMaggio and Powell argue that a specific form of rationality (‘collective rationality’) is harboured by growing interrelation, mutual awareness, and ultimately structuration of organisations into organisational fields. The early institutionalist notion of ‘institutional field’ was replaced by the ‘organisational field’: ‘organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services or products’ (1983, p. 148). Environmental pressures could be effectively reduced to pressures of *organisation*. As later on in this chapter, I will draw on both early and new institutionalist insights in order to anticipate a wider set of possibilities for how organisational commitments work, it is important that we consider how the two institutionalisms can communicate with each other, notwithstanding their differences.

Take DiMaggio and Powell’s seminal work on the common characteristics of organisational fields (1983; see also Scott, 1991). While being used in a research programme of its own (Powell & DiMaggio, 2023), the notion of ‘collective rationality’ expanded the same terrain as the sociological new institutionalist scholarship did: the expectation that institutions will become more like each other (i.e., more ‘isomorphic’) as they follow rationalised forms of organisation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In early institutionalist terms, one could describe ‘collective rationality’ as merely a cultural property of institutional domains. Organisations adapt to external norms and values as they become integrated within an institutional domain (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Selznick, 1948; Thompson, 1967). Ideologies that traverse institutional domains, the so-called ‘meta-ideologies’, are reflective of symbolic media (e.g., science) being adopted by socio-economic and political systems (for instance, capitalism) as these systems seek to expand (Abrutyn & Turner, 2011).⁴ One may also consider technical environmental pressures that boost the popularity of

⁴ Abrutyn and Turner (2011) argue that institutional isomorphism can be traced to various modes of integration between and within institutional domains and the meso-level

certain symbolic media as opposed to others, e.g., technological developments mainstreaming the application of scientific principles in the organisation of social life. New institutionalists have sought to counter these arguments with cross-national empirical analyses showing that ‘the world was being bureaucratized and organized much faster than it was being developed economically and technologically’ (Finnemore, 1996, p. 329; see also Meyer & Michael, 1979), along compelling arguments about the global diffusion of cultural models (Meyer, 2000; Soysal, 2012; Szakács-Behling, 2018).

Moreover, new institutionalists expect organisations to be shaped by their environment, and so do the early institutionalists; however the emphasis of the new school falls on the (cultural) institutional environment rather than on its technical dimensions (Orru et al., 1991). Organisations become embedded into organisational fields glued by the ideologies of science, progress (in terms of socio-economic development) and democracy (in terms of individual empowerment and human rights) (Finnemore, 1996; Frank et al., 1995; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Thomas et al., 1987). Distinct institutions turned organisations are pushed towards greater standardisation as they compete, copy, and coerce each other (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Historical or resource differences between organisations (important to the early institutionalists) play a diminishing role in the processes and structures of organisations according to the new institutionalists. Within the new institutionalist perspective, a company’s personnel is of little consequence to organisational transformation. Individuals are thought to mirror their cultural environment. One can no longer speak about ‘agency’ but rather ‘actorhood’. In a paradoxical fashion, individuals within organisations perform agentic and rationalistic scripts, e.g., the ‘rational’, ‘self-driven’ company manager assessing the environment for opportunities and threats. Attempts by individuals to change the organisation often result in greater similarity between the organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The interaction between environmentally embedded units (that includes, organisations) fosters isomorphism and not divergence, as proposed by the early institutionalists. For example, major trends of structural and cultural homogeneity documented in higher education include: the massification

units populating them. Organisations might develop similar features because of socio-structural interdependencies along the lines of exchange, domination, boundary overlap, and so on.

of higher education (Schofer & Meyer, 2005, see also Meyer et al., 1992), the strengthening of the administrative and managerial bodies (Baltaru & Soysal, 2017), mass participation in rankings and league tables (Soysal et al., 2022; see also Hazelkorn & Mihut, 2021), and formalisation of university missions (Baltaru, 2019, 2020; Kwak et al., 2019; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Krücken et al., 2013). Indeed, the new institutionalists have positioned themselves against atomistic and rational-choice accounts underpinning early institutionalist arguments (Heugens & Lander, 2009).

Organisational Commitments From an Institutional Perspective

The different way in which new institutionalist scholars conceptualise organisations and their relationship to the environment compared to the early institutionalists has direct implications for what organisational commitments are and how they work. Because the internal attributes of the organisation are thought to have minimal impact on its subsequent transformation compared to the influence of the (cultural) environment, for the new institutionalists organisational commitments are mere reflections of external scripts. They are not moulded after the internal needs of the organisation, and they do not define what a particular organisation is about. Organisational commitments are forms *without* content.⁵ They emerge in isomorphic fashion as organisations adopt the same action scripts and values irrespective of their differences.

When saying that organisational commitments are reflective of external cultural scripts, I first of all refer to the fundamental cultural expectation that an entity (a firm, an association, an educational institution) ought to formally articulate previously taken for granted societal roles. For example, universities had been able to carry out their social functions without spelling them for centuries, but today it is almost impossible to imagine a university who lacks formally articulated commitments. Commitments—in Selznick's terminology, 'common goals' a meso-level entity ought to have in order to be classed as an 'organisation', become

⁵ The metaphor is borrowed from the 'theory of forms without content' developed as a critical commentary to the import of Western-inspired models (institutions, cultural practices, etc.) in nineteenth century Romania which were dissociated from the actual socio-cultural foundation of the country (Maiorescu, 1868 in Roghină, 2020).

expected from entities across the board, from private companies to professional associations, pushing them all into ‘organisation’ as a model of institutional identity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Isomorphism can apply at multiple levels: not only to the form of commitments, i.e., *formally articulated* commitments vs implied commitments, but also to their *object*, i.e., what commitments are formally oriented to. In new institutionalist terms, isomorphism is indicative of commitment ‘ritualisation’ (ibid., 1977). The early institutionalist equivalent can be found in Selznick’s sociological view of ‘institutionalisation’: ‘to institutionalize is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand’ (1957, p. 17).

Furthermore, we are faced with the question of whether organisational commitments reflect the *activity* of an organisation, as distinct from its internal needs we already considered. From an early institutionalist perspective this is the fundamental premise that ensures the coherence of an organisation: commitments bind together its personnel and justify its internal structure and *raison d’être*. This is especially relevant to established institutions, such as the university or the health system; the broader societal commitments of these institutions are fundamentally and uniquely linked with the professions inhabiting them, as opposed to, say, private firms or organisations created to serve time-bounded interests.

Early institutionalists were not foreign to the possibility that an organisation may not follow on its commitments, but this possibility was seen as a hazard of opportunism on the behalf of an organisation’s personnel, or more generally put, the product of a mismatch between the commitments of the organisation and the actions, motifs, or capabilities of the individuals inhabiting it (Selznick, 1948). Meanwhile, new institutionalists conceptualise decoupling between organisational commitments and the internal activity structure in terms of incongruence between the action scripts adopted from the external environment and the way in which the organisation has been operating prior to the adoption of that action script (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For example, a university might develop a ‘transfer office’ as part of its commitment to facilitate knowledge transfer from academia to the industry, but knowledge transfer may instead happen via informal networks built over a long time rather than via the transfer office (Krücken, 2011). Decoupling between form and the activity structure is likely in organisations with historical roots and consolidated traditions, for instance, where newly added commitments conflict with the values of professional allegiances (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, see also Hall, 1968). It can also occur in the cases where organisations

Table 3.1 Organisational commitments in early and new institutionalist perspectives

	(A) <i>Early institutionalist</i>	(B) <i>New institutionalist</i>
Proposition 1	Organisational commitments are the ends towards which an organisation gears its internal activity	Organisational commitments are the ends towards which an organisation <i>presents</i> its internal activity as being geared to
Proposition 2	Organisational commitments differentiate an organisation from another (especially in the case of established institutions) Exception: where the object of commitment acts as a generalised symbolic medium that transgresses institutional fields	Organisational commitments make an organisation more similar to another
Proposition 3	Organisational commitments are driven by the internal attributes of the organisation and by the external environment in which it operates	Organisational commitments are driven by the external environment in which the organisation operates

lack the financial resources to implement their commitments (Baltaru, 2020). But most importantly, as an organisational practice spreads, the chances of it being coupled with the structural attributes of the organisation naturally decrease (the same organisational practice is adopted by an increasingly heterogeneous collection of organisations).

Table 3.1 summarises the different insights provided by early and new institutionalist theory when it comes to conceptualising organisational commitments.

THE TWO-WAY FUNCTION OF ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENTS

Do organisational commitments work? Early and new institutionalist perspectives present us with some different and some overlapping possibilities about the roles that commitments might play in organisations. The former, distinct possibilities, stem from the different conceptualisations of organisational commitments (Table 3.1, Propositions 1 to 3).

The latter, overlapping possibilities, stem from the pliability of early institutional arguments (specifically, arguments pointing to environmental integration and institutionalisation) to explain similarity in organisational outputs, something that new institutionalists have been drawing attention to (see Table 3.1, Proposition 2B and the *Exception* to Proposition 2A). In this section, I will: (a) review the distinct possibilities brought by early and new institutionalist perspectives and use them to formulate *Function 1* of organisational commitments, as well as outline scenarios where this function might not be accomplished; (b) review the overlapping possibilities presented by early and new institutionalist arguments and calibrate them into what I will call *Function 2* of organisational commitments.

Let us exemplify each of these possibilities by referring to the case study and question that this book is concerned with, i.e., whether universities' organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) work (see Chapters 1 and 2 for an overview inclusion organisation in the UK higher education sector).

The early institutionalist perspective is conducive to the expectation that organisational commitments work. First, if commitments are 'ends' towards which an organisation gears its activity (see Table 3.1, Proposition 1A) then the object of the commitment is prioritised and resourced. More resources facilitate the organisation's ability to achieve that which it has committed itself to. Second, because organisational commitments are partly determined by the internal attributes of the organisation, such as resource availability and its cultural pedigree (see Table 3.1, Proposition 3A), the very presence of a formally articulated commitment should indicate some level of fusion between the values and resources of the organisation and what the organisation commits itself to. Third, a commitment that has been formalised has become subject to rational-instrumental action on the behalf of the organisation. This is possibly the strongest assumption of rationalistic models of action such as those underpinning early institutionalist scholarship: that rational-instrumental action is the most effective way of achieving set goals and also the most efficient in terms of resources used (Finnemore, 1996). Even Max Weber, who provided us with the healthy reminder that rational-instrumental action is only one type of social action (as distinct from social actions based on tradition, emotion, or duty) (1947), admired rational-instrumental action. Analysing the organisational expression of rational-instrumental action in the context of bureaucracy, Weber pointed out bureaucracy's 'technical superiority over any other form of organization' and its

‘precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs’ (Weber, 1921/1968, p. 973).

I hereby formulate the first function of organisational commitments: that of achieving their designated purpose. According to their formal commitments, universities aspire to be places where everyone, irrespective of socio-economic and cultural background, can work and study. We may articulate the first function of organisational commitments as follows:

Function 1 (The People-Centred Function): *Organisational commitments to inclusion work to include people in universities, i.e., demographic inclusion among students and staff.*

Function 1 is of direct interest to practitioners and to a vast majority of scholars. The functional and rationalistic model underpinning early institutionalist thought has been a building block in policy making and has driven social scientific research that sets itself to assess and to critically evaluate organisational policies for what they ought to achieve. Universities embrace organisational commitments to inclusion without questioning whether they work or not (Baltaru, 2020). Policy-oriented research identifies universities that have had a better experience with their formally articulated organisational commitments to inclusion than others (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2018). When doing so, policy evaluations rely on an early institutionalist premise, namely that attributes internal to the organisation, from its inner culture to its personnel, play a role in whether organisational commitments work. For example, Selznick (1948) conceptualised the failure of organisations to achieve their goals as a gap between ‘the formal system’, which is made up of pressures originating in the institutional environment (in our case, think of a university being pressed to become inclusive) and ‘the action system’, as the structural element made out of individuals whose mindsets may or may not align with the formal system.

Functionalist assumptions also underpin a growing body of theoretical, qualitative, and process-oriented research, sometimes referred to as the ‘critical’ study of inclusion, equality and diversity. This perspective proposes that by developing organisational commitments to inclusion, universities appear as if they are doing something about it without actually doing it, in other words, commitments ‘work’ precisely because they are non-performative (Ahmed, 2006). Organisational commitments afford universities a way out of tackling the social inequalities harboured

within their walls, as in the now epitomic example of the predominantly White university displaying inclusion-oriented commitments and so avoiding meaningful discussions about racism. These studies portray the organisation as purposive and rational, i.e., effectively rational within its culturally bounded, discriminatory framework. In other words, they are critical in relation to the values and/or the intention of organisations (the cultural and political elements) but not in relation to how organisations work (whether organisations are driven by the convictions of individuals inside them, which may be inconsistent with environmental demands of inclusion, or by broader isomorphic processes such as mimicking or coercion across organisational fields). The early institutionalist idea that an organisation's conduct (that includes, its formal commitments) is functionally determined by the internal attributes of the organisation has been increasingly challenged.

The new institutionalist alternative views formal structures as a product of conformity (rather than agency) and ceremony (rather than reason) (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), a cultural angle that is becoming increasingly useful for scholars seeking to understand the limitations of purposive organisational action (Keith, 2001). This might not apply to the first adopters of a given organisational practice, but as more organisations follow, the practice in question becomes appealing because of its cultural value rather than its suitability. For example, some of the first universities publishing an equality and diversity statement may have attracted students and staff from underrepresented backgrounds to a greater extent than all other universities. However, as equality and diversity statements become adopted by a growing fraction of universities, they may no longer correlate with diversity at the demographic level. This is partly because having an equality and diversity statement becomes what universities ought to do: 'as an innovation spreads, a threshold is reached beyond which adoption provides legitimacy rather than improved performance' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Indeed, a recent study of five hundred universities around the world discovered that almost half of the universities under investigation had established diversity offices, the proportion being the highest in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand combined, i.e., just over eighty percent (Lee & Ramirez, 2023). It is not necessarily the most demographically diverse universities that open equality and diversity offices (Baltaru, 2020), and scholars have struggled to find empirical evidence

for the impact of specialised diversity personnel at the demographic level, for example, on faculty hirings (Bradley et al., 2022).

The key issue here is that conformity can stagger performance (Heugens & Lander, 2009). Applied to our case study, one may anticipate decoupling between inclusion-oriented organisational commitments and the levels of demographic diversity on the ground, i.e., a scenario where *Function 1* is not accomplished. In Chapter 5 we will explore this function empirically, building on other studies that sought to find whether organisational commitments work for their designated purpose (see Baltaru, 2023; Cole, 2012; Keck & Sikkink, 1999).

Let us now broaden our understanding of the role of organisational commitments, towards an additional function that does not revolve around their explicit, designated purpose.

(Re)imagining Function with Sociological Institutional Lens

While framing the role of organisational commitments in terms of ‘functions’ inevitably draws on the structural functionalist underpinning of early institutionalists, doing so in a manner that transcends normative assumptions about how organisations behave falls within the remit of sociologists. The task involves conceptualising the functions of organisational commitments not only as purposefully determined by the organisation but also as a by-product of the systems in which an organisation operates. In my view, the new (sociological) institutionalist school has more in common with the arguments made by sociologists working in early structural and functionalist frameworks (especially R. Merton building on T. Parsons) than with other ‘new’ institutionalist schools, notably in economics.

Sociological functionalism of the Durkheimian type conceives the social world as an organism that seeks to survive (1893/1933). Each unit of the social system across its various levels, including the meso-level considerations pertaining to the study of organisations, plays a role in a self-regulating process oriented towards maintaining stability. Importantly, a unit may play a function irrespective of whether it has been subject to purposive designation by some rational entity. From this angle, we may expect organisational commitments to play a function for the organisation within the organisational field in which it operates, but that

function need not coincide with what was intended by the organisation.⁶ For example, a university may develop inclusion-oriented organisational commitments under the conviction that these commitments will help it become more inclusive (or alternatively, as critics say, will help it avoid responsibility for inclusion). Even if commitments may fail to deliver on their formally articulated object, they may still work in a way which has not been envisioned by the universities' personnel; it's new function may emerge out of a culturally bounded system shaped by the collective convictions of universities and other corporate structures that universities share *organisational field(s)* with.

Before introducing this new (second) function, note that the plural 'organisational field(s)' is used here to acknowledge that universities inhabit multiple institutionalised domains of activity in which organisations interact based on their shared goals, e.g., the educational organisational field, the public service organisational field, and also what I shall call 'the inclusion-oriented organisational field' (which will be evidenced in Chapter 4 for the UK HE sector). Throughout the book, when using the singular form ('*the* organisational field') I refer to the *inclusion-oriented organisational field*, i.e., the organisational field composed by other institutions/organisations that pursue inclusion as part of their extended missions (e.g., other universities, the government in democratic systems) or primary missions (e.g., inclusion-oriented regulators, inclusion-oriented charities), and that a university interacts with.

Back to the functions of OCIs, a variant of how organisational commitments might work outside their explicit purpose follows from the new institutionalist arguments: becoming attuned to the norms and values of the external environment *purveys* an organisation with *legitimacy*. To the extent to which inclusion and organisational actorhood are culturally valued (as a result of shared convictions), the 'invisible'

⁶ Functionalism within a sociological framework allows for functions to be both actor-driven and systemic artefacts. Because of this, some argued that early institutionalists preserve the 'real life complexity' of institutions, while new institutionalists work at a Durkheimian level of abstraction and "mathematize abstract empiricism" (Stinchcombe, 1997, p. 6). Perhaps abstract empiricism is what it takes to rescue real life complexity from the determinism of agentic models forged by the early institutionalists. One example where one might suspect that the early institutionalist projection of agency on the behalf of organisations becomes itself disconnected from the 'complexity of real life' can be found in Selznick's attempt to use a Freudian analogy in the conceptualisation of organisational commitments (1948, p. 32).

function of inclusion-oriented organisational commitments is to catalyse the legitimacy of the university, especially among the actors that make the inclusion-oriented organisational field. The university strengthens its belonging to an organisational field of inclusion-oriented institutions/organisations not only because it has the ‘right’ values, but also because it has exercised rationality and proactiveness by articulating these values in the form of organisational commitments (Baltaru, 2023). *Function 2* of organisational commitments is grounded in a fusion between the new institutionalist argument of legitimacy outlined above and early sociological constructivist and functionalist insights. First, *Function 2* requires a shared representation of social reality. Commitments ‘work’ to legitimise universities within an organisational field to the extent to which they are valued by the actors within that field. Seeing commitments as a by-product of a shared framework of representation, locates the problem within a social constructivist angle, preventing the naturalization of social settings for which functionalism has been criticized in social sciences (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Second, *Function 2* can be seen as an ‘unintended consequence’ of commitments, an issue which has been linked with both unorganised and formally organised purposive actions (see Merton, 1936). This stance speaks directly to Robert K. Merton’s elaboration of Parsonian structural functionalism (Merton, 1968/1949; Parsons, 1937). Beyond the ‘manifest’ function (in our case, the intended function of organisational commitments, *Function 1*) one should consider the ‘latent’ function (in our case, that role of organisational commitments which is not ‘apparent’). *Function 2* of organisational commitments relates to the consequences of commitments within a system, specifically within a shared system of representation that a sociological lens can ‘debunk’ (Berger, 1963).

Function 2 emerges if we understand inclusion broadly as ‘the state of being included within a structure’. This angle enables us to consider commitments in relation to the inclusion of people in universities (and the purported needs of various social groups to be represented in higher education), and go beyond that, to consider the inclusion of the universities into the organisational field in which they operate (and the legitimacy needs of the universities themselves). *Function 2* is easily overlooked if one limits themselves to a micro-level lens. Once we consider institutional dynamics, the addition of *Function 2* to *Function 1* is, at least, a matter of integrating multi-level angles to the study of Inclusion Organisation (see Chapter 1).

I hereby formulate the second function of organisational commitments. This requires reimagining the dependent variable from that which concerns people, i.e., the inclusion of people in universities (*Function 1*, or ‘the People-Centred Function’), to that which concerns universities, i.e., the inclusion of universities into the organisational field in which they operate (*Function 2*, or ‘the Institution-Centred Function’).

Function 2 (The Institution-Centred Function): *Organisational commitmentsto inclusion work to include universities into the organisational field.*

ADAPTATION, LEGITIMACY, AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

Function 2 could be interpreted as a matter of university adaptation to the external environment. This brings a theoretical conundrum as to how this function can be located in institutionalist theory. Notably, in the new institutionalist perspective the agency of an organisation is viewed as ‘enacted’, i.e., a ‘cultural script’ more than an inherent attribute of the institution. While one cannot use a culturally ascribed attribute to inform theoretical generalisations about how organisations work, neither can we speak about institutional adaptation without accounting for some degree of purposiveness of the organisation (an organisationally favoured direction of self-preservation, to say the least). Even in studies portraying organisational hypocrisy as useful for the organisation, and as such revolutionising the way in which we think about the gap between ‘talk’ and ‘action’, the role of the ‘talk’ materializes along the axes of problem-solving and purposive adaptation i.e., organisations “cope” with inconsistent demands and “create” structures and processes that help navigating them (Brunsson, 1989, p. 7/8). Strategic use of commitments to navigate ideological pressures and conflicting demands may of course occur (think of universities that are required by their governments to implement equality actions), but we should also be careful not to ‘go native’ when it comes to the cultural appeal of explanations that place the *locus* of action within the agency of the organisation. I argue that it is also possible for organisations to benefit reputationally from their commitments not because of developing ‘the right commitments’ at ‘the right moment’, but as a result of a given commitment diffusing across organisations to the point of acquiring normative value. If DiMaggio and Powell

(1983) were right that there is a threshold of diffusion that an organisational innovation (such as a commitment) can reach such that its adoption purveys ‘legitimacy rather than improved performance’ (p. 148), then the possibility emerges that *Function 2* can be unlocked exogenously by a change in the environment (specifically, in the level of spread of the organisational practice in question) and not necessarily as a result of purposive adaptation on the behalf of the organisation. The early sociological perspective on organisations provided by P Selznick can provide further perspective on how legitimacy gains play out, complementing the newer sociological institutionalist framework this argument expands on.

In his foundational theory of organisations, Selznick argues that an organisation may commit to external ideologies as a defensive mechanism, such that ‘action formally undertaken for substantive goals be weighed and transformed in terms of its consequences for the position of the officialdom’ (1948, p. 30). This perspective is relevant to the above problem in two ways. First, it considers the role of commitments in consolidating the external position of the organisation in a manner that speaks to the early institutionalist angle, i.e., when talking about the ‘defence’ mechanism Selznick attributes agency to the organisation. Second, neither is the perspective blind to formalisation, an attribute that is key to recognising the transformation of institutions into ‘formal’ organisations, as theorised by new institutionalists. Unlike Stinchcombe (1997), Selznick refers to ‘formal’ not to ‘implicit’ commitments, and it also considers the consequences of formal action in terms of legitimacy dynamics (aka, the ‘officialdom’). These merits might be traced to Selznick embracing a broader view of functionalism in his work, whereby ‘the significance of events may be defined by their place and operational role in a means-end scheme’ (1948, p. 33). Selznick was unlike many scholars of institutions of his time in that he blended early institutionalist premises and sociological conceptualisations of function. He assumed some level of agency on the behalf of the organisation and its personnel (as did Stinchcombe [1997]) but like T. Parsons, he thought that functional dynamics of integration were constructed along the lines of value-infused actions and normative systems (Parsons, 1935).

Selznick’s understanding of ‘institutionalisation’ is of particular significance to bridge early and new institutionalist perspectives into a fortified theoretical basis for *Function 2*. An important feature used by early institutionalists to articulate the distinctiveness of institutions from

other corporate entities is their role in regulating social action (Stinchcombe, 1997) which, in Parsonian terms, happens ‘in conformity with the common ultimate value-system of the community’ (Parsons, 1935, p. 299). Selznick embraced this definition and took it a step further by arguing that goals and procedures specific to organisations can be themselves institutionalised as they become impregnated with value (Selznick, 1957; see also Krueger, 2017). This brings us to the point that will be extensively elaborated by new institutionalists, namely that *organisation* can become itself institutionalised as a model of institutional identity and purpose. In Krueger’s interpretation (2017) Selznick’s conceptualisation means that: (a) the boundary between organisations and institutions becomes blurred: ‘organizations themselves can become institutions’ (p. 1); and (b) the embodiment of value-infused commitments in the identity of the organisation harnesses its survival because of enhanced social integration.⁷ The latter implication aligns with our endeavour of reimagining the dependent variable when it comes to organisational commitments: as serving the organisation, not only their formally designated purpose.

Legitimacy-Driven Adaptation—Institutions Meeting What Is ‘Thinkable’

Just like their predecessors, new institutionalists and organisational theorists quote organisations’ quest to survive, for example, in DiMaggio and Powell (1983), or in Meyer and Rowan (1977). Yet they consider ‘the adaptive storytelling less persuasive’ (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, pp. 10–11). This begs the question: if adaptation does not drive environmental embedment in the new institutionalist perspective, then what does? This aspect has been frequently queried by early institutionalist defenders who criticised new institutionalists for operating at a ‘Durkheimian level of abstraction’ whereby ‘collective representations manufacture themselves by opaque processes, are implemented by diffusion, are exterior and constraining without exterior people doing the creation or the constraining’ (Stinchcombe, 1997, p. 2).

⁷ Whilst Selznick was keen to emphasise integration dynamics at a micro-level, e.g., organisation members sharing similar values, the compelling arguments put forward by the subsequent new institutionalist literature emphasised cultural ‘diffusion’ at the level of the organisational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Alternatives to the ‘adaptive storytelling’ have been proposed by the ecological perspective to organisations which point towards the demographic processes of competition and selection that occur as populations of organisations expand (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Sociologists’ alternative to adaptation emphasises legitimacy and has been described as more nuanced to the circumstances of time and place than the models proposed by ecologists (Haveman & David, 2008). Specifically, ‘legitimacy improves access to resources and acceptance from customers, and thus contributes to organizations’ ability to persist’ (Haveman & David, 2008, p. 579; see also Meyer & Rowan, 1977). But if we are to focus on the benefits of legitimacy for the organisation in terms of accessibility of resources, we find ourselves back to the rationalistic story of survival through ‘adaptation’, the very story that sociological institutionalists made a point in distancing themselves from.

A more coherent argument might be achieved if we think of organisational survival in terms of the making and maintenance of legitimacy, which is perhaps closer to what Haveman and David meant by organisations’ ability to ‘persist’ (p. 579). We might understand *persistence* in terms of recognition through socialisation i.e. the meso-level entity exists as an organisation because its form is recognisable as such within a framework of representation. As long as what a corporate entity does meets a legitimised template of organisation, then it will act and be acted towards accordingly i.e. the usual dynamics of adaptation and competition for resources apply. Adaptation can thus be legitimacy-driven, rather than being a purpose or a driver of action on its own. This angle does not lose sight of the phenomenological basis of sociological institutionalism, according to which patterns of behaviour reflect ‘not only what is materially advantageous or morally appropriate but also what is ‘thinkable’ in a given cultural and institutional context’ (Cole, 2012, p. 1136).

We might conclude the task of achieving a coherent basis for *Function 2* by referring to Heugens and Lander’s (2009) distinction between the ‘symbolic performance’ and the ‘substantive performance’ of an organisation, whereby the former refers to the range of positive social evaluations that consolidate the status of an organisation. As far as our case study is concerned, universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion should not only be considered in terms of whether they work to deliver ‘substantive’ goals, i.e., output measures of demographic inclusion (see *Function 1*), but also in terms of their implications for ‘symbolic’ performance, e.g., maintaining the status of the university (see *Function 2*).

Table 3.2 illustrates *the two-way function* of organisational commitments proposed in this chapter and locates it in the institutionalist literature.

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the possibility that commitments may work for their explicit purpose cannot be anticipated by the new institutionalist perspective. As a result, early institutionalist insights have been recycled and used to inform *Function 1* of organisational commitments, i.e., that commitments could work to deliver their explicit purpose, in this case, the inclusion of people in universities. Meanwhile, both theoretical perspectives back *Function 2* of organisational commitments, i.e., that commitments could benefit the inclusion of the university into the organisational field in which it operates. From an early institutionalist perspective, commitments, even when they are widely spread, can have an integrative role; this could happen when the object of

Table 3.2 The *two-way function* of organisational commitments and its relationships to early and new institutionalist propositions about organisational commitments

	<i>Function 1</i> <i>The People-Centred Function</i>	<i>Function 2</i> <i>The Institution-Centred Function</i>
	<i>Organisational commitments to inclusion work to include people in universities, i.e., demographic inclusion among students and staff</i>	<i>Organisational commitments to inclusion work to include universities into the [inclusion-oriented] organisational field</i>
(A) Early institutionalist	Organisational commitments are coupled with the internal activity structure; Organisational commitments are more effective than implicit commitments in achieving set goals	Similarity in organisational commitments secures integration / adaptation for the organisation
(B) New institutionalist	— ¹	Similarity in organisational commitments purveys the organisation with legitimacy

Note 1 A cultural angle to organisational fields does not exclude that coupling between legitimised practices and internal behaviour and structures may happen, but this is reserved to limited scenarios, e.g., for the first companies adopting an organisational practice

a given commitment (or indeed, the act of committing) works as a generalised medium of exchange. Additionally, an organisation may articulate commitments as a means of purposeful adaptation to external environmental demands. Furthermore, from a new institutionalist perspective, *Function 2* is expected insofar as commitments purvey an organisation with legitimacy.

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‘Talking Inclusion’: The Institution-Centred Function (*Function 2*)

This chapter explores whether organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) have benefited universities as adapting institutions, i.e., the extent to which the articulation of OCIs enhances the inclusion of universities into the organisational field in which they operate. This is *Function 2* of organisational commitments, or the ‘institution-centred function’, as theorised in Chapter 3. The first part of the chapter situates *Function 2* of OCIs into historical perspective by providing an overview of the cultural milieus that UK universities have been adapting to. I illustrate key institutional purposes assigned to universities by the polity and argue that ideas of inclusion have been (re)formulated in line with these expectations. The second part of the chapter brings empirical evidence for how *Function 2* is playing out in the UK higher education (HE) sector in the early 2000s. I show that by formally pursuing inclusion, universities share an organisational field with actors that are consequential for their legitimacy, finances, and reputation, from the government to third-party, inclusion-oriented organisations and other universities. Universities are expected to play an active role in the ‘inclusion-oriented organisational field’ (IOF), which overlaps with the HE field and goes beyond it. Through OCIs universities undergo a process of legitimacy-driven adaptation, as participating in the IOF enables them to meet cultural expectations of agency and societal relevance projected on their behalf.

INCLUSION NARRATIVES IN ADAPTING UNIVERSITIES

Anti-elitism—‘Inclusion’ and the Universality of the University

Among the many societal roles that universities got accustomed to, the pursuit of knowledge and the development of character have been a constant in their institutional identity (Bara, 2015). In his ‘Idea of a University’, the English theologian and philosopher John Henry Newman famously referred to the pursuit of knowledge as being ‘its own end’ (1891). Universities had a profound societal role, i.e., to nurture one’s mind through education, but also one’s character. This vision also resonates with the ideas of the Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1810; see also Nybom 2003). The latter envisioned the university as an independent community of scholars dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, the societal function of education resting in the classical ideal of *Bildung*. Bara (2015) describes this ideal as representing ‘the full and harmonious development of all the human skills and potentials that manifest themselves in a unique way in every person’ (p. 5).

Notwithstanding their differences,¹ early ideals of the university afforded a broad definition of personhood, abstracting the human from the predicaments of societal fragmentation. Scottish thinkers of the Enlightenment considered that education in schools could undo the effects expected from the division of labour in commercial societies (Millar, 1818). Vanderstraeten (2006) draws connections to similar ideas in the less industrialised Prussia, where education could counter the fragmentation of human purpose following the expansion of state bureaucracy (Goethe, 1976 [1796]; von Schiller, 1795). But in the 1800s, these universalistic ideals of personhood were paradoxically reserved for a few, in England mostly for White men from wealthy backgrounds. As discussed in Chapter 2, this paradox was challenged by the equalitarian ‘wind of change’ of the 1800s. If scholars had any capacity to influence society, or at least to define an ideal personhood, that definition had to account for

¹ The Humboldtian emphasis on independent reasoning and self-reflection was influenced by the religious pluralism that existed in Prussia after the Napoleonic wars, and the secularisation of theological faculties following the establishment of the Empire in 1871 (Parsons, 1968). In the UK, the emphasis grew on cultivating men (sic) to serve the church and the state. While defending the idea of a liberal education, or an education of the ‘whole mind’, Newman argued that this should ultimately be a ‘useful’ education (Bara, 2015).

the expanding demographic seeking education, being able to vote, and increasingly inhabiting the cities and driving economic development.

The university embarked into what will be a long and slow journey, away from its 'elitist' institutional roots. From the 1800s up through the early 1900s, the dropping of admission barriers faced by religious minorities and females, can be seen as a proto commitment to inclusion, aligning universities with the social reforms at the time. Inclusion, as a university concern, was challenged and debated, as one may expect in periods of transition. Some argued that this direction was a move away from the scholarly orientation of universities, which 'had never been concerned with equality except as an object of study in genetics and in social philosophy and the social sciences' and 'had never before been regarded as devices for the establishment of equality of status' (Shils, 1975, pp. 13–14). As a scholarly object 'equality' was itself subject to criticism, for instance, because of its assumption of hierarchy: 'an acceptance of a certain enduring inequality from which individuals could escape by their exertions of mind and character' (E.S. [sic], 1974, p. 5). On the other hand, universities' universalistic ideal for the pursuit of knowledge and the development of character was conceptually compatible with an equalitarian vision of society, perhaps more so than with an elitist system where strata were determined by gender, race, wealth, and religious orientation rather than by intellectual ability or virtue alone.

Widening Participation—'Inclusion' for National Development and Progress

At the turn of the twentieth century universities did not only navigate modern egalitarianism, but also the strengthening of state support and regulation. A notable development in this direction in the United Kingdom was the establishment of the University Grant Committee (UGC) in 1919 to centralise the distribution of state subsidies to universities in England and Wales. Demographically, universities were deeply impacted by the polity. The drafting of males into WW1 hampered participation in higher education, especially for youth from lower classes; after WW2, the numbers of students and staff grew as men became released from military services and governments provided grants for demobilised soldiers (Shils, 1975). Within the next two decades, considerations of race, gender, and socio-economic inequality emerged in regulatory frameworks and higher education reviews. The state positioned itself as a

representative of the public interest, embedding requirements of fairness into the allocation of public funds to universities (Robbins Report, 1963). In other words, the operational freedom of universities depended on how institutions themselves held their ends in respect to equality of opportunity, a move supposed to limit rejections based on ‘racial, social or other grounds extraneous to academic suitability’ (1963, p. 231).

Just as the early university ideologues saw the role of universities in ‘nurturing character’, the civil servants, university chancellors, and economists of the twentieth century narrowed the scope of character development into the more specific requirement of a ‘skilled workforce’. Higher education was seen as an engine of socio-economic development, an asset that nation states could draw on to stimulate wellbeing internally, and to enhance their competitiveness on the geopolitical scene. The newer universities at the time, such as the ‘civic’ universities built at the turn of the twentieth century in UK’s industrialised cities, e.g., Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, aligned with government’s aspiration of providing higher education to a wider range of people that qualify for it and in doing so, encouraging national progress. If expanding the body of highly educated people could strengthen the economic position of the state, widening access to HE was an important step to achieve it. In this spirit, the Education Act of 1962 mandated local authorities to cover tuition fees. It was believed that a university education should be accessible to all those qualified to pursue it (Robbins Report, 1963). Equality was seen as a matter of ‘opportunity’, not only in higher education, but also more broadly, regarding the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups in the labour market. Equality of opportunity was quoted by anti-discrimination reforms worldwide; even in the United States, where higher education institutions (HEIs) followed a different financial model than in Europe, equality of opportunity surfaced through affirmative action policies (Oswick & Noon, 2014).

Adapting to the state-led expectations that universities should expand their student bodies and create a highly educated workforce did not fall neatly with the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Across the Atlantic, massifying access to universities was criticised as a populist notion, an organisational challenge, and even a threat to the ethos of the university. This view was especially prevalent in the United States, where it was not uncommon to criticise diversity programmes for supposedly altering quality standards and for bringing organisational pressures on universities. For instance, in 1975 the sociologist Edward Shils remarked that

the overall direction of demographic inclusion 'has resulted in a draft of students whose culture markedly differs from that of students who formerly came to universities: many of them were even more ill-educated in secondary school than the majority of students' and that such actions 'required more staff, which in turn required more money, more accommodation, and more paper-work within the university' (p. 23). This account problematically favours a certain 'student culture' over another and undermines the historical role of universities in making the very social inequalities it now sought to unmake (in other words, universities have never been just about scholarship). However, Shils' reflections provide an important window into the institutional and ideological forces that universities had to reconcile and adapt to as they were restructured for mass provision. Among the scholars populating universities at the time, there was an *awareness of the external environment* in which universities operated, its requirements, and its contradictions. In the same train of thought, Shils noted that university leaders had to 'attend to the expectations which are directed towards them from the outside' and in this way 'assure the continued flow of financial resources which they need, to do their duty to society, and to maintain the dispositions and opinions which afford their value and encourage their support' (1975, p. 22).

In the United Kingdom, the widening of access to higher education was partly driven by universities' increasing financial dependency on state funds. Beloff (1998) describes the broadening of access to universities as 'the product of an interaction between the Oxford community and the wider world', where 'state action, or the threat of it, were essential ingredients of reform' (p. 387).² Perhaps in an attempt to create a common ground between the state and the academic profession, the Robbins Report of 1963 framed anti-discrimination reforms as matters of academic freedom: 'For the individual teacher academic freedom means the absence of discriminatory treatment on grounds of race, sex, religion and politics; and the right to teach according to his own conception of fact and truth, rather than according to any predetermined orthodoxy'

² Beloff (1998) notes that, in the UK, the relationship between universities and the state was of 'an intimate and bargaining kind' with important figures in the political arena having studied at the most prestigious universities. For example, Sir Robert Peel, who served two terms as prime minister (1834–1835 and 1841–1846) and William Ewart Gladstone, who served four terms as prime minister from 1868 to 1894, were both educated at the University of Oxford.

(p. 229). But equally, financial penalties were invoked for the universities that would perpetuate exclusions based on social origin. In the words of the Robbins Report, these institutions ‘would have scant claim to unconditional subventions from public funds in a free society’ (1963, p. 231).

Managing Diversity—Environmental Pressures of Organisation

By the end of the twentieth century students were expected to pay towards the cost of their degree, but equality of opportunity did not disappear from the policy agenda. The introduction of means-tested upfront tuition fees (Teaching and Higher Education Act, 1998) and the push to strengthen universities’ managerial backbone (Jarratt Report, 1985) laid the ground for a new ideal of the university. The ‘entrepreneurial university’, as Clark famously called it (1998) ought to be proactive and self-reliant and enjoy freedom in operational matters such that it can become financially autonomous.

In the United Kingdom, HE reforms provided plenty of ‘opportunities’ for universities to move in this direction, as even research funding became allocated in a competitive fashion through ‘quality weighting’ via the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) introduced in 1986. Unlike the state-reliant university, the entrepreneurial university was seen as best placed to contribute to socio-economic development, i.e., the so-called ‘third mission’ of the university, beyond teaching and research (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020, see also Etzkowitz, 2003). Because of deregulation and competition, the entrepreneurial university is presumably ‘able’ and ultimately ‘needs’ to swiftly respond to changes in its external environment (Shattock, 2010). The White Paper of 1991 noted that developments in this direction were under way, including the use of private income from research contracts and the provision of business studies and courses aimed at individuals who were already in employment. Similarly, the Jarratt Report remarked that: ‘universities have been encouraged and have exerted themselves to increase their income from sources other than the State’, a move linked with stronger collaborations between universities and the industry (1985, p. 16).

In this context, universities’ response to pressures of inclusion acquired a strategic character, concerned, for instance, with catering towards the diverse needs of their students and strengthening university’s image beyond the scholarly community (Baltaru, 2019). UK universities had to

realise their role in a diverse society where 'there is active debate about the basis for any system of values' (Dearing, 1997, p. 79). Universities were not to 'form character' following 'outdated' notions of 'virtue'; neither would they limit at creating 'highly skilled individuals' to strengthen the nation. Higher education would become increasingly tailored to the aspirations and ambitions of those who pay for it, as subsequent increases in tuition fees famously placed students 'at the heart of the system' (White Paper, 2011). Legal and cultural environmental pressures further highlighted the importance of universities catering for diversity. Equality legislation placed statutory duties on universities (and on public sector institutions at large) to prevent discrimination (Disability Discrimination Act, 2005; Equality Act, 2006, 2010; Race Relations [Amendment] Act, 2000) building on historical equality legislation (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995; Race Relations Act, 1976; Sex Discrimination Act, 1975). At the same time, inclusion emerged as a global cultural currency. The Dearing Report of higher education in the 'learning society' noted that 'the UK has increasingly become a society which includes many cultures' and which is 'actively engaged in reflection about the place of the UK in the world, particularly in relation to Europe' (1997, p. 79).

In the early 2000s we find universities fully embarked into a global trend of managing diversity and inclusion, while maintaining a competitive edge. Just like public institutions, the UK universities have equality duties; just like private companies, they embed diversity into their strategies for generating income; but unlike any other organisations, they are historically positioned to legitimise knowledges and models of personhood. At the turn of the millennium, universities are not merely dropping exclusionary practices or following widening participation reforms; environmental pressures of organisation make them organisers and rationalisers of inclusion in society. Next, I illustrate how, through organisational commitments to inclusion, universities become embedded into a fully-fledged inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF).

UNIVERSITIES AND THE INCLUSION-ORIENTED ORGANISATIONAL FIELD

The previous section illustrates how UK universities have been transforming in response to societal expectations, specifically: the pursuit of knowledge and the 'formation of character', national development and progress, and environmental pressures of organisation in the context of

marketisation. I showed that ideas of inclusion formed the repertoire through which universities have been articulating their societal value, specifically: universities' moral relevance, i.e., inclusion as anti-elitism; universities' socio-economic relevance, i.e., inclusion as widening participation in the welfare state; and universities' organisational actorhood, i.e., inclusion in terms of organisational proactiveness, from the 1980s onwards.

I will now focus on the pursuit of inclusion in the early 2000s, when, I argue, inclusion became the common enterprise of an organisational field on its own, i.e., the inclusion-oriented organisational field. An organisational field refers to 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). To support this definition DiMaggio and Powell supply examples of developing organisational fields documented by research, including the field of college textbook publishing (Coser et al., 1982) and the radio industry (Barnouw, 1966–1968). Without a template for how an organisational field should look like, they emphasise that 'the structure of an organisational field cannot be determined a priori but must be defined on the basis of empirical investigation' (ibid., 1983, p. 148). Scott (1991) further elaborates the definition of the organisational field as 'a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field' (pp. 207–208; see also Scott, 1991; 1994). Both definitions emphasise the relational attributes of organisational fields, while the guidelines with regards to when an aggregate of organisations qualifies as an organisational field are loose (Wooten, 2015). This is why, as we explore the extent to which UK universities operate within an inclusion-oriented organisational field, empirical evidence for the presence of such an institutionalised area of activity is key.

I start from the premise that institutions engage in multiple organisational fields (Scott, 2013; see also Pizarro, 2012). Universities are historically established institutions in the educational field but are in the process of establishing themselves in the inclusion-oriented organisational field. Therefore, their legitimacy needs are most prominent in

the latter. This is why I expect that organisational commitments to inclusion play a role in infusing universities with legitimacy within the IOF (as 'inclusive organisations') in a way that would not apply to organisational commitments to education, i.e., universities are already well-established institutions within the educational field.

To sum up, according to the *Function 2* of organisational commitments (theorised in Chapter 3), commitments help include universities into the organisational field(s) in which they operate, especially when the enterprise of the (new) field is distinct from their historical mission. In the case of inclusion-oriented organisational commitments, I refer specifically to the inclusion-oriented organisational field (**IOF**). Drawing on attributes of organisational fields theorised by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and characteristics of cultural environments and organisational actorhood elaborated in new institutionalist scholarship (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Meyer, 2000; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). I embark in two tasks:

- (a) *to evidence the presence of the IOF in the HE sector*; I will do so by exploring whether the pursuit of inclusion in the UK higher education exhibits the following selected attributes of organisational fields: rationalisation, the presence of key rationalisers, the involvement of multiple organisations, and high volume of information.
- (b) *to evidence how OCIs include universities into the IOF (Function 2)*.

I will do so by: (a) showing how, through OCIs, universities meet cultural expectations of organisational actorhood; (b) bringing evidence for the dynamic features of organisational fields among universities, and between universities and other organisations, namely: mutual awareness, interaction, and homogeneity in organisational practices.

Source of Empirical Observations (1):

Netnographic^{*1} *Observations of Universities' Inclusion-Oriented Webpages*

I navigated the inclusion-oriented web pages of 124 universities. These pages were located in universities' official websites accessible to public users, as of 2018.³ A semi-structured guide of investigation was used in data collection. I paid attention to inclusion-oriented documents, institutional policies, governance and organisational structures. Most importantly to the current analysis, I took note of any references to equality legislation, external organisations and inclusion-oriented schemes that universities mentioned on these web pages. The purpose was to obtain an overview of: (a) what external organisations universities most frequently refer to in the pursuit of inclusion; and (b) how are inclusion-oriented commitments expressed and how are universities portrayed in the process. Netnographic data were used to answer the above substantive questions as well as to inform the mining of textual data from organisational webpages, as it will be described later in this chapter.

*¹The term 'netnography' has been traditionally restricted to the exploration of interactions between people in 'bounded' online spaces, such as discussion forums. In this research I 'follow the plot' (Marcus, 1995) on websites as one of the multiple spaces of investigation that a meta conceptualisation of digital ethnography can afford (Delli Paoli & D'Auria, 2021). As in the case of alternative methods of investigation used to map university commitments such as the 'web-census' (Christensen et al., 2019), universities are seen as enacting specific discourses in their online self-presentations.

³ An inclusion-oriented web page is a section in the official website of a university which publicises university's position to inclusion and any related documentation and actions. In most cases, inclusion-oriented web pages include one or more key-terms, e.g., inclusion/equality/equalities/diverse/diversity, in multiple formats, for example: www.UniversityName.ac.uk/about/equality-diversity-inclusion, www.equality.UniversityName.ac.uk, www.UniversityName.ac.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion, www.UniversityName.ac.uk/departments/inclusion. Universities' inclusion-oriented web pages can be located under the 'about us'/'corporate information'/'governance' sections but may also be found separately for students (for instance, under 'student services') and staff (for instance, under 'human resources').

*Evidence for the Inclusion-Oriented Organisational Field
in the UK HE*

Key Rationalisers: The State and the Professions

Throughout the netnography, *references to governmental regulation* were identified across universities' inclusion-oriented webpages, in relation to the Equality Act of 2010, and occasionally in relation to earlier equality legislation such as the Race Relations Act (1976) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). Terminology related to equality legislation was used widely, for instance, 'equality duty', 'protected characteristic' and 'protected group'.

The state has been, indeed, a key 'rationaliser' in the development of the inclusion-oriented organisational field in the United Kingdom, through the means of equality legislation and higher education policy. 'Positive actions' to tackle discrimination started being expected from universities in the early 2000s as a result of the public sector equality duties with regards to race, disability, and gender (Disability Discrimination Act, 2005; Equality Act, 2006; Race Relations [Amendment] Act, 2000). Most recently, these equality duties have been combined into a generalised equality duty (Equality Act, 2010). As previously discussed in Chapter 2, the 'organised' pursuit of inclusion was also stimulated by sector-level HE reforms. The introduction of tuition fees and the accompanying rhetoric that higher education is an individual (rather than public) benefit, pushed responsibility for inclusion from the state to universities themselves. Universities were reimagined as 'agents' of inclusion, capable to self-organise and to widen participation in the absence of generous state subsidies to cover the cost of higher education (Baltaru, 2022b). Institutions were pressed to strategise for inclusion and made attentive to hypothetical reputational and even financial losses if they do not conform. For example, in the Dearing Report funding bodies were recommended to prioritise those HEIs most committed to widening participation (1997, Recommendation 2).

The exploration of inclusion-oriented web pages also revealed an underlying trend of *professionalisation* in terms of areas inhabited by non-academic professionals, e.g., Dignity at Work Advisors, Dignity and Respect Advice Service, Support/Access/'Equality for All' Services. It is however arguable whether this reflects the importance of the professions as a rationaliser of organisational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the case of universities pursuing 'third mission' goals we are talking

about a distinct meaning of professionalisation. For instance, the higher education professionals catering for equality and diversity are distinct from the autonomous professions uniquely identified by their societal function and by their codes of conduct, as in the case of the academic profession (Baltaru, 2022a). Perhaps more relevant to this point is what Whitchurch (2008) referred to as a *third space* between academic and administrative domains. Throughout the netnography I identified such a space linked to the expert-driven articulation of inclusion-oriented commitments. Actions and initiatives highlighted on universities' inclusion-oriented webpages, which can be located at these cross-roads, are: Equality Research Initiatives, Inclusive Teaching and Assessment Statements, Equality Lecture Series, Annual Race Lectures, Intersectionality Information, Diversity E-learning Courses, Inclusive Curricula, Equality and Diversity Advisory Groups (which includes academic staff), and Student Equality Work Placements.

Rationalisation

Examples of universities adhering to rationalised practices emerged in the netnography. Rationalisation is a 'collective' feature of organisational fields, with rationalised practices being used in many organised areas of activity (consider 'strategic plans' as a widely spread planning instrument). Formalisation and standardisation are key attributes of rationalised practices as they emulate principles of scientific formalism, often in an instrumental attempt to link goals and actions.

Across the UK universities, organisational commitments to inclusion are *formalised* in terms of endorsements, policies and procedures. Endorsements include institutional statements, e.g., Slavery and Human Trafficking Statements, Equal Pay Statements; pledges, e.g., 'Stand Alone' pledges for 'estranged' students, Time to Change (employer) Pledge, Inclusive Culture Pledge; and 'forwards' and public statements from vice-chancellors and leadership. I identified overarching policies, e.g., Equality of Opportunities Policy, and policies covering specific issues, e.g., Gender Identity Policy, Disabled Students Policy, Bullying and Harassment Policy, Diversity and Dignity at Work Policy, EDI in Employment Policy, Family Related Leave Policy, Prayer and Contemplation Facilities Policy, Dignity at Study Policy, Student Equality Work Placement Policy and Guidelines, Dignity and Respect at Work, Trans Non-binary Intersex Equality Policy and Guidance, Student Pregnancy/Maternity/New Parenthood and Adoption Policies, often accompanied by codes of conduct, e.g.,

Transgender Equality Code of Conduct, and formalised procedures, e.g., Flexible Working or Grievance Procedures.

Furthermore, organisational commitments to inclusion are *standardised*. They follow an instrumental logic, whereby means and objectives are articulated. This is especially visible in the use of strategic plans and expert-driven tools. Throughout the netnography I identified formal strategies which were wide in scope, e.g., E&D Strategy, Equality Scheme, 4-year Strategic Equality Plans, and issue-specific, e.g., Gender Action Plan, Access and Participation Plan, Corporate Parenting Plan, Tackling Racial Harassment Plan, Sign Language Action Plan. Universities also mentioned expert-driven tools and actions in their inclusion-oriented web pages, such as: Equality Assessment and Analysis Toolkits, Guidance on Checking Equality Progress, Equality Screenings, Documentation of Equality Act Changes, Terms of Reference for Equality Advisory Groups etc.

Multiple Actors in the Inclusion-Oriented Organisational Field

Not only universities, but a range of other organisations started articulating inclusion-oriented commitments and manifesting an interest into the state of inclusion in higher education, creating the conditions required for interaction within the field. An overarching organisation with charity status was set to support inclusion, equality and diversity in higher education across the UK: the Equality Challenge Unit (HEFCE, 2013; Register of Charities, 2025a). Known by its abbreviation, ECU was established in 2001 (ibid.) and in 2018 was merged into Advance HE (Advance HE, 2018). ECU developed equality charters: (1) the Athena Swan Charter (AS) established in 2005 to foster the inclusion of females in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) employment (Advance HE, 2019a); and (2) the Race Equality Charter (REC), which was officially launched in 2016 to improve representation and progression of Black and ethnic minorities students and staff (Advance HE, 2019b). The charters recognise universities' commitment to inclusion by virtue of memberships and awards, the latter indicating how far their commitments have progressed i.e. Bronze, Silver, Gold (Advance HE, 2025). The former ECU (and current Advance HE) are probably the most important sector-level bodies channelling universities' commitments to inclusion. Because of their charitable purposes, such bodies are independent from the government, while by virtue of 'motive' there can be overlap between a charity's functions and governmental functions (UK

Government, 2025a). ECU/Advance HE are not the only bodies that universities engage with when it comes to articulating inclusion-oriented commitments.

The netnography revealed *references to external organisations* across the public, private, and third sector. The most highlighted inclusion-oriented organisations by universities were identified based on the centrality of related keywords and logos in universities' inclusion-oriented web pages. As of 2018, universities would often refer to the Equality Challenge Unit, but also to public bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission and governmental organisations such as the Government Equalities Office. According to researcher's own assessment of the netnographic observations, among the many other companies mentioned in universities' inclusion-oriented web pages, the most emphasised were Stonewall and DisabledGo. To get an idea of the type of organisations that populate the inclusion-oriented organisational field, other than universities themselves, below I provide an overview of their legal status, foundations and formal purpose.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is responsible to encourage equality and diversity, protect human rights, and tackle unlawful discrimination in England, Scotland and Wales (EHRC, 2021). It is an independent statutory body (EHRC, *ibid.*), public, executive, and non-departmental (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2025). Such public bodies are established to deliver public services without being ministerial departments (UK Government, 2025b). EHRC was established in 2007, following the Equality Act of 2006 (EHRC, 2025a). The Government Equalities Office (currently Women and Equalities Unit) (Government Equalities Office, 2025) was established in 2007 to work across the government and be responsible for a range of equalities legislation (The National Archives, 2007). DisabledGo, currently AccessAble, is a limited liability company set up in 2000 (AccessAble, 2025; Companies House Register, 2025). In the United Kingdom, Stonewall is registered as a charity (Register of Charities, 2025b) which stands in support for LGBTQ+ people, tracing its campaigning activity to 'a global movement since 1989' (Stonewall, 2025, p. 1). Frequent references were also made to Disability Confident which is a government scheme addressed to employers and focused on encouraging the recruitment and retention of people with disabilities or health conditions (Citizens Advice, 2025). In 2016, the Disability Confident symbol replaced the previous 'two ticks' symbol of the former Two Ticks Positive About Disabled People scheme

(Department for Work & Pensions, 2025).⁴ This is not a comprehensive overview of the public bodies and companies that UK universities engage with. I highlighted the most visible entities according to the netnographic observations. In further analyses in this chapter, I will also consider the Living Wage Foundation, an organisation which campaigns for good working standards (Living Wage Foundation, 2025). Unlike the other organisations above, this foundation was not as frequently referred to on universities' websites, yet it is one of the fewest organisations that some universities were observed to engage with when it comes to tackling socio-economic inequalities.

I will now continue to illustrate how features of organisational fields theorised by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) apply to the pursuit of inclusion in the UK universities. As previously stated, the goal is to evidence the inclusion-oriented organisational field in which UK universities are operating. This step is key to understanding *Function 2* of organisational commitments to inclusion, i.e., that organisational commitments 'work' to include universities into the organisational field in which they operate.

High Volume of Information

As expected in organisational fields, in their pursuit of inclusion universities and other organisations deal with a *high volume of information*. This includes communicating equality legislation updates and monitoring and self-assessment of inclusion progress at the institutional level.

The Dearing Report (1997) explicitly refers to the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as a tool that HE bodies can use to monitor demographic changes. Information about protected characteristics, demographic data, and qualitative data about the experiences of students and staff, all feed into the rationalised pursuit of inclusion. With this information institutions develop data-driven equality charter submissions, equality reports, and strategic action plans. The Dearing Report (1997) includes an explicit recommendation to HEIs that they should maintain equal opportunities policies and 'identify and remove

⁴ The earlier conditions that had made this organisational landscape possible include global developments in the strategic pursuit of inclusion, equality and diversity. For example, considerations surrounding disability inclusion have made their way into the Dearing Report (1997), around the same time as the issue was codified globally into UN's Standard Rules of the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 1994).

barriers which inhibit recruitment and progression for particular groups and monitor and publish their progress towards greater equality of opportunity for all groups' (1997, p. 376).

Throughout the netnography, the high volume of information that universities are dealing with in the pursuit of inclusion was evidenced by published statistical reports, e.g., Demographic Profiles, People Data Report, Equalities Data, Workplace Monitoring, Student Equality Data, Key Workforce Statistics, Equal Opportunities Analyses, BME Attainment Gap—Key Performance Indicators (KPI), as well as educational content surrounding qualitative approaches to equality and diversity, e.g., Guide to Offensive Terminology, Trans Terminology, Equality Briefings (on race, religion, belief, ethnicity etc.), and links to research societies, e.g., the Gender Identity Research and Education Society.

Above I illustrated key features of organisational fields that apply to the pursuit of inclusion in the UK higher education: rationalisation, the government as a main 'rationaliser', multiple organisations involved (not only universities), and the high volume of information that actors within the field are dealing with.

Evidence for How Organisational Commitments Embed Universities Into the Inclusion-Oriented Organisational Field

Through Commitments Universities Manifest Organisational Actorhood

Within the inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF) we would expect the university to be an organisational actor, i.e. 'an integrated, goal-oriented entity that is deliberately choosing its own actions and that can thus be held responsible for what it does' (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 241; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). Findings from the netnographic research strongly suggest that organisational commitments to inclusion enable universities to manifest organisational actorhood.

First, the committed university presents itself as *accountable* and *goal oriented*. Its capability to take responsibility for inclusion is articulated via institutional reports, e.g., Gender Pay Gap Report, Equal Pay Review, Gender Pay Gap Action Plan, EDI Progress Report, and transparent procedures, e.g., Equality Audit, Equal Pay Audit, Equal Pay Reviews. The reports frequently highlight outcomes, usually evaluated at four-year intervals, e.g., Impact Assessment, Impact Assessment Strategy,

Achievements against Objectives, and emphasise the proactiveness of the university, e.g., Equality in Action Initiative.

Second, the committed university *fosters purposiveness and self-awareness* among its staff. This transference of actorhood from the institution to its personnel is visible in the framing of networks of individuals following characteristics protected by the equality legislation, e.g., *sex*: Senior Academic Female Network Group, *pregnancy and maternity leave*: Parent's Network, Carer's Network, *race*: BAME Staff Network, *disability*: Staff who Stammer, and events that facilitate reflections on these issues, e.g., Let's Talk Disability, Let's Talk Race, Equality Elephant in the Room Sessions, E&D Forums, Equality Mentoring, Embedding Equality Initiative, Ways of Getting Involved Initiative.

Third, the committed university has a *strong organisational backbone*. In relation to the pursuit of inclusion, this is indicated by organisational structures, e.g., E&D Offices/Units/Teams, Disability Services, governance structures, e.g., Equality Diversity Monitoring and Research Committees, Inclusion-Oriented Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Diversity and Inclusion Steering Group, E&D Group linked to the Board of Governors, and networks, e.g., Harassment Advisory Network, Women's Leadership Network, Dignity and Respect Network and associated Dignity and Respect Coordinators.

Fourth, the committed university presents the pursuit of inclusion as being part of the *institutional core*. This is indicated by the inclusion of equality and diversity terminology in the 'vision' or in the 'mission' of the university, but also by linking the university name with inclusion-oriented keywords as in the following templates, e.g., Inclusive [university name], Respect at [university name], [university name] Women.

I will further illustrate how commitments integrate universities into the inclusion-oriented organisational field by bringing evidence of mutual awareness between universities, and between universities and other organisations within the field. For this purpose, I will analyse keyword frequencies and model digital content from universities' inclusion-oriented webpages and from the landing pages belonging to some of the main external organisations that universities referred to in their inclusion-oriented web pages (as outlined in the previous section entitled 'Multiple actors in the inclusion-oriented organisational field').

Commitments Enable Mutual Awareness and Homogeneity Within the Organisational Field

This section will explore whether commitments ‘work’ to include universities into the organisational field in which they operate. This function may be evidenced in two ways: by mutual awareness across universities and other organisations in the IOF, including awareness of external rationalisers such as the state; and by within-field structuration, i.e., discursive similarities in the way in which commitments to inclusion are being framed across universities and other relevant organisations. Mutual awareness and within-field structuration towards greater homogeneity of organisational practices have been discussed by DiMaggio and Powell in their overview of collective rationality within organisational fields (1983).

By observing commitments not only across universities, but also across the public bodies, charities and companies that universities refer to in their inclusion-oriented web pages, we can explore: (a) whether there is *mutual awareness* among these organisations as if they are involved into a ‘common enterprise’; (b) whether there is *similarity/homogeneity* in the way in which inclusion-oriented commitments are framed across these organisations.

Once more, the argument is that mutual awareness and discursive similarities across universities, and between universities and other public bodies, charities, and companies, bring empirical evidence for *Function 2* of inclusion-oriented organisational commitments, i.e., that they ‘work’ to include universities into the organisational field in which they operate.

MUTUAL AWARENESS WITHIN THE INCLUSION-ORIENTED ORGANISATIONAL FIELD

I start by documenting how organisational commitments to inclusion enhance mutual awareness within the inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF). This will be indicated by universities’ awareness of public bodies, charities and companies that stand for inclusion, and of course, awareness of governmental equality legislation and inclusion-oriented schemes.

Source and Analyses of Empirical Observations (2):

Descriptives of Keyword Frequencies

The frequency analysis relies on data collected from universities' inclusion-oriented webpages and the webpages of external inclusion-oriented organisations such as the Equality Challenge Unit. The collection of textual content across the university sector was done from 2018/19 up through 2020. The text has been tokenised in order to produce counts of keywords. Two datasets are being used: (a) a dataset of *universities* broken down by foundation era ('ancient', 'red brick', 'civic', 'plate glass', 'ex-polytechnics') compared to a mixed reference category ('other') which covers universities founded at different points in time but that fall outside the specified categories; (b) a dataset of *non-academic organisations* representing the inclusion-oriented organisational field beyond universities, such as the organisations most highlighted by universities in their inclusion-oriented web pages, as listed earlier in this chapter. The analysis draws on count data: how many times a keyword or a prescribed combination of keywords appeared on the webpages of each university/organisation.⁵ The data is used to map cross-references among universities and other external organisations in the inclusion-oriented organisational field: references to each other (Table 4.1), to equality legislation (Figs. 4.1A/B), to equality charters (Figs. 4.2A/B), and to specific inclusion-oriented initiatives (Figs. 4.3A/B).

I have previously argued that the government is a **major rationaliser** in the inclusion-oriented organisational field. To assess this expectation, I explore how spread *references to equality legislation* are across universities and across other organisations in the field. The latter, non-academic organisations, have been grouped into three categories: *public bodies and governmental frameworks* (specifically, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Government Equalities Office, and the Disability Confident scheme promoted by the Department of Work and Pensions); *charities and companies*⁶ (specifically, Stonewall, Disabled Go/AccessAble,

⁵ In the case of universities, the webpages refer to the inclusion-oriented webpages (and associated sub-pages) and in the case of non-academic organisations such as the Equality Challenge Unit, the webpages refer to the 'About us' pages or any main landing pages (and associated sub-pages).

⁶ The term 'company' is used broadly to indicate an organised structure and not legal status.

and the Living Wage Foundation) and the *Equality Challenge Unit*—ECU (currently, Advance HE). ECU is a category on its own, because: (a) it comprises of several initiatives, including Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter (REC); (b) unlike other charities, ECU represents an overarching approach to support equality and diversity for staff and students across the HEIs in all four UK nations.

References to equality legislation are counted in relation to recent and earlier equality acts.⁷ For example, upon manually checking a random selection of the mined webpages, I noted that the expression ‘the equality act’ refers to early 2000s equality legislation, especially the Equality Act of 2010.⁸ References were also counted for three selected pieces of earlier legislation: ‘the sex discrimination act’, ‘the race relations act’, and ‘the disability discrimination act’. These acts do not constitute an exhaustive list of equality legislation. They have been chosen because: (a) they emerged frequently on universities’ webpages, as in the case of the Equality Act of 2010 (see previous netnographic findings); (b) the other, earlier acts, are representative for the anti-discrimination legislation which has instituted equality duties for race, disability, and sex, subsequently replaced by a general (combined) equality duty (UK Government, 2023).

In Table 4.1 we can see that *equality legislation references* are made by universities across the board, i.e., from the ancient to the newer universities, and by other organisations in the inclusion-oriented organisational field, i.e., we identified references to equality legislation not only among *public bodies/governmental frameworks* (as one would expect), but also across the webpages of the *Equality Challenge Unit* and the webpages of *other inclusion-oriented charities and companies*.⁹ The prevalence of references to equality legislation indicate the collective, legal rationalisation of the pursuit of inclusion in the inclusion-oriented organisational field

⁷ In the dataset, references to equality legislation have corresponding variables. For example, the variable ‘disability discrimination act’ refers to the number of times this expression occurs across webpages, the same logic applying for: ‘race relations act’, ‘sex discrimination act’, ‘equality act’, ‘equality duty’, ‘socio-economic duty’, ‘protected characteristic’, ‘protected group’ etc.

⁸ Other early 2000s equality legislation potentially captured includes the Equality Act of 2006 and the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations of 2007 (EHRC, 2025b).

⁹ References to other inclusion-oriented organisations capture whether the names of specific inclusion-oriented charities/companies (or the names of their initiatives/schemes) are mentioned on the websites under investigation.

(IOF) in the UK HE, the impact of equality legislation on the elaboration of organisational structures being a long investigated phenomenon in the United States (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Edelman, 1992; Furuta & Ramirez, 2019).

How do organisational commitments 'work' to include universities in the IOF? Take the example of the Government Equalities Office, any given UK university 'U', and the Equality Challenge Unit. From an earlier institutional perspective these governmental unit, university, and charity, have functionally distinct structures and missions. Organisational commitments to inclusion, however, cut through institutional distinctiveness by virtue of collective rationality and the common inclusion-oriented enterprise. In the absence of formal commitments to inclusion, a university would no longer fit into the organisational field, with potential consequences for its reputation and in some cases, for its funding. With regards to the latter scenario, one may consider how the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) used to allocate funding to universities conditional on the university holding at least an Athena Swan Silver Award (an award in ECU's Gender Equality Charter).

In Table 4.1 we also notice that, while bound by legal rationalisation, universities engage with inclusion-oriented organisations beyond academia, a feature expected in organisational fields. For example, references to *inclusion-oriented charities/companies* have been identified across the inclusion-oriented pages of ancient, red brick, plate glass, and newer universities. Interestingly, on the investigated webpages of *public bodies/governmental frameworks* and the *Equality Challenge Unit* I did not find references to other *inclusion-oriented charities and companies*. This may indicate the presence of hierarchies, a theorised feature of organisational fields, whereby the most established organisations within the enterprise seek recognition the least. For example, there is little need for statutory bodies to quote schemes initiated by charities, as these bodies already enjoy legitimacy by working at an arm's length from the government. However, a company promoting inclusion may benefit from flagging the way in which its mission is linked with the goals of other organisations.

Table 4.1 documents the organisational awareness of the committed university *externally*. When manually investigating the inclusion-oriented web pages of universities, an *internal* form of organisational awareness also emerged, in relation to inclusion-oriented personnel and student initiatives, e.g., Equality Staff Networks, equality-oriented Student Charters. Universities' engagement with non-academic inclusion-oriented

organisations in the IOF also appears to facilitate the internalisation of terminology specific to these various external schemes (e.g., many universities now designate their own inclusion ‘champions’).

Within the inclusion-oriented organisational field, one feature of organisational actorhood is paramount, i.e., *proactiveness*. This involves, at minimum, being reactive to changes in the external environment. In the netnographic overview of inclusion-oriented web pages we have seen that universities react to external signals, from changes in governmental legislation to incorporating concepts from equality research. For example, a university published on its inclusion-oriented web page a document containing ‘Intersectionality Guidance’.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 provide a quantitative illustration of how organisational actors react to developments within the inclusion-oriented organisational field: in the case of *universities* (Figs. 4.1A and 4.2A) and in the case of (non-academic) organisations: *public bodies/governmental frameworks*, the *Equality Challenge Unit*, and other inclusion-oriented *charities/companies* (Figs. 4.1B and 4.2B). I focus on equality legislation developments (Fig. 4.1) and equality charter developments (Fig. 4.2).

In Fig. 4.1 we notice that, while engaging with equality legislation, both universities and the above non-academic organisations overwhelmingly refer to the most recent acts (specifically, the Equality Act) as opposed to earlier pieces of legislation, such as the Disability Discrimination Act or the Sex Discrimination Act. In Fig. 4.2, we notice that ECU’s older and most popular equality charter (Athena Swan/ the Gender Equality Charter), is referenced to a larger extent across universities, then the newer, Race Equality Charter. This shows that the pursuit of inclusion in HE engages diverse organisations who are aware of each other and reactive to each other’s initiatives. We also notice that the weighted average of references to equality charters across universities (Fig. 4.2) is generally greater than the weighted average of references to equality legislation (Fig. 4.1).¹⁰ This is expected, as ECU’s equality charters target the higher education sector, while the equality legislation concerns all sectors of activity.

The above frequency analyses illustrate organisational responsiveness to developments in the inclusion-oriented organisational field, such

¹⁰ Counts were divided by the total number of pages mined per organisation to account for the structure of the webpage (i.e., the number of sub-pages), as textual data was also collected from accessible pages at one-click away from the landing page.

as updates in equality legislation (Fig. 4.1) or the mainstreaming of ECU's equality charters (Fig. 4.2). Prior to this analysis, when manually investigating universities' inclusion-oriented webpages, I could also observe organisational responsiveness in relation to the perceived needs of students and staff. This was indicated by the presence of organisational services catering to diverse demographics, e.g., Quiet/Prayer Rooms, Chaplaincies, Faith Spaces, Accessibility Guides.

Commitments do not only integrate universities into the inclusion-oriented organisational field by virtue of inter-organisational awareness. They also forge discursive similarities in terms of *whom* inclusion may concern, homogeneity being indicative 'within-field structuration' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). To illustrate the popularity of different inclusion-oriented concerns across universities, keyword counts were grouped by substantive concern: *disability* (mentions of DisabledGo and Disability Confident), *gender* (mentions of Athena Swan/Gender Equality Charter), *race* (mentions of Race Equality Charter/REC), LGBTQ+ (mentions of Stonewall), and *socio-economic* (mentions of the Living Wage Foundation). In the *socio-economic* category I additionally counted references to POLAR ('participation of local areas'), which is a classification framework used to monitor the participation of young people in higher education (Office for Students 2023).

Figure 4.3 displays the average amount of references to inclusion-oriented organisations and schemes grouped by substantive concern, across universities and other organisations. We notice that the most frequently referenced initiatives across universities concern gender and race. This may be due to a pattern of domination within the inclusion-oriented organisational field, whereby the Equality Challenge Unit had been most influential in setting the inclusion-oriented agenda of UK universities via its charters (see also Fig. 4.2). Inclusion-oriented talk on race is comparable, in terms of the size of referencing across universities, with the issue of LGBTQ+ inclusion. This may reflect an emphasis on 'recognition' rather than 'redistribution' (Fraser, 1995). Socio-economic issues are highlighted the least in universities' inclusion-oriented web pages (thus the black coloured bar, last slice to the right of the stacked graphs, is hardly perceptible). This appears to be a commonality in the inclusion-oriented organisational field; as I shall illustrate later in Chapter 5, neither is 'socio-economic background' on the list of 'protected characteristics' proposed by the Equality Act (2010).

Finally, the presence of disability-oriented mentions we observe in the ‘*public/governmental frameworks*’ is driven by the Disability Confident scheme promoted by the UK’s Department for Work and Pensions. The comparable amount of references to LGBTQ+, disability, and socio-economic schemes in the category ‘*other charities/companies*’ is mainly an artefact of self-references made on the webpages of these organisations/schemes.

The list of inclusion-oriented organisations other than universities (Part B of Figs. 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3) is not exhaustive. There are hundreds of other inclusion-oriented charities, companies and campaigning groups in the United Kingdom. Rather than arbitrarily expanding the sample, I opted to focus on the most illustrative organisations. The selection was based on the netnographic observations made as of 2018, where I took notes of the public and third sector organisations most visible on universities’ inclusion-oriented websites for the public user.

DISCURSIVE HOMOGENEITY ACROSS THE ORGANISATIONAL FIELD

Structuration within organisational fields has been linked with homogenisation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Once incorporated into the organisational field, an organisation may adhere to normative goals and to collective rationality, whereby rational-instrumental actions are favoured over informal, collegial, emotional, or charismatic approaches, to use some of Weber’s terminology. We would expect universities’ embedment into the inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF) to be underpinned by discursive similarities between how commitments are framed across universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations they engage with.

As illustrated earlier in this chapter, universities have been adapting to varied models of identity and purpose projected on their behalf: institutions pursuing knowledge in the broadest sense, engines of socioeconomic development; and the proactive ‘entrepreneurial’ organisation that the university is expected to be today. As the mission of the university became elaborated, we noticed different approaches to inclusion: anti-elitism and universalism; widening participation; and the fully-fledged ‘inclusive organisation’ managing diversity. It is possible that the discursive nuances linked to these epochs arise in universities’ online self-presentations today, reminiscent of previous processes of environmental

adaptation, signalling continuity and generating nuance in universities' pursuit of inclusion.

Source and Analyses of Empirical Observations (3):

Topic Modelling of a Digital Corpus of Data

Based on the netnographic observations as of 2018/19, I identified: (a) links to the inclusion-oriented web pages for universities; (b) links to the landing pages of selected organisations and schemes that universities most visibly referred to on their inclusion-oriented webpages (as previously outlined). Up through 2020, publicly available content was scraped from those public webpages where no restrictions were detected. The data mining algorithm was implemented in the software Python. The textual data was cleaned using the Natural Language Toolkit, which provides libraries and programs for symbolic and statistical natural languages processing.¹¹ Textual information was successfully mined from over one hundred universities and ten external inclusion-oriented organisations and schemes.

To analyse the data, I opted for *Latent Dirichlet Allocation* (LDA), a generative probabilistic model suitable for mapping underlying topics in text corpora (Blei et al., 2003). In text modelling, the probabilities of various topics effectively represent the 'documents', in this case, the files of text mined from universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations.

Table 4.2 illustrates how inclusion is framed in the inclusion-oriented organisational field, using a systematic overview of topic interpretation and labelling. **Part A** of the table is based on textual data from universities and from other inclusion-oriented organisations (public bodies, charities etc.). **Part B** is based on textual data from universities only.

In Table 4.2, (**Part A**) the most frequently occurring words across topics, both for universities and for inclusion-oriented organisations, are used by the researcher to inform substantive categories across the IOF in HE in the United Kingdom (the 'theory-informed dimensions'). Two

¹¹ First, words and sentences have been separated/'tokenized' to enable data cleaning. Second, punctuation and any common words, also known as 'stop words' (e.g., 'the'/'in'/'and'/'is') were removed. Third, a stemming procedure was applied to produce morphological variants of the root/base word (e.g., 'develop' for 'developing'/'development'/'developed').

of these dimensions refer to the broader orientation of the inclusion-oriented ‘talk’ i.e. *Orientation (academic)* and *Orientation (inclusion)*. We see that the talk reflects the institutional milieu: **Academic** (keywords: ‘research’, ‘studi’, ‘academ’, ‘educ’, ‘alumni’, ‘scholar’, ‘school’, ‘faculty’), or the commitment at hand: **Inclusion** (keywords: ‘equal’, ‘divers’, ‘inclus’, ‘disabl’, and ‘race’). The next three dimensions concern organisation, i.e., *Organisation (proactive)*, *Organisation (regulatory)*, and *Organisation (administrative)*. Nuances are distinguished by keywords, as follows: **Proactive** (‘network’, ‘develop’, ‘activ’, ‘action’, ‘business’, ‘manag’, ‘transform’, ‘protect’, ‘inform’, ‘award’, ‘perspective’, ‘charter’, ‘impact’); **Regulatory** (‘policy’, ‘work’, ‘access’, ‘data’, ‘report’, ‘language’, ‘service’, ‘opportun’, ‘public’), and general **Administrative** (‘campus’, ‘commun’, ‘health’, ‘resource’, ‘train’, ‘people’, ‘harass’, ‘fund’, ‘social’).

The theory-informed dimensions speak to the arguments made earlier in this chapter. Different epochs had distinct expectations from universities, and some of these expectations continue to shape the way in which universities present themselves today. For instance, the pursuit of knowledge as a good on its own informs the ‘Academic’ dimension; responsiveness to governmental demands informs the ‘Regulatory’ dimension; the emphasis on universities’ organisational backbone informs the ‘Proactive’ and ‘Administrative’ dimensions. These narratives factor into the way in which universities frame the pursuit of inclusion: when focusing on universities, I drew on text published on their inclusion-oriented webpages. Furthermore, organisational commitments to inclusion enable universities and companies across the board to flag their organisational backbone. Keywords feeding into the above categories, for instance, when it comes to the *Proactive*, *Regulatory*, and *Administrative* dimensions, were also among the most frequently occurring terms in the webpages of the external organisations that universities engage with in the pursuit of inclusion.

Table 4.2 (Part B) displays the most relevant words across three LDA generated topics, specifically for universities. The previously illustrated theory-informed dimensions help the researcher give meaning to these topics (see columns ‘Proposed Topic Label’). This is done by configuring the Top 10 relevant keywords from each topic the LDA has returned, across the theory-informed dimensions.

We can see three LDA topics that summarise the corpus of textual data specifically for universities. There is little distinctiveness between topics,

four of the five theory-informed dimensions being represented by a corresponding keyword across all topics. This is not surprising, as homogeneity is expected to occur in organisational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, in *Topic 1* most keywords point to 'Inclusion' orientation, in *Topic 2* most keywords point to 'Academic' orientation, and in *Topic 3* there is an equal mix of keywords pertaining to 'Inclusion' orientation and to 'Proactive' organisation. These inclusion-oriented, academic-oriented, and inclusion-organisation-oriented narratives carry the ideological and normative imprint of distinct epochs and environments that universities have been adapting to (see the introductory part of this chapter for an overview).

Interestingly, in *Topic 3*, the 'Administrative Organisation' dimension is not represented despite the 'Proactive Organisation' dimension being dominant. This finding illustrates a fine distinction made by the sociologists of institutions between the Weberian concept of 'administration' relating to functional requirements of running an enterprise, and the more recent emphasis on 'organisational proactiveness'. In Selznick's words, we could say that in the latter case administration is infused with value 'beyond the technical requirements at hand' (1957, p. 17). Inclusion organisation is not merely about accommodating diverse demographics; it also helps universities meet cultural expectations of proactiveness and goal-orientation, in addition to their historical scholarly orientation.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

This chapter illustrated how organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) enable an inclusion-oriented organisational field for the HE sector. Universities, public bodies, charities and other companies, all actors in this field, formulate commitments to inclusion in similar ways. OCIs enable universities to articulate organisational actorhood, which is a culturally desired characteristic according to sociological and institutionalist research (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013).

This is what I call *Function 2* of organisational commitments, or the 'the institution-centred function'. As elaborated in the theory-oriented chapter, similarity in organisational commitments may work to include universities in the external environment in which they operate (see

Chapter 3, Table 3.2, *Function 2*). From an early institutionalist perspective, commitments could play an integrative role for universities in the institutional environment (even when isomorphic, they may work as ‘generalised media of exchange’), while from a sociological institutionalist perspective, commitments can purvey universities with legitimacy (provided that their object or their *modus operandi* aligns with cultural norms). In either case, via OCIs universities become themselves included into the institutional and cultural environment in which they operate.

The Peculiarity of Homogeneity and Its Implications

The similarity we have observed in terms of how universities ‘talk’ about inclusion on their webpages is harder to expect from a traditional functionalist perspective. If we were to assume that universities are agents capable of steering their course according to ‘what works’ in their individual circumstances (the early functionalist argument), we would expect substantial variation, not only in how commitments are formulated, but also in whether universities display them at all. HE policy in the United Kingdom has been expecting differentiation. For example, the Jarratt Report (1985) anticipated ‘significant variation of ‘management style’ from one university to another’ and that individual universities would develop ‘their own ethos’ which it linked with ‘variations in history, tradition, size, location’ and even with ‘the influence of outstanding leaders’ (p. 8). The Dearing Report (1997) expected that universities ‘will emphasise different elements in their chosen purposes and activities’ and that diversity between institutions ‘will become the basis for collaboration between complementary institutions’ (p. 8). This chapter showed that homogeneity, rather than diversity, is the basis of interaction across universities as well as between universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations. Homogeneity is reflected in organisational purposes, with regards to the presence of inclusion as part of universities’ mission, and in how these purposes are attained, i.e., via instrumental organisational action.

This feature is key to evidencing the presence of an inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF) in the UK HE, with isomorphism being expected as new areas of institutional life are establishing and become populated by organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; see also Wooten & Hoffman, 2016). While in this chapter I have illustrated

the IOF based on netnographic material (in terms of how universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations talk about inclusion and cross-referencing of equality legislation and inclusion-oriented initiatives), further research may explore the inter-organisational connectedness within this field at the structural, rather than discursive level. This can be done by mapping universities' engagement with inclusion-oriented organisations in terms of equality charter memberships, pledges, and involvement with workplace equality indexes (this is partly done in Chapter 5, when operationalising universities' memberships in equality charters). One may also track the presence of university personnel in inclusion-oriented networks set by professional membership schemes such as Advance HE, and vice versa, tracking the engagement of personnel from external inclusion-oriented charities and professional associations with universities' equality and diversity teams. Last but not least, researchers may delve deeper into the so-called 'material and visual basis' (Greenwood et al., 2017, p. 436) by exploring the 'durability' and 'transferability' of material artefacts such as office spaces and the communication infrastructures (Jones et al., 2017; see also Latour, 1986).

Homogeneity in universities' organisational commitments to inclusion has important implications for whether organisational commitments to inclusion work in relation to what they explicitly set themselves to do: make universities more inclusive. Even in a scenario where universities were initially motivated by ambitions to become more inclusive in their student and staff demographic, similarity in how inclusion is being pursued is expected to lead to decoupling between organisational forms (in this case, organisational commitments) and practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In Chapter 5 I will explore whether organisational commitments 'work' to include underrepresented populations in universities, what I call: *Function 1* of OCIs, or the 'people-centred function'. The implications of both functions to inclusion organisation and the perceived gap between the 'talk' and the 'walk' will be discussed in-depth, in the light of the results, in Chapter 6.

APPENDIX

See Tables 4.1, 4.2 and Figs. 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3.

Table 4.1 Inter-organisational awareness in the inclusion-oriented organisational field

<i>Universities</i>	<i>Equality legislation references (government)</i>	<i>References to inclusion-oriented charities/ companies</i>
Ancient	✓	✓
Red brick	✓	✓
Plate glass	✓	✓
Post-1992 (ex-polytechnics)	✓	✓
Other	✓	✓
<i>Non-academic organisations</i>	<i>Equality legislation references (government)</i>	<i>References to inclusion-oriented charities/ companies (self-references excluded)</i>
Public bodies/governmental frameworks	✓	—
Equality Challenge Unit	✓	—
Other organisations (charities, companies)	✓	✓

Notes

- ✓ at least one reference was made on the main landing webpages of the listed organisations (on the inclusion-oriented web pages, in the case of universities)
- no references were made on the main landing webpages of the listed organisations (on the inclusion-oriented web pages, in the case of universities)

Table 4.2 Systematic overview of topic interpretation and labelling

A: Dimensions informed by the most frequently occurring terms across the LDA topics both for universities and for other inclusion-oriented organisations				
Orientation (academic)	Orientation (inclusion)	Organisation (proactive)	Organisation (regulatory)	Organisation (administrative)
research studi academ educ alumni scholar school faculty	equal divers inclus disabl race	network develop active action business manag transform protect inform award perspective charter impact	policy work access data report language service opportun public	campus commun health resource train people harass fund social

(continued)

Table 4.2 (continued)

B: Occurrence of one or more keywords relating to each dimension among the Top 10 keywords most relevant to a given Topic T^p in universities ($T = 3, \lambda = 0.5$)						
Topics	Orientation (academic)	Orientation (inclusion)	Organisation (proactive)	Organisation (regulatory)	Organisation (administrative)	Proposed Topic Label
1	research studi	equal divers inclusion disabl	network inform	polic	work	Inclusion narrative
2	research studi scholar alumni school	equal divers	business	polic	fund	Academic narrative
3	research	equal inclus disabl divers	transform perspective network inform	service	—	Inclusion Organisation narrative

Notes

1 Many keywords in the table are root words, e.g., 'educ' stands clearly for 'education', 'educat' stands for 'education', 'educat' stands for 'education', etc. Where complete words are not easily deduced by the reader from the root word, a complete word is displayed instead, e.g., the full word 'service' is displayed for the root 'servic'.

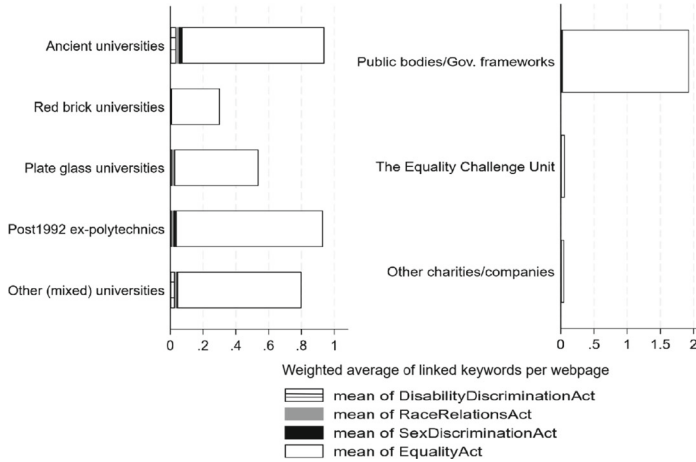


Fig. 4.1 (A, left side) and (B, right side) References to new equality legislation (the Equality Act) as opposed to earlier legislation, across universities (A) and other organisations (B)

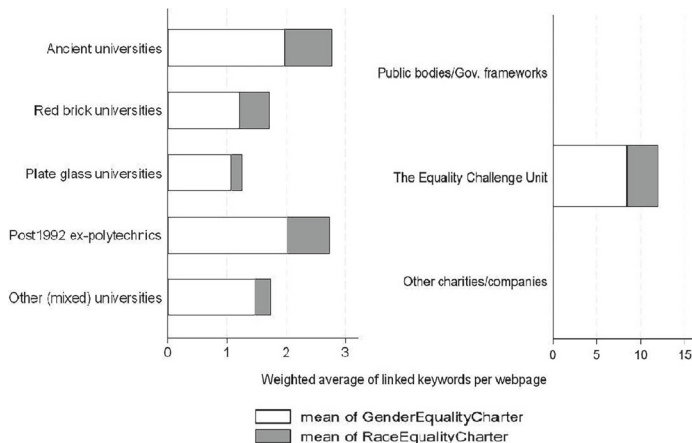


Fig. 4.2 (A, left side) and (B, right side) References to ECU's Gender Equality Charter and Race Equality Charter, across universities (A) and other organisations (B)

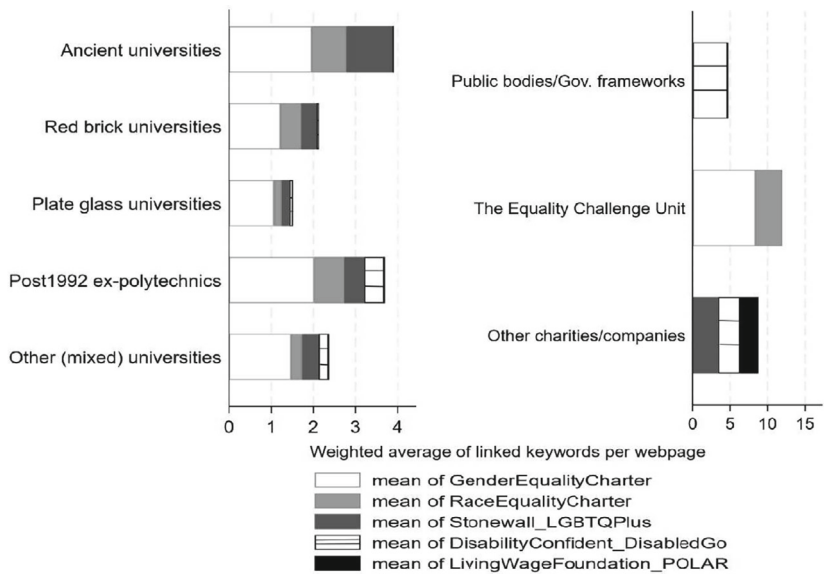


Fig. 4.3 (A, left side) and (B, right side) References to inclusion-oriented organisations and schemes by substantive concern, across universities (A) and other organisations (B)

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‘Walking the Talk’: The People-Centred Function (*Function 1*)

Whether organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) work to include people in universities (*Function 1* of commitments) is not the same as making universities more inclusive. For example, one of the most popular frameworks of organisational commitments in the UK higher education (HE), the Race Equality Charter (REC), is committed to addressing barriers faced by Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) staff and students. Whether REC works or not to include people in universities should be assessed in relation to its impact on the declared demographic of interest, and this *can*, but does not *necessarily* mean that universities are generally lacking in terms of ethnic diversification. For example, in England people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to pursue a university degree than those from White British backgrounds (Bolton, 2025; Crawford & Greaves, 2015).

This is not to say that OCIs in the UK HE have gotten their demographics wrong. Staff from minority ethnic backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in higher-level contacts, as I have previously shown (Baltaru, 2023), and ethnic inequalities persist when looking at degree attainment/degree awarding gaps (UUK, 2022). However, the reader should be aware that the current empirical analysis of whether organisational commitments work is confined to utilise the demographic groups that make the general, declared object of the respective organisational commitments, or, where the declared object has changed over time (as in the case of the Athena Swan charter), the demographic group that is

most often linked with that specific charter/scheme in the public view.¹ In this way, we can focus on whether organisational commitments (the ‘talk’) deliver on those areas that they are associated with in the public view (the ‘walk’).

This chapter starts with identifying the demographic groups that organisational commitments in the UK HE, in the early 2000s, have been primarily concerned with. To identify them, I draw on findings from Chapter 4 with regards to the main inclusion-oriented frameworks that universities quoted on their inclusion-oriented web pages as of 2018. I remark that organisational commitments have been mainly focused on issues of gender (specifically, females), disability (specifically, people reporting a disability) and ethnicity (specifically, Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups), with a notable lesser concern with socio-economic inequalities. Drawing on existing statistical reports, I then provide an overview of student and staff trends for these specific demographic groups in the UK higher education sector. Change has occurred over the last couple of decades, towards greater representation, and in some cases, over-representation of these *historically* underrepresented demographic groups, although inequalities persist in the details. The statistical account is followed by an overview of literature documenting gaps between commitments and practice. Furthermore, I empirically evaluate the impact of OCIs on the numbers of females, ethnic minorities and disabled students and staff, focusing on a four-year timespan starting with 2018/19 when data to operationalise organisational commitments were collected. The results are presented and discussed in relation to *Function 1* of OCIs, i.e., whether organisational commitments impact the actual student and staff demographics.

Importantly, while the timeline utilised in the empirical analysis is suitable for assessing the impact of OCIs from a policy-oriented point of view (i.e., four-year planning is commonly used by universities when implementing inclusion strategies), the results cannot be extrapolated

¹ Athena Swan was established to support commitments to advancing the careers of women working in STEM subjects in higher education and research, and it has since been mainstreamed to cover staff across the board (academic and non-academic) and students (Advance HE, 2019a). While the current information on the Advance HE pages states that the charter is now used “to address gender equality more broadly, and not just barriers to progression that affect women” (Advance HE, 2025, p. 1), this direction has been scrutinised in the public domain where the charter is emblematic for supporting women’s inclusion (Hunter Blackburn, 2024).

for earlier time periods. In other words, this empirical chapter serves as an illustration for how *Function 1* of OCIs can be explored empirically and answers the question of whether commitments impacted the student and staff demographic in the most recent years (where a gap in research is identified). With regards to earlier periods of time, this chapter will discuss earlier empirical research; as we will see, previous studies struggled to identify an impact of organisational commitments on their targeted demographics (e.g., Gregory-Smith, 2017). With the current timeline (2018/19–2022/23) affording a finer operationalisation of organisational commitments, i.e., our predictors of interest, we are able to see mixed results. The absence of an impact of organisational commitments at the demographic level is replicated (especially when it comes to equality charter memberships) but not in every case (as the analysis will show, awareness of equality legislation is linked with positive trends in some historically underrepresented demographic groups).

ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO INCLUSION—HIGHLIGHTED DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Organisational commitments can be seen as goals attached to a formal organisational structure. In the oldest institutions, organisational commitments are often distinct from the original purpose of the establishment, although they may crystallise into institutional missions over time. For example, universities' historical activities can be broken down in teaching and research, but over time, as the organisational backbone of universities became elaborated, the broader pursuit of socio-economic development has also been adopted (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

As shown in Chapter 4, organisational commitments emerge, by definition, within a field of collective entities (from public bodies to charities) bounded by collective rationality. To identify the main demographics that are targeted by universities' organisational commitments to inclusion in the United Kingdom, we must turn our attention to the institutional environment that universities inhabit, and consider the commitments articulated by the government, charities and other inclusion-oriented companies that universities engage with.

Let us begin with the demographics of concern in the UK's equality legislation. The Equality Act of 2010 lists the following nine 'protected characteristics': age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and

sexual orientation. It is illegal to discriminate against a person because of any of these characteristics. In addition, public authorities and entities exercising public functions (universities included) have a general ‘equality duty’ to eliminate discrimination, foster equality of opportunity and good relations between people. Although the Act contains a public sector duty concerning socio-economic inequalities, the duty is framed in loose terms as a ‘due regard to the desirability’ of the authority exercising its functions in a way that could reduce inequalities of outcome rooted in socio-economic disadvantage. Socio-economic status is not among the protected characteristics, and as a result organisations do not face the same legal pressures to foster equality for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bradshaw et al., 2024).

Three of the nine protected characteristics (specifically: race, disability and sex) used to have equality duties of their own, before the generalised Public Sector Equality Duty was introduced in 2011 (Edelstyn, 2023). These were: the race equality duty introduced under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act of 2000, the gender equality duty introduced by the Equality Act of 2006, and the disability equality duty introduced by the Disability Discrimination Act of 2005. The emphasis on sex, race and disability is a continuation of influential equality legislation prior to the 2000s, notably the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, the Race Relations Act of 1976, and the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. Gender, race and disability are highlighted when it comes to equality legislation, the emphasis falling on historically underrepresented groups, namely females, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

Gender and race also emerge as central areas of interest for the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), currently merged into Advance HE (2018). Registered as a charity with multiple objectives (Register of Charities, 2025a), ECU has been standing for equality and diversity in universities since 2001, and for eliminating discrimination linked with the characteristics protected by the equality legislation (EHRC, 2015). Unlike other inclusion-oriented charities, ECU’s equality work in HE is funded by key bodies such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council, the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, Universities UK and GuildHE (HEFCE, 2013). The receipt of public funding and the wide reach across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, make ECU probably the most influential charity in catalysing universities’ inclusion-oriented organisational commitments in

the United Kingdom. When checking the demographic that ECU was originally concerned with according to how the charity appears in the Register of Charities of the Charity Commission for England and Wales, we note: 'people with disabilities', 'people of a particular ethnic or racial origin' and 'other defined groups' (Register of Charities, 2025a).

ECU's two major 'equality charters', i.e., schemes that organisations can engage with to be recognised as committed to equality and diversity, concern *gender*: Athena Swan or the Gender Equality Charter, founded in 2005 (Advance HE, 2019a); and *race*: the Race Equality Charter, trialled in 2014 and officially launched in 2016, focused on supporting Black and minority ethnic staff and students on issues ranging from representation to progression (Advance HE, 2018). Although today Athena Swan quotes 'gender inequality more broadly' (Advance HE, 2025), throughout the early 2000s it established itself as an initiative supporting the careers of women in STEMM employment (Advance HE, 2019a), and it became expected, in public view, that it should be supporting females (Hunter Blackburn, 2024).

Ethnic minorities, females and people with disabilities, also emerged as major demographics of concern when exploring universities' inclusion-oriented web pages (see Chapter 4). While universities often quote the full list of protected characteristics according to the equality legislation, inclusion-oriented actions in relation to the above groups were remarkably widespread.² This emerged when looking at keyword frequencies but also when considering the netnographic notes; based on the latter (qualitative) observations, examples of inclusion-oriented practices can be quoted, i.e., in relation to gender ('Women's Leadership Network', 'Women's Staff Network', 'Gender Pay Gap Action Plan'); race ('Annual Race Lectures', 'Equality Briefings on Race', 'Black History Month', 'BAME Staff Network') and disability ('Disability Confident' symbol, 'Let's Talk Disability', 'Disability Services').

² Gender reassignment and sexual orientation were also frequently referred to by universities (e.g., 'Transgender Equality Code of Conduct'; 'Gender Identity Policy') which widely publicised their ties with the LGBTQ+ campaigning charity Stonewall (Register of Charities, 2025b; Stonewall 2025). I do not empirically assess the impact of organisational commitments on LGBTQ+ inclusion at the structural, demographic level, because of insufficient publicly available, granular, university-level data on the number of students and staff falling into this category.

Females, Ethnic Minorities and People with Disabilities in Higher Education

In the United Kingdom, gender, race and disability are characteristics that are ‘protected’ by the equality legislation, prioritised in equality charters and schemes, and highlighted in universities’ inclusion-oriented web pages. Their topicality has to do with the historical underrepresentation of females, people from minority ethnic backgrounds and people with disabilities, in education and in employment (especially in the highest, most-prestigious levels of activity). In Chapter 2, where I provided a historical overview of the pursuit of inclusion in the UK higher education, we have seen that it was not up until nineteenth century that the first Black male graduate was recorded (Black Cantabs Research Society, 2017), and women admitted to sitting the General Examination (Carter, 2018). Concerns with the inclusion of people with disabilities became more consequential in the second half of the twentieth century, as the participation rates in HE increased across the board. Universities were encouraged to provide ‘reasonable adjustments’ to reduce the institutional barriers preventing people with disabilities from working or studying in them, while opening their doors to people of all ages who desired to complete their education or upgrade their skills (Dearing Report, 1997; see also the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995).

The inclusion of females and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds continues to be a topical issue over a century and a half onwards, as indicated by the equality charters of the Equality Challenge Unit. Similarly, as we have seen in Chapter 4, universities frequently refer to gender, race and disability on their inclusion-oriented webpages, more so than to other characteristics, such as socio-economic background. But what are the numbers of females, people from minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities in the UK higher education like? Let us now have a look at some of the most recent statistics for these groups and for socio-economic background as a reference point.

The demographic makeup of the higher education sector today should be understood in the context of a dramatic growth in student enrolments over the last half of a century. The HE participation rate, as indicated

by first time student enrolments,³ increasing from about 6% in the early 1960s (Wyness, 2010) to about half of the English-domiciled population in 2017/18 according to the Department for Education (DfE, 2019). A segment of this expansion took place in the early 2000s, DfE showing that the HE initial participation rate (HEIPR) increased steadily from 41.8% in 2006/07 to 50.2% in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019). There was an overall pattern of growth, despite the drop of 6.5% in HEIPR from 2011/12 to 2012/13, contemporaneous with the increase in tuition fees. Neither did the COVID-19 pandemic destabilise the participation rate. According to Bolton (2021) the total number of applicants, as captured by data from Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), was up by 3.2% from 2019 to 2020. The growth we see in the early 2000s especially applies to full-time undergraduate students, as the total number of part-time entrants decreased by half from 2008/9 to 2019/20, as illustrated by HESA data (Bolton, 2021). Indeed, issues of underrepresentation can come up when looking at granular data rather than at the aggregate student and staff populations. Let us now zoom into historically underrepresented demographics.

If a century and a half ago, in a historical moment, University of London assessed the first women to sit the General Examination, in the early 2000s females were already more likely to participate in higher education, this 'reversed' gender gap (where females participate more than males) widening from 9.4% in 2006/07 to 12.5% in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019). Statistics from UCAS corroborate this trend, as the overall growth in the number of accepted applicants to full-time UG courses from 2010 to 2024 was more pronounced for females (+16%) than for males (+11%) (Bolton, 2025). Finer grained data reveal pockets of female underrepresentation, although female participation is growing across the board. This is the case when considering the student demographic in male-dominated subjects or the staff demographic in higher-level academic contracts. Information published via the Department for Education on the Education Hub (2021) shows that between 2011 and 2020 there was a 50.1% increase in the number of women accepted into full-time Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) undergraduate courses, the share of women entering full-time UG courses in these

³ The age range based on which the participation rate is reported in Wyness (2010) is 18 to 30 years old, while the age range applicable to the statistics reported by the DfE (2019) is 17 to 30 years old.

areas changing from 33.6% to 41.4%. With regards to gender inequalities across contractual levels, some of the latest Advance HE data show that as of 2022/23, only 30.8% of all professors were female (2024).

Furthermore, if in the United Kingdom, White males from socio-economically advantaged strata have dominated the university demographic for centuries, UCAS data as of 2024 show that the highest three demographic groups in terms of entry rates were minority ethnic (Chinese: 66%, Asian: 51%, Black: 48%) compared to 30% of applicants from White backgrounds (Bolton, 2025).⁴ When using 2022/23 DfE data to zoom into the applicants eligible for free school meals (FSM), Bolton (2025) reports that White British boys are most disadvantaged, with only 14% entering HE by the age of 19.⁵ Similarly, only 23% of Black Caribbean boys eligible for FSM started HE by the age of 19, compared to 45% of girls from the same ethnic and FSM-eligible group. Inequalities concerning minority ethnic groups persist when it comes to educational attainment (among students) and occupying higher-level contracts (among staff). According to a study done by Universities UK, White students are more likely than Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students to be awarded a First or a 2:1 for their degree, although the gap has reduced from 13.2% in 2017/18 to 8.8% in 2020/21 (UUK, 2022). As of 2022/23, UK national academic staff from BAME backgrounds disproportionally occupy fixed term contracts (29.0%) compared to White academics (23.3%) (Advance HE, 2024). UK-based BAME academic staff are also less likely to be professors, i.e., they occupy only 11.7% of the professorial positions, the issue of underrepresentation being especially pronounced for UK Black academics, who make for only 3.8% of professors (ibid., 2024).

The widening of access to higher education has not only incorporated females and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds, but also more people declaring disabilities. UCAS data for the end of the 2023 application cycle show a 77.5% increase in the number of UK applicants reporting disabilities and mental health conditions, compared to the 2019 figure, when 58,000 applicants did so (UCAS, 2023). The proportion of all staff who disclosed having a disability increased, from 3.9% in

⁴ The UCAS data refer to the 18-year-old entry rates.

⁵ The DfE entry rate data broken down by Free School Meals eligibility refers to young people located in the state sector of England.

2012/13 to 7.2% in 2022/23 (Advance HE, 2024). As of 2022/23, the proportion of disabled staff in professorial roles (7.1%) was lower than the proportion of non-disabled staff in professorial roles (10.4%) (ibid.). Due to the self-declared nature of disability, it is possible that the figures partly reflect an increase in the recording of people with disabilities in HE rather than a trend in the population. One may additionally note, based on Census data, that although there was an increase in the number of people with disabilities in England and Wales (9.8 million in 2021 compared to 9.4 million in 2011) the proportion of disabled people in the population decreased (ONS, 2023).

Higher education student and staff demographics have generally improved across the groups that organisational commitments highlight (females, minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities). Interestingly, other demographic groups, such as individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged strata, continue to experience inequalities and do not benefit from the same levels of commitment from universities (see Chapter 4 in this book; see also Bradshaw et al., 2024). According to UCAS data from the end of 2024 application cycle, substantial differences between the entry rates of the most and the least disadvantaged groups persisted, with 51% of UCAS entrants coming from areas with the highest level of historical participation (POLAR group Quintile 5) compared to only 24% applicants from the lowest participation areas (POLAR group Quintile 1), based on the Participation Of Local Areas (POLAR) classification (Bolton, 2025; see also OfS, 2020).

DO ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENTS IMPACT THEIR TARGETED DEMOGRAPHICS?

In a publication series commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Milem et al. distinguish between *diversity as engagement*, which comprises of 'a broad and varied set of activities and initiatives' (2005, p. 4), and *compositional diversity*, which refers to 'the numerical and proportional representation' of specific demographic groups on campus (ibid., p. 15). The authors favour the first approach, questioning numerical indicators from a policy-oriented perspective, e.g., when it comes to defining how much demographic diversification is enough. This preference is reflected in US-based studies of inclusion-oriented organisational commitments. Matthews et al. (2023) focus on the process of developing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) mission

statements at the Chicago College of Nursing, University of Illinois. Garcia et al. (2021) explore how student affairs professionals interpret and enact EDI at ‘predominantly White research institutions’ in a Southern state (p. 140). Using a ‘critical qualitative approach’ (sic), the authors distance themselves from a focus on demographic indicators, arguing that focusing on demographic diversification may overlook practices that ‘contribute to institutional transformation’ (ibid., 2021, p. 137).

While a process-oriented, interpretivist approach provides an important angle to inclusion that can complement the demographic lens, one should not fall into the trap of considering the former a replacement of the latter. It is more important than ever to be equally aware of the problems associated with the ‘diversity as engagement’ approach, from the loose definition of ‘engagement’ (e.g., does drafting a mission statement qualify as ‘engagement’ with inclusion?) to the hazards of opportunism that can arise from ambiguous definitions and selective retrieval of individual-level experiences of inclusion (or exclusion, thereof). For universities themselves, the route to ‘engage’ with EDI in ways divorced from demographic indicators has opened a Pandora box, whereby language is used loosely and creates a spurious sense of progression towards inclusiveness.

Some studies suggest that this problem is inherent to the language of organisational documents and to how statements of commitment work. Templeton et al. (2016) investigate universities located in the San Francisco Bay Area and find incongruences between the missions of diversity programs, diversity statements, and university missions, which they consider reflective of a tension between the use of inclusive terminology and progress at the structural level. Taylor et al. (2019) analyse the content of diversity mission statements from fifty public ‘flagship’ post-secondary institutions in the United States. They illustrate how the use of ‘blanket terminology’ prevents the accomplishment of equality goals, while enabling the institution to maintain control over who benefits from the mission statements. In Norway, Orupabo and Mangset (2021) provide an exploration of academic recruitment based on observations and in-depth interviews with recruiters. They find that the inclusion of diversity considerations in the search for candidates did not prevent the use of criteria favouring men in key steps within the recruitment process. In the United Kingdom, Bradshaw et al. (2024) propose a meta-analysis of the kind of diversity data collected by elite universities, combined with content analyses of equality policies. Their findings reveal that considerations about class background are generally left outside universities’

inclusion-oriented policies and data monitoring when it comes to staff, despite the need for actions to alleviate class inequalities. Kimura (2014) explores equality and diversity policies and practices in the UK universities, across the sector and in one university case study. The study draws attention to the limitations of organisational commitments to empower the demographics that they are aimed at. Not surprisingly, much of the research on OCIs in the United Kingdom focuses on equality charters. Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) conducted focus-groups, semi-structured interviews and workshops with female academics and students that the Athena Swan charter is concerned with. They conclude that gender equality programmes represent a 'moderate' means of resistance for feminists, while also being linked with disproportionate allocation of workload to women and marginalised groups. The implications of the Athena Swan charter to the reproduction of gender inequalities in the distribution of workload are corroborated by Nash et al. (2020) in a regional Australian university. Based on student attainment data and institutional ethnographies of selected English universities holding Race Equality Charter awards and of Advance HE, Campion and Clark (2022) find that the REC is not perceived to deliver substantial progress; nevertheless, it inspires strategic race equality work, for instance, supporting other race-oriented initiatives that have the potential to deliver incremental change.

Quantitative investigations of whether organisational commitments to inclusion impact changes at the structural, demographic level are extremely scant. Few years ago, two quantitative investigations of the impact of the Race Equality Charter using Higher Education Statistics Agency data were published (Baltaru, 2023; Nwosu, 2024). The authors struggled to find evidence that joining REC makes a difference for the subsequent share of minority ethnic staff. Another systematic quantitative investigation was done in 2015 by Gregory-Smith. Two natural experiments: the introduction of Athena Swan (AS) in 2005 and the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) announcement in 2011 that certain research grants would require a 'silver' AS award, were used to assess the effect of the charter on medical schools in the United Kingdom. Despite a general increase in the share of female employees in clinical employment across contractual levels in the early 2000s, the study did not find substantial differences between early and newer AS charter adopters, or that making funding conditional on holding a 'silver' AS award works to progress female careers. While not directly measuring the impact of organisational commitments, Boliver (2013, 2015) brings evidence for

the endurance of higher education access inequalities in the early 2000s. Controlling for prior qualifications, Boliver (2013) finds that historically underrepresented UCAS applicants are less likely to apply to elite, Russell Group universities (specifically, applicants from lower socio-economic groups and from state schools), or to receive offers of admissions from these institutions (specifically, applicants from state schools and from minority ethnic backgrounds). Such investigations are crucial to contrast structural indicators of inclusion with the booming of inclusion-oriented commitments in the last two decades.

The shortage of systematic quantitative studies on the impact of OCIs on the university demographic comes at a significant loss for the equality and diversity scholarship, as such investigations can afford representative, sector-level insights about whether and in what direction commitments shape who studies and works in universities. Not addressing this gap is partly responsible, in my view, for the taken for granted assumption, in policy making, that strategic organisational action works, and for a situation where it is virtually impossible to hold sector-level equality programmes accountable. Assessing the impact of equality initiatives without systematic quantitative investigations is prone to over-generalisations and disproportionate focus on successful (or unsuccessful) initiatives, just like exclusively focusing on quantitative investigations constrains inclusion to a merely demographic matter. To progress the research on inclusion in universities, we should pursue a balanced account of how and where OCIs ‘work’.

This chapter contributes to this endeavour by supplying a quantitative investigation of organisational commitments to a body of overwhelmingly qualitative and process-oriented scholarship; in the United Kingdom, the latter has brought a formidable, critical collection of case-studies drawing attention to a disconnection between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’. It is time that we assess how these dynamics hold across the sector and across those demographics that have been formally prioritised by organisational commitments: gender, ethnicity and disability.

METHODOLOGY

Organisational commitments to inclusion are used to predict the demographic makeup of students and staff in higher education, with an emphasis on those groups that are most frequently referred to in the organisational commitments articulated by universities and other

inclusion-oriented charities and organisations, as introduced earlier in this chapter. I therefore assess whether organisational commitments matter for the *female demographic* (female students, female staff, female professors), for the *minority ethnic demographic*, i.e., individuals falling into Black, Asian and other/mixed backgrounds as opposed to the White category (minority ethnic students, minority ethnic staff, minority ethnic professors) and *people with disabilities* (students and staff with a declared disability). The indicators are based on data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).⁶ For a granular analysis, I additionally consider the number of *professors*, as universities have been consistently called to follow up on their commitments when it comes to the underrepresentation of females and ethnic minorities at the most senior levels (Ellis, 2024; University & College Union, 2013).⁷

Timeline and Sample

This analysis assesses whether organisational commitments to inclusion are associated with changes in the above demographics of interest between two time-points: 2018/19 (T0) to 2022/23 (T1). This timeline enables us to expand the existing quantitative studies of organisational commitments with newer data (Gregory-Smith, 2017; Nwosu, 2024). It is paramount to continuously assess the impact of OCIs as more data becomes available, partly because commitments may take longer to become ingrained into institutional cultures and create the right conditions for their effectiveness (Baltaru, 2023). Furthermore, based on the exploration of universities' inclusion-oriented web pages (see Chapter 4), it emerged that a 4-year interval is commonly used in institutional planning when assessing equality progress.

⁶ Student numbers: the indicators refer to students registered on a course leading to a HE qualification or a HE-level credit, irrespective of nationality, except for the ethnicity data, where the counts refer to the UK-based student population. Staff numbers: the indicators refer to staff employed under a contract of employment at a HE institution. Source: HESA Open Data <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>, available through the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

⁷ Analysing disabled staff by professorial status is not viable because of the very small numbers in this category. In addition, the issue of underrepresentation at the professorial level has been most widely discussed in relation to ethnic minorities and females. When it comes to disability, one shall additionally consider the proportion of people with disabilities in the population who are able to work.

The valid sample used in the current investigation consists of higher education institutions (HEIs) with university status (excluding further HE colleges and alternative HE providers) for which data were available across all variables of interest, including the primary data collected to operationalise organisational commitments (to be introduced later in this section). Regarding the HESA demographic indicators, there are more missing values in the staff data (especially for the numbers of professors) than in the student data. Upon data cleaning and matching with the primary data operationalising organisational commitments, the consistent number of universities across student demographic sub-groups was just over one hundred ($N = 104$), while the consistent number of universities across staff demographic sub-groups and professor sub-groups was smaller ($N = 84$ universities).

The sample is representative of the UK HEIs which have an established presence in the public eye: those HEIs with university status, which are not further higher education colleges or alternative/private HE providers, have consistently appeared in ranking tables such as the Complete University Guide and have consistently returned data to HESA. Working with a homogenous sample of established universities is common in HE research (Taylor et al., 2019); the comparability between institutions is strengthened and we can avoid issues arising from changes in the HESA coverage of HE providers.

The current sample includes universities varied in terms of foundation era (ancient, ‘redbrick’, ‘civic’, ‘plate glass’, universities with polytechnic roots etc.) across the United Kingdom. In Table 5.1 we can see that the universities under investigation are varied in terms of membership in the prestigious Russell Group, income from funding body grants to total income, region and demographic composition.

Operationalisation and Analytical Strategy

The dependent variables consist in changes in the absolute numbers of students and staff and (more specifically) professors across the demographics of concern (females, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities) from 2018/19 to 2022/23; these measures are utilised while controlling for the overall changes in the total numbers of students/staff/professors for the period of investigation. Alternative model specifications (e.g., with dependent variables operationalised as percentage changes) are provided in the robustness analysis.

A multiple linear regression model is used to assess the impact of inclusion-oriented organisational commitments on the changes in the student and staff demographic sub-groups (2018/19 to 2022/23). Consider the multiple linear regression formula:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1i} + \beta_2 X_{2i} + \beta_n X_{ni} + e_i$$

In the current models, 'Y' stands for the demographic changes recorded for a university 'i' (absolute differences in specific student and staff groups from 2018/19 to 2022/23), modelled based on selected predictors and control variables 'X₁' to 'X_n', where 'β₀' is the intercept and 'e_i' stands for the error term. While organisational commitments to inclusion are the main predictors, the models will also control for university prestige, finances, region and relevant differences in demographic composition and size. Continuous variables are standardised by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation.

Organisational commitments to inclusion are measured in two ways. First, via institutional memberships in equality charters, i.e., in the Athena Swan/Gender Equality Charter and in the Race Equality Charter (REC) as of 2018/19, with universities coded '1' if members and '0' otherwise. As of 2018, 44% of universities in the sample were REC members. In the case of Athena Swan (AS) the distinction is made between charter members holding at least a 'Silver' award (coded '1') and all other universities, i.e., non-members and universities holding a Bronze 'planning' award (coded '0'). This is because in the smaller sample of universities returning professor data less than five percent of institutions were not AS members. Focusing on universities holding at least a 'Silver' award provides a more meaningful distinction, with 15% of universities falling under this high achieving AS charter bracket. Second, two additional binary indicators were derived from the textual data mined from universities' inclusion-oriented webpages (see Chapter 4 for the data collection overview). These indicators capture: (a) whether the university refers, on its inclusion-oriented web pages, to the Equality Act or not (illustrative terminology: equality act, equality duty, protected characteristic)—just over 80% of universities did so; (b) whether the university refers, on its inclusion-oriented web pages, to popular schemes dedicated to the inclusion of people with disabilities (specifically, Disability Confident and DisabledGo/AccessAble)—a third of the universities in the sample did so. The universities displaying references to the above equality legislation

and inclusion schemes have been coded '1', while the universities who did not make such references on their inclusion-oriented web pages have been coded '0'. The data collection process started as of 2018/19, and the refinement process, including tests and re-iterations of data mining, run up through 2020.

University prestige is captured by whether the university is a member of the prestigious Russell Group (coded '1') or not (coded '0'). Russell Group (RG) membership has been widely used in UK-based HE research to differentiate elite universities from all other universities, the group being compared, in public view, with the 'Ivy League' in the United States (Baltaru, 2023; BBC, 2006). These research-intensive universities are leading the UK HE sector in terms of student interest (National Audit Office, 2017), selectivity (Raffe & Croxford, 2013), research quality as measured by the Research Excellence Framework and endowments and invested income (Boliver, 2015). Accounting for Russell Group membership is important because historically, underrepresented minority groups have fared worst in elite universities compared to all other universities (Boliver, 2013), but also because of their wealth and public appeal which may impact how their demographics are changing. For example, prestigious universities may be partially 'shielded' from sector-level challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and from financial crises, which is relevant for their admissions and recruitment capacities. For the period under investigation, RG membership is a time invariant indicator. **University finances** are captured by the proportion of funding body grants (FBG) income in total income. This HESA indicator refers to grants from funding bodies such as the Office for Students, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, the Department for Education and the Department for Education Northern Ireland. The share of income from funding body grants in total income accounts for different financial configurations across the UK higher education sector, whereby some universities rely more on income from FBG as opposed to externally funded research, tuition fees and other sources of income. FBG income is measured as of 2018. **Regional differences** are consequential to how universities are funded and run across the United Kingdom (consider the Scottish devolution). Unlike in England and Wales, home students who choose to pursue a university degree in Scotland do not have to pay tuition fees; furthermore, the number of Scottish-domiciled students that can be recruited is capped (Ogden & Thomas, 2024). The models control for

whether universities are located in Scotland (coded '1') or not (coded '0'). This is a time invariant indicator. For descriptive statistics, see Table 5.1.

University size is captured by the total number of students/staff/professors from the demographic groups of interest, as of 2018/19. For example, when predicting the changes in the number of females from 2018/19 to 2022/23, the model controls for the total number of females as of 2018/19 (T0). If universities with larger student/staff capacities can increase their demographic to a larger extent, one may expect positive relationships between the volume of individuals at T0 and the dependent variables measured in absolute differences (from T0 to T1). Last but not least, the models will control for the overall **changes in the total number of students/staff/professors** from 2018/19 to 2022/23. This is done in order to isolate the changes we want to predict in the demographics of interest (the dependent variables referring to females, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities) from the overall changes in the university population and to see how much of the variation in the dependent variable is due to broader trends in the expansion of the student and staff bodies in universities. When predicting changes in female/ethnic minority/disabled *students*, I control for the change in the total number of students; when predicting changes in female/ethnic minority/disabled *staff*, I control for change in the total number of staff; when predicting changes in female/ethnic minority *professors*, I control for the change in the total number of professors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 5.1, we can see the diversity makeup of the universities in the sample as of 2018/19. If we consider the average shares of females, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities in the context of the nearest estimates of the 2021 Census, we notice instances of both underrepresentation and over-representation. For example, on average, there are more female students and students from minority ethnic backgrounds than in the population; however, females are underrepresented among professors

and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in total staff and, to an even larger extent, among professors.⁸

The inclusion perspective adopted in this analysis is concerned with improvements in the participation of the selected demographic groups ‘irrespective of how other groups have fared’ (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 146). As argued earlier in this chapter, this enables us to assess whether organisational commitments to inclusion ‘work’ for those demographic groups that they are associated with in the public view.

Table 5.2 focuses on ECU’s main equality charters (Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charters) and illustrates how the numbers of females and ethnic minorities respectively have fared from 2018/19 to 2022/23 across students and staff, in universities that were charter members (the columns named ‘yes’) compared to those who were not (the columns named ‘no’), according to the operationalisation presented earlier in this chapter. We notice that highly ‘committed’ universities have admitted and/or employed more females compared to all other universities and have employed more ethnic minorities compared to all other universities. However, there are many other factors that could play a role in the differences we observe, including the size of those demographic groups to begin with (as of 2018), and the overall growth in the total student and staff bodies. It is therefore important to look at the multiple regression analyses where these and other variables are accounted for.

Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 display the results from the multivariate analyses.

Consider the results from the multiple regression models predicting changes (from 2018/19 to 2022/23) in the absolute numbers of female students, staff and professors (Table 5.3), minority ethnic students, staff and professors (Table 5.4) and disabled students and staff (Table 5.5). When the dependent variable concerns females, organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) are operationalised based on membership in the Athena Swan (Gender Equality Charter) (‘Silver’ Award or above); when the dependent variable concerns ethnic minorities, OCIs are based on membership in the Race Equality Charter (‘Bronze’ Award or above);

⁸ According to the 2021 Census estimates for England and Wales, females make for 51% of the population (ONS, 2022a), while 81.7% individuals identified themselves in the ‘White’ category (ONS, 2022b). The descriptive statistics provided for the current sample of UK universities in terms of demographic makeup closely match the ones we get when running the analyses for universities from England and Wales only.

when the dependent variable concerns people with disabilities, OCIs capture whether universities referred, in their inclusion-oriented web pages, to specific disability-oriented schemes (Disability Confident and DisabledGo/AccessAble). Whether universities made references to the Equality Act across their inclusion-oriented web pages is included as a predictor in all the models.

The models control for the share of income from funding body grants, university prestige, whether the university is located in Scotland, and the size of the demographic of interest measured in absolute numbers as of 2018 (T0). The results are shown in Models 1 (**M1s**). Models 2 (**M2s**) additionally control for the changes in the total number of students (when predicting a student sub-group), in the total number of staff (when predicting a staff sub-group), and in the total number of professors (when predicting a sub-group of professors). It is important to account for the overall expansion/shrinking in universities' student and staff bodies as this may explain variation in the sub-groups of interest. However, this control can also absorb a substantial amount of variation in the dependent variable ($R^2 > 0.90$). This has been the case in two out of the eight models run (specifically, when predicting changes in female staff and in female professors). For these cases, it is recommended that the reader primarily refers to the results from the **M1s**.

***Between 2018/19 and 2022/23 Awareness of Equality Legislation
Benefited the Numbers of Female Professors and Disabled Staff***

The current analysis, focused on the 2018/19–2022/23 timespan, finds that organisational commitments are consequential for female professors and for disabled staff but not for other demographic groups. While organisational commitments have been operationalised both in terms of institutional memberships in equality charters and references to the Equality Act on universities' inclusion-oriented web pages, only the latter appears to have had an impact at the demographic level. During this period, there was a positive relationship between the number of female professors and the referencing of the Equality Act on universities' inclusion-oriented web pages, controlling for the proportion of funding grants income in total income, membership in the prestigious Russell Group, the total number of female professors as of 2018 (T0), and region (Table 5.3, Female professors, β in **M1** = 0.27, $p < 0.05$). The results were replicated even when controlling for the overall change

in the total number of professors (male and female) for the period under investigation (a demographic control that, as expected, absorbs much of the variation in the dependent variable) (Table 5.3, Female professors, β in **M2** = 0.13, $p < 0.05$). Universities referring to the Equality Act on their inclusion-oriented web pages have also been hiring more staff with disabilities compared to the universities where such references were not present. This finding holds when controlling for institutional differences (Table 5.5, Disabled staff, β in **M1** = 0.47, $p < 0.05$), and also when additionally controlling for the overall changes in the total number of staff irrespective of disability status (Table 5.5, Disabled staff, β in **M2** = 0.38, $p < 0.05$).

In sum, statistically significant associations between organisational commitments and the demographics of interest have been identified only in the cases of female professors and disabled staff.

References to Equality Legislation Did Not Impact Ethnic Minority Numbers from 2018/19 to 2022/23, Neither Did the Race Equality Charter

From 2018/19 to 2022/23, changes in the numbers of ethnic minorities (students/staff/professors) in universities that are members of the Race Equality Charter are no different than in the universities that are non-members, controlling for the proportion of funding grants income in total income, membership in the prestigious Russell Group, the total number of students/staff/professors as of 2018 (T0), and region (Table 5.4, Minority ethnic students, β in **M1** = -0.26 , $p > 0.05$; Minority ethnic staff, β in **M1** = -0.00 , $p > .05$; Minority ethnic professors, β in **M1** = -0.05 , $p > 0.05$). The absence of a REC impact is replicated also when controlling for the overall changes in the total numbers of students/staff/professors irrespective of minority ethnic background (Table 5.4, Minority ethnic students, β in **M2** = -0.19 , $p > 0.05$; Minority ethnic staff, β in **M2** = 0.09 , $p > 0.05$; Minority ethnic professors, β in **M2** = 0.10 , $p > 0.05$). Neither are references to the Equality Act consequential for the ethnic demographic composition of universities. From 2018/19 to 2022/23, universities that refer to the Equality Act on their webpages are no different than the universities who do not, i.e., when it comes to changes in the number of minority ethnic students (Table 5.4, Minority ethnic students, β in **M2** = -0.01 , $p > 0.05$) and staff (Table 5.4, Minority ethnic staff, β in **M2** = 0.08 , $p > 0.05$), and neither when it

comes to changes in the number of minority ethnic professors (Table 5.4, Minority ethnic professors, β in **M2** = -0.01 , $p > 0.05$). The absence of an impact is also noted across the anterior model specifications (Table 5.4, M1s).

The findings align with the existing literature suggesting that the impact of organisational commitments is stalled when it comes to ethnic minorities as opposed to other targeted demographic groups (Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023).

Replication with a Different Model Specification

The current regression models predict differences in absolute numbers in the demographic sub-groups of interest (females, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities), while controlling for overall demographic changes in the total numbers of students and staff. Another way of assessing the impact of organisational commitments is to look at relative changes, i.e., percentage changes in the demographic groups of interest for the same time span. To ensure that the findings hold across both specifications, the models have been re-run to predict percentage changes in the same demographic groups of interest from 2018/19 to 2022/23. Table 5.6 compares the coefficients for organisational commitments (the predictors of interest): the results obtained from the main analyses using absolute differences (Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5) with the results obtained from the robustness analyses using percentage changes. All other controls are matched across the models (see Table 5.6, Notes).

The results are reliable. The positive and statistically significant coefficients concerning references to equality legislation for female professors and for disabled staff were replicated also when predicting growth rates (*Females/Professors/Web reference to the Equality Act/% changes*: $\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.10$; *Individuals with disabilities/Staff/Web reference to the Equality Act/% changes*: $\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.05$). The indicators of organisational commitments that were not statistically significant in the main models, i.e., even when using a relaxed criterion ($p < .0.10$), remained so also in the new specification.

Between 2018/19 to 2022/23, Demographic Change in Female Students, Minority Ethnic Students, and Disabled Students Was Positively Led by Russell Group Universities

In the period of investigation, Russell Group universities fostered growth in the numbers of females, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities studying for a degree, controlling for all other differences between universities. The results hold across both the **M1** and **M2** model specifications for minority ethnic students (Table 5.4, Minority ethnic students, β in **M1** = 0.68, $p < 0.01$; β in **M2** = 0.59, $p < 0.01$); and for disabled students (Table 5.5, Disabled students, β in **M1** = 0.96, $p < 0.001$; β in **M2** = 0.90, $p < 0.001$); and in the fully specified model for female students (Table 5.3, Female students, β in **M2** = 0.21, $p < 0.05$).

The first iterated models (**M1**) reveal positive and statistically significant coefficients also when it comes to female staff (Table 5.3, Female staff, β in **M1** = 0.95, $p < 0.05$) and disabled staff (Table 5.5, Disabled staff, β in **M1** = 1.23, $p < 0.001$). In the case of female staff **M1** provides more meaningful information than **M2**, as in the latter model controlling for changes in the total number of staff has absorbed virtually all variation in the dependent variable (Table 5.3, Female staff, **M2**, $R^2 > 0.90$). However, this issue did not occur in the fully specified model predicting disabled staff (Table 5.5, Disabled staff, **M2**, $R^2 = 0.72$). Here, the association between RG membership and the changes in the numbers of disabled staff not holding when controlling for the overall changes in the staff body shows that, from 2018/19 to 2022/23, Russell Group universities have generally recruited more staff than the other universities, irrespective of disability status.⁹

Socio-Economic Disadvantage—The ‘Unprotected’ Characteristic Left Behind and the Potential of the Race Equality Charter for Applicants From Low-Participation Areas

The main models focus on predicting changes in those demographic groups that have been highlighted by organisational commitments in the

⁹ The models were additionally run to predict percentage changes rather than absolute numbers (see Table 5.6). While Table 5.6 only displays the coefficients for organisational commitments (the predictors of interest), note that the positive and statistically significant impact of Russell Group membership identified in the main Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 was replicated also when predicting percentage changes.

early 2000s, in terms of gender, ethnicity and disability. To achieve a comparative angle for whether organisational commitments matter for other demographics, I additionally modelled the impact of organisational commitments on students from low-participation neighbourhoods. The data are based on the most recent iteration of the POLAR classification of Participation of Local Areas (POLAR4) by the Office for Students (OfS) used by HESA in its publications. If organisational commitments to inclusion nurture inclusive cultures at the institutional level, then a positive impact on disadvantaged demographics across the board can be expected.

POLAR4 provides a grouping of areas across the United Kingdom based on the share of young people who participate in higher education, from the lowest participation rate, i.e., most disadvantaged (Quintile 1) to the highest rate of participation, i.e., most advantaged (Quintile 5). I am using the HESA data (2025a) on how many UK-based students from low-participation neighbourhoods (POLAR4) study in the various HE providers as an (imperfect) indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. Low-participation neighbourhoods exhibit higher-level socio-economic disadvantage than the higher participation neighbourhoods, but the reader should be aware that other factors such as the ethnicity profile of the area and the availability of accessible HE places locally also play a role in the participation rate (OfS, 2020). The analysis uses POLAR4 data published by HESA under the 'Widening Participation' rubric, which refer to (verbatim): 'UK-domiciled full-time young undergraduate entrants who did not leave within 50 days of commencement at HE providers' (HESA, 2025b). At the time of the analysis, the latest available cross-section for POLAR4 data on the HESA website was 2020/21, thus this analysis focuses on changes from 2018/19 to 2020/21.

Five separate models were run to identify potential associations between changes in the body of disadvantaged students and all the organisational commitments that can be operationalised with the current data, controlling for relevant institutional-level differences (see Table 5.7). An additional predictor was introduced: whether the university explicitly refers to POLAR, the participation of local areas classification, on its inclusion-oriented web pages. The models were run to predict absolute differences as well as percentage changes in the numbers of young full-time students from low-participation neighbourhoods.

Across the various operationalised organisational commitments, one borderline statistically significant positive association was found, i.e., between membership in the Race Equality Charter and the percentage

change in students from low-participation neighbourhoods (Table 5.7, Model 3, $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.10$).

This association occurred only when predicting percentage changes in the number of students from low-participation neighbourhoods and controlling for changes in the absolute number of full-time students for the period under investigation. The results are displayed such that we do not exclude the possibility that an impact of REC on the inclusion of students from low-participation neighbourhoods exists in the population, even if weak. A potential explanation for why this association occurred under this model specification is that while one may expect that getting more full-time students widens participation, i.e., more students from low-participation neighbourhoods are being admitted, not all REC members are fast growing universities, thus an impact of REC on the body of students from low-participation neighbourhoods may emerge when controlling for the overall increase in full-time students as a potential suppressor variable. In addition, race equality initiatives with an intersectional approach (also considering socio-economic disadvantage) may be more effective when the number of students to be catered for is low.

None of the other organisational commitments mattered for the count of students from low-participation neighbourhoods, despite the documented underrepresentation of this demographic group (Bolton, 2025).

ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENTS—INCLUDING PEOPLE IN UNIVERSITIES?

As far as **Function 1** of organisational commitments is concerned, i.e., that of including people in universities, the evidence is limited but not non-existent. From 2018/19 to 2022/23, only the publicised awareness of equality legislation, as signalled by references to the Equality Act on universities inclusion-oriented web pages, was positively associated with changes in demographic groups highlighted by organisational commitments, specifically in relation to female professors and to disabled staff. Just as previous studies, I struggled to identify an impact of equality charters at the demographic level (Gregory-Smith, 2017; Nwosu, 2024).

Interestingly, a positive and borderline statistically significant association emerged between membership in the Race Equality Charter and the percentage changes in UK-domiciled, full-time, young students from low-participation neighbourhoods from 2018/19 to 2020/21. While we

have seen that organisational commitments disproportionately highlight 'recognitional' equalities such as gender and race, there is capacity for OCIs to work across demographic layers where intersectionality with socio-economic background is present. It is known that not only the level of socio-economic disadvantage, but also the ethnicity profile of an area influences participation in higher education (OfS, 2020). Perhaps *Function 1* of OCIs is more likely to manifest where commitments maintain a grip of the layers of socio-economic disadvantage that can underpin gender, racial and disability-related inequalities in higher education. Tailoring the equality legislation in this direction, for instance, by expanding the list of 'protected characteristics' with socio-economic background, might provide an effective route to realising the purported impact of equality charters, seeing that awareness of equality legislation has the most reliable impact on the university demographic.

Another finding emerging from this analysis is the overwhelming positive association between changes in the demographic groups of interest and Russell Group membership across the timeline under investigation. Prior research has shown that historically underrepresented demographic groups fared worse in elite universities compared to all other universities, for example, when it comes minority ethnic students (Advani et al., 2020; Boliver, 2013), socio-economically disadvantaged students (Boliver, 2013; Reay et al, 2009) and minority ethnic staff (Advani et al., 2020; Ahmet, 2021) especially in the most senior positions (Baltaru, 2023). This research is anterior to the current timespan of investigation, i.e., 2018/19 to 2022/23. It is possible that the inclusion-oriented trend in UK's elite universities stems from changing student and staff recruitment strategies in the context of financial and operational pressures linked with COVID-19 and Brexit. The findings may speak to the failure of non-elite universities to maintain diverse student and staff bodies when faced with financial deficits and uncertain student enrolments. The inclusion-oriented trend we see for female students, ethnic minority students and disabled students might also reflect the volume of applications from individuals from these demographic groups applying to study in Russell Group universities. If this is the case, then the positive impact of university elite status on structural-level inclusion is constructed by how historically underrepresented demographics relate to a university education in times of uncertainty. As the value of a university degree lowers, individuals might orient themselves towards higher-value degrees, especially at higher levels of risk aversion. It is also possible that the positive trends we

witness in the elite Russell Group universities reflect a greater emphasis on inclusion in these universities in the most recent years. We have seen that organisational commitments to inclusion are important for universities to maintain legitimacy within an organisational field that valorises inclusion (*Function 2* of OCIs, or ‘the institution-oriented function’, see Chapters 3 and 4). With organisational commitments to inclusion increasingly expected from universities, inclusion becomes a dimension of university reputation (see also Baltaru, 2020). Indeed, by 2022 Russell Group universities have been highlighting their commitments to inclusion more so than all other universities, for instance, via developing equality, diversity and inclusion strategies (Saloniki et al., 2024).

Let us now move to the last chapter of this book (Chapter 6) where I provide a discussion of the dynamics between *Function 1* (the hereby explored ‘people-centred function’ of organisational commitments) and *Function 2* (the ‘institution-centred function’ of organisational commitments), and their implications for the gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion.

APPENDIX

See Tables 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, and 5.7.

Table 5.1 Sample characteristics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev</i>
<i>Control variables as of 2018</i>				
Russell Group university	0	1	0.22	N/A
Scotland-located university	0	1	0.13	N/A
Share of funding body grants in total income	0.03	0.64	0.14	0.12
<i>Diversity makeup as of 2018</i>				
Share of female students in total students	0.40	0.76	0.57	0.07
Share of minority ethnic students in total students	0.03	0.68	0.23	0.16
Share of disabled students in total students	0.06	0.28	0.14	0.04
Share of female staff in total staff	0.46	0.66	0.56	0.04
Share of minority ethnic staff in total staff	0.04	0.36	0.13	0.07
Share of disabled staff in total staff	0.01	0.14	0.06	0.02
Share of female professors in the total number of professors	0	1	0.32	0.16
Share of minority ethnic professors in the total number of professors	0	0.4	0.09	0.07

Notes $N = 104$ universities (student counts); $N = 84$ universities (staff/professor counts)

Table 5.2 Average changes in the number of students and staff in the sample of UK universities by demographic group and equality charter membership, from 2018/19 to 2022/23

<i>Females</i>		
Athena Swan member (Silver and above)		
	<yes>	<no>
<i>Staff</i>	460	150
<i>Students</i>	2080	1560
<i>Ethnic Minorities</i>		
Race Equality Charter member (Bronze and above)		
	<yes>	<no>
<i>Staff</i>	235	145
<i>Students</i>	715	725

Notes Data are displayed rounded to the nearest multiple of '5'. To enable a meaningful comparison for the time interval under investigation, in the case of Athena Swan universities with a Bronze award were not included under the category 'yes' (the majority of universities in the sample have at least a Bronze AS award)

Table 5.3 Multiple linear regression models predicting changes in universities’ female demographic from 2018/19 to 2022/23

	<i>Female Students</i>		<i>Female Staff</i>		<i>Female Professors</i>	
	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>
	<i>Absolute differences</i>		<i>Absolute differences</i>		<i>Absolute differences</i>	
Athena Swan Charter Member (Silver/Gold)	−0.07 (0.28)	−0.01 (0.09)	−0.08 (0.29)	−0.08 (0.08)	−0.29 (0.33)	−0.10 (0.14)
Web reference to the Equality Act	0.08 (0.22)	−0.07 (0.07)	0.20 (0.23)	0.05 (0.05)	0.27* (0.12)	0.13* (0.05)
Funding body grants income in total income	0.07 (0.11)	−0.00 (0.03)	−0.14 (0.11)	0.00 (0.03)	0.12 (0.17)	0.01 (0.05)
Russell Group Membership	0.13 (0.27)	0.21* (0.11)	0.95* (0.40)	0.14 (0.16)	0.38 (0.63)	0.17 (0.12)
Scotland-located university	−0.17 (0.36)	0.09 (0.10)	0.59+ (0.32)	−0.08 (0.10)	−0.27 (0.56)	−0.04 (0.17)
Number of female students/staff/professors as of 2018 ¹	0.39*** (0.11)	0.06 (0.05)	0.40* (0.20)	0.11* (0.05)	0.65+ (0.36)	0.12 (0.09)
Change in total students/staff/professors ²	—	0.93*** (0.06)	—	0.88*** (0.04)	—	0.84*** (0.03)
<i>F</i> -test	2.50*	53.65***	18.23***	191.15***	7.59***	343.53***
<i>R</i> ²	0.19	0.88	0.57	0.97 ^{Note 3}	0.59	0.94 ^{Note 3}
<i>N</i>	104	104	84	84	84	84

Notes

+*p* < 0.10; **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001

^{*1}When predicting changes in female student numbers, the control for the total number of female students as of 2018 applies; when predicting changes in female staff numbers, the control for the total number of female staff as of 2018 applies; when predicting changes in female professor numbers, the control for the total number of female professors as of 2018 applies

^{*2}When predicting changes in female student numbers, the control for the change in the total number of students (i.e., irrespective of gender) applies; when predicting changes in female staff numbers, the control for the change in the total number of staff applies; when predicting changes in female professor numbers, the control for the change in the total number of professors applies

^{*3}As expected, in the **M2**s, controlling for changes in the overall student/staff demographic can absorb much of the variation in the dependent variables (*R*² > .90). This situation occurred in 2 out of the 8 **M2** models presented across Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5. For interpretation, the reader should compare the results from these two models with the coefficients from the anterior **M1** specifications (where the models are run without this covariate)

Table 5.4 Multiple linear regression models predicting changes in universities' minority ethnic demographic from 2018/19 to 2022/23

	<i>Minority ethnic Students</i>		<i>Minority ethnic Staff</i>		<i>Minority ethnic Professors</i>	
	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>
	<i>Absolute differences</i>		<i>Absolute differences</i>		<i>Absolute differences</i>	
Race Equality Charter Member	-0.26 (0.20)	-0.19 (0.20)	-0.00 (0.15)	0.09 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.16)	0.10 (0.15)
Web reference to the Equality Act	0.01 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.13)	0.11 (0.11)	0.08 (0.09)	0.04 (0.20)	-0.01 (0.19)
Funding body grants income in total income	0.02 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.18 (0.14)	-0.10 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.20)	-0.12 (0.08)
Russell Group Membership	0.68** (0.21)	0.59** (0.22)	0.90* (0.38)	0.58 (0.58)	0.70+ (0.40)	0.47 (0.30)
Scotland-located university	-0.21 (0.20)	-0.21 (0.26)	0.59 (0.47)	0.24 (0.54)	0.37 (0.38)	0.31 (0.26)
Number of minority ethnic students/staff/professors as of 2018 ¹	0.16 (0.18)	0.03 (0.16)	0.43+ (0.25)	0.31 (0.21)	0.43* (0.18)	0.18 (0.14)
Change in total students/staff/professors ²	–	0.34* (0.14)	–	0.33 (0.28)	–	0.48** (0.15)
F-test	4.93***	5.84***	8.76***	12.70***	5.83***	9.85***
R ²	0.13	0.22	0.57	0.63	0.49	0.63
N	104	104	84	84	84	84

Notes

+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

¹When predicting changes in minority ethnic student numbers, the control for the total number of minority ethnic students as of 2018 applies; when predicting changes in minority ethnic staff numbers, the control for the total number of minority ethnic staff as of 2018 applies; when predicting changes in minority ethnic professor numbers, the control for the total number of minority ethnic professors as of 2018 applies

²When predicting changes in minority ethnic student numbers, the control for the change in the total number of students (i.e., irrespective of ethnicity) applies; when predicting changes in minority ethnic staff numbers, the control for the change in the total number of staff applies; when predicting changes in minority ethnic professor numbers, the control for the change in the total number of professors applies

Table 5.5 Multiple linear regression models predicting changes in the number of individuals with a known disability studying and working in universities from 2018/19 to 2022/23

	<i>Disabled Students</i>		<i>Disabled Staff</i>	
	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>	<i>M1</i>	<i>M2</i>
	<i>Absolute differences</i>		<i>Absolute differences</i>	
Web reference to disability inclusion schemes	−0.07 (0.17)	−0.01 (0.16)	0.05 (0.15)	0.08 (0.13)
Web reference to the Equality Act	0.01 (0.22)	−0.07 (0.18)	0.47* (0.22)	0.38* (0.16)
Funding body grants income in total income	0.01 (0.13)	−0.02 (0.12)	−0.23+ (0.12)	−0.10 (0.11)
Russell Group Membership	0.96*** (0.26)	0.90*** (0.23)	1.23*** (0.33)	0.50 (0.31)
Scotland-located university	0.25 (0.53)	0.35 (0.48)	0.85* (0.37)	0.35 (0.36)
Number of disabled students/staff/professors as of 2018 ¹	0.41** (0.12)	0.33** (0.10)	0.28* (0.13)	0.49** (0.17)
Change in total students/staff/professors ²	–	0.36** (0.11)	–	0.26** (0.10)
<i>F</i> -test	9.47***	11.37***	14.71***	19.54***
<i>R</i> ²	0.40	0.50	0.58	0.72
<i>N</i>	104	104	84	84

Notes

+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < .005$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

*¹ When predicting changes in disabled student numbers, the control for the total number of disabled students as of 2018 applies; when predicting changes in disabled staff numbers, the control for the total number of disabled staff as of 2018 applies

*²When predicting changes in disabled student numbers, the control for the changes in the total number of students (i.e., irrespective of disability status) applies; when predicting changes in disabled staff numbers, the control for the changes in the total number of staff applies

Table 5.6 Coefficients of universities' organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) from multiple regression models predicting absolute differences from 2018/19 to 2022/23 (Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5) compared with OCI coefficients when re-running models to predict percentage changes¹

<i>Models</i>		<i>Absolute differences</i>	<i>% changes</i>
Females			
<i>Students</i>	Athena Swan Charter Member (Silver+)	−0.01 (.09)	0.02 (0.08)
<i>Staff</i>	Athena Swan Charter Member (Silver +)	−0.08 (0.08)	−0.02 (0.10)
<i>Professors</i>	Athena Swan Charter Member (Silver +)	−10 (0.14)	−0.12 (0.12)
<i>Students</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	−0.07 (0.07)	−0.11 (0.09)
<i>Staff</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	0.05 (0.05)	0.02 (0.06)
<i>Professors</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	0.13* (0.05)	0.37+ (0.20)
Ethnic Minorities			
<i>Students</i>	Race Equality Charter Membership	−0.19 (0.20)	0.01 (0.13)
<i>Staff</i>	Race Equality Charter Membership	0.09 (0.11)	−0.16 (0.14)
<i>Professors</i>	Race Equality Charter Membership	0.10 (0.15)	−0.07 (0.28)
<i>Students</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	−0.01 (0.13)	0.17 (0.14)
<i>Staff</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	0.08 (.09)	0.16 (0.16)
<i>Professors</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	−0.01 (0.19)	0.30 (0.29)
Individuals with Disabilities			
<i>Students</i>	Web reference to disability inclusion schemes	−0.01 (0.16)	0.07 (0.21)
<i>Staff</i>	Web reference to disability inclusion schemes	0.08 (0.13)	0.11 (0.19)
<i>Students</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	−0.07 (0.18)	0.04 (0.23)
<i>Staff</i>	Web reference to the Equality Act	0.38* (0.16)	0.44* (0.20)

Notes

+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

¹% change models mirror the controls used in Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5, but changes are operationalised in relative terms.

Table 5.7 Coefficients of universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) from multiple regression models predicting changes in the numbers of young full-time students from low-participation neighbourhoods (POLAR) from 2018/19 to 2020/21¹

<i>Models</i>	<i>Organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs)</i>	<i>Young full-time students from low-participation neighbourhoods</i>	
		<i>Absolute differences</i>	<i>% changes</i>
Model 1	Web reference to POLAR	−0.10 (0.025)	0.47 (0.40)
Model 2	Athena Swan Charter Member (Silver+)	−0.29 (0.22)	−0.47 (0.33)
Model 3	Race Equality Charter Membership	0.02 (0.14)	0.28* (0.16)
Model 4	Web reference to disability inclusion schemes	0.01 (0.14)	0.12 (0.17)
Model 5	Web reference to the Equality Act	0.09 (0.16)	−0.03 (0.21)

Notes

+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

¹**Models 1–4** have been run with control variables mirroring the model construction in Tables 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5. The models do not include universities in Scotland, for which data were not available, however a geographical control is used for the UK regions represented in the data. In **Model 5**, the impact of web-references to the Equality Act is estimated on its own (not at the same time with other OCIs) and controlling for institutional-level differences. $N = 93$ universities across the models

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Discussion and Conclusion: How Organisational Commitments to Inclusion Work

This book has taken on the task of addressing the perceived disconnectedness between ‘the talk’ and ‘the walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion, using the case study of the United Kingdom. I argued that addressing this question requires that we broaden our understanding about what organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) are for. OCIs are supposed to foster the inclusion of people in universities, i.e., the formally articulated purpose of commitments (which I referred to as *Function 1*), but they also act to include universities into the organisational field in which they operate (*Function 2*).

In Chapter 3, I proposed a conceptual framework for anticipating these functions (the *two-way function* of organisational commitments), rooted in sociological and institutionalist theories. The analytical potential of this framework was demonstrated in the subsequent two chapters. In Chapter 4, I provided an empirical illustration of *Function 2* by showing how, in the United Kingdom, OCIs purvey universities with legitimacy within the inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF). In Chapter 5, I addressed *Function 1* of OCIs, exploring the extent to which organisational commitments also foster the inclusion of people in the UK universities. In other words, the *two-way function* is an account of how OCIs *could* work, but whether any of the above functions manifest in particular settings (specific higher education [HE] systems, types of commitments, university groups, demographic groups, timelines etc.) is not a given and should be assessed empirically.

Because the question driving this book was to understand the perceived gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion, where the ‘walk’ is commonly associated with the inclusion of people in universities, let us discuss the contribution of this book starting from *Function 1* of OCIs, i.e., to foster the inclusion of people in universities.

In Chapter 5, I explored *Function 1* by assessing the relationship between organisational commitments to inclusion (in terms of university memberships in equality charters, and web-references to equality legislation, to disability schemes and to socio-economic frameworks) and changes in the numbers of disabled students/staff, females and ethnic minorities students/staff/professors (between 2018/19 to 2022/23) and in the numbers of students from low-participation areas (POLAR) (between 2018/19 to 2020/21). For this specific timeline, I found limited evidence that organisational commitments matter for the demographic groups they stand for. Only commitments to equality legislation, as measured by the presence of references to the Equality Act on universities’ inclusion-oriented web pages, were positively linked with changes in targeted demographics, specifically in relation to female professors and disabled staff. A borderline statistically significant, positive association was also identified between membership in the Race Equality Charter and changes in the numbers of students from low-participation areas from 2018/19 to 2020/21. No other impact of equality charters or of references to inclusion-oriented schemes was detected.

Let us now move on to investigating how the *two-way function* of organisational commitments theorised in this book advances the existing scholarship concerned with this very disconnectedness between organisational commitments and structural-level change.

EXPANDING THE EXPLANATORY HORIZONS FOR THE GAP BETWEEN THE ‘TALK’ AND THE ‘WALK’

How to understand the (de)coupling between the talk and the walk when it comes to organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs)?

Some scholars see it as a failure of good management. Williams et al. (2014) attribute the issue to institutional inertia and a lack of leadership. McMurtie (2016) argues that OCIs are used as a mere strategy to ‘delegate responsibility’. This is the ‘default’ functionalist perspective (of an early institutionalist failure) in policy making, whereby the blame for the lack of outcomes falls onto the capacities and intentions of the

personnel inhabiting the organisation. While this functionalist perspective can be useful on a case-by-case basis, it cannot adequately explain when certain types of actions (in this case, organisational commitments) fail across the board. We also risk underestimating the factors that are beyond the agency of personnel/leadership.

One such stream of literature searching for explanations ‘outside’ the resources of organisations, points towards the incompatibility between equality and neo-liberal logics. Remnant et al. (2023) explore the impact of managerial and neo-liberal principles on disabled academics. Drawing on analyses of university policies and interviews with disabled staff and HE professionals, they find that professional groups understand disability through the lens of performance management and market imperatives, which contrasts with the institutional rhetoric on equality and diversity. In their analyses of Athena Swan, Tzanakou and Pearce (2019) link the charter’s emphasis on accountability and metrics with the broader neo-liberalisation of UK academia. The ‘marketisation perspective’ which partly informs these studies has been influential in higher education and useful to conceptualise systemic changes. Where universities arguably fail to deliver on social goods (in this case, inclusion), this perspective begs a reconsideration of how we view and govern higher education. However, studies operating in this perspective are not well-equipped to explain why similar issues occur in systems that have not been marketised. For example, gaps between universities’ organisational commitments and practice have also been reported in countries where higher education continues to be viewed and governed as a public good (Orupabo & Mangset, 2021). Furthermore, not all pervasive and often negatively charged developments are ‘neo-liberal’. For example, the emphasis on organisational accountability and metrics can also be linked to rationalisation, a cultural trend that has been observed across economic systems around the world (Frank et al., 1995).

Another perspective understands the failure of OCIs to bring about meaningful change in terms of their ‘non-performativity’. Studies in this perspective quote Sarah Ahmed (2006) who revisited John Langshaw Austin’s notion of the ‘performative’ as a property that an utterance can have once it does what it says, provided that the right conditions are in place for the utterance to be consequential (Ahmed, 2006 on Austin, 1975). Ahmed argues that organisational commitments to inclusion, e.g., a university race equality policy, exemplify speech acts that are ‘non-performative’, i.e., even if the conditions are right, they should not

be expected to do what they say, because the way in which a speech act ‘works’ is precisely by ‘failing to bring about what it names’ (2006, p. 105; see also Ahmed, 2012). For example, in relation to race, commitments bring about a ‘perverse performance of racism’ (2006, p. 111) because they ‘absolve’ the university from confronting structural and organisational realities of exclusion where they apply. In my view, this is one of the most systematic accounts of the gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’, which has inspired analyses of organisational commitments to inclusion in the United Kingdom (Kimura, 2014) and beyond (Essanhaji & Reekum, 2023), but it has limitations.

The non-performativity of organisational commitments appears to be an immutable property; as Ahmed says, the failure of commitments is ‘not a failure of intent or even circumstance’ (p. 105). From this perspective OCIs either do not deliver on what they are set to accomplish, or enable the organisation, in a perverted fashion, to seem like it does what it says. We are weakly equipped to anticipate scenarios where commitments *do* work for their formally articulated purpose. Earlier in this book, I noted the same issue with new institutionalist theory, another strong candidate for explaining decoupling between organisational commitments and practice (Baltaru, 2020). In that case it was the emphasis on cultural isomorphism that left little odds of ‘coupling’ between organisational commitments and the internal activity structure, other than in the very early stages of organisations adopting new practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, in Chapter 3, where I proposed the **Two-Way Function** of organisational commitments as an alternative way of thinking about the gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’, I showed that ‘coupling’ (in the current case, commitments doing what they formally say) is plausible without downplaying the role of the cultural environment. Going back to the ‘non-performativity’ explanation, questions of individual agency and motif arise when locating the problems of organisational commitments at the discursive level, despite the argument that speech acts are not ‘failures of intent’ (Ahmed, 2006). For example, an emerging body of literature inspired by considerations of how commitments (un)perform draws attention to how equality discourses depoliticise inequality (Sriprakash et al., 2016). It is argued that the articulation of time in policy documents deflects concrete plans for equality actions (Roos et al., 2020), a problem that appears to affect some demographic groups more than others (Essanhaji & Van Reekum, 2023). Similarly, Taylor et al. (2019)

argue that the blanket terminology underpinning organisational commitments empowers institutional actors to ultimately specify the concrete subjects that benefit from inclusion.

If organisational commitments to inclusion act to selectively include historically disadvantaged demographic groups, rather than enhancing equality work across the board, then they are not ‘non-performative’ in themselves, i.e., a dimension of intent external to organisational commitments, perhaps a feature of the individuals developing and implementing them, is implied. The key question that emerges is whether we pursue knowledge about how commitments work or about how individuals *use* them. Rooted in an institutionalist perspective, this book has been strictly concerned with the former avenue.

I started by defining inclusion in the broadest sense as ‘the state of being included within a structure’ (see Chapter 1) which enabled me to consider the ‘inclusion needs’ of both individuals navigating stratified societies and of universities adapting to changing socio-economic and cultural environments. In subsequent chapters ‘inclusion’ was shown to be a relatively recent development in historically ‘exclusive’ universities, now fully engaged in ‘inclusion organisation’ (see Chapter 2); and a development buttressed by changing cultural and institutional environments that universities have been navigating, up until the inclusion-oriented organisational field we are witnessing today (see Chapter 4). Drawing on sociological institutionalist theory (see Chapter 3) I conceptualised two empirically testable functions of organisational commitments (that includes, organisational commitments to inclusion), as applied to the case study of UK universities, i.e., the *two-way function* of OCIs. First, I considered the purported role of organisational commitments, i.e., *to include people in universities*. This is *Function 1* of OCIs and it engages early functionalist arguments emphasising the agency of the personnel and the effectiveness of formal instrumental action (Stinchcombe, 1997; Selznick, 1948, 1957). Second, I reflected on how organisational commitments work within a system where ‘inclusion organisation’ is culturally valued, i.e., *to help universities adapt to it*. This is *Function 2* of OCIs and it engages with new institutionalist theory documenting the transformation of universities into ‘organisational actors’ and the spread of individual empowerment as a normative direction (Baltaru, 2019; Frank et al., 1995; Lee & Ramirez, 2023; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). Empirical applications based on the two functions were provided in Chapter 4 (in relation to *Function 2*) and in Chapter 5 (in relation to *Function 1*).

Differentiating between these two functions provides a nuanced understanding of how OCIs work, which helps us put into perspective the perceived disconnectedness between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ and anticipate how the pursuit of inclusion will evolve as the socio-economic and cultural environment in which universities operate changes.

Decoupling: An Overwhelming Emphasis on Function 2 Hampers Function 1

The gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ could be due to organisational commitments facilitating the adaptation of universities to a cultural environment valorising inclusion (*Function 2*, F2), more so than the inclusion of people in universities (*Function 1*, F1). In this case, F2 manifests in the detriment of F1. Consider the following scenario. A university can use a lump sum of funds to foster inclusion, equality and diversity. There are several ways in which the money can be spent: hiring an equality advisor, sponsoring bursaries to students from disadvantaged or minority groups, organising diversity-awareness days etc. If the concern with flagging commitments to inclusion (conducive to F2) is greater than the concern with demographic inclusion (conducive to F1) then the resources will be invested in activities with highest visibility even if the impact that these can have at the demographic level is speculative, e.g., organising a diversity-awareness day is a direct way of ‘showing off’ commitments but an arguable way to effectively foster diversity at the structural level.

The above scenario assumes some level of intention on the behalf of the organisation, i.e., the preference for high visibility equality actions. However, the ‘push factors’ for the disproportional emphasis on F2 as opposed to F1 can also be external to the university. With affirmative action being illegal in the United Kingdom, a bias towards indirect ‘positive’ actions to tackle discrimination is introduced. While higher education institutions can technically implement bursaries, scholarships and prizes, they are warned about the risks of running into legal issues of unlawful discrimination (Equality Challenge Unit, 2012). Directly supporting ‘protected’¹ demographic groups becomes a more complex and arguably risky direction than resourcing professional expertise that could potentially achieve this aim indirectly, e.g., opening an equality,

¹ The adjective ‘protected’ in this context refers to demographic groups with characteristics protected by the equality legislation (Equality Act 2010).

diversity and inclusion (EDI) office, commissioning EDI research, networking with inclusion-oriented stakeholders beyond academia etc. For example, in 2022 UK's Research and Innovation Council (UKRI) announced the 'Equality, diversity and inclusion caucus' opportunity where a total fund of £4,562,500 was available for *leading on* research-based evidence on EDI for the purpose of informing policy and practice. While the funding targeted organisations with research capacity, the proposal requirements included heavily loaded managerial activities such as the recruitment of researchers and practitioners and the delivery of 'a program of activities focused on synthesising existing evidence on the effectiveness of different EDI practices', collaborations with non-academic organisations such as businesses and non-profit organisations being encouraged (UKRI, 2022, p. 1).

A policy-oriented research and assessment programme aware of the *two-way function* of organisational commitments theorised in this book, would explore how much of the EDI Caucus funding was used to implement scholarships for researchers from minoritised backgrounds as opposed to strengthening the organisational capacity of the research project (and if such use of the funding was possible to start with). Such an investigation would assess how much the commitment has benefited the reputation, resources and network(s) of the council and of the participating organisations (*Function 2*), compared to the inclusion of underrepresented demographic groups in universities (*Function 1*).

Coupling: Function 1 and Function 2 Reinforce Each Other

The optimistic functionalist scenario is that universities' embeddedness into the inclusion-oriented organisational field (through memberships in equality charters, engagement with inclusion-oriented schemes run by organisations beyond academia etc.) translates into more inclusive cultures, which further stimulate underrepresented and 'protected' demographic groups to study and progress their careers in higher education.

We have seen that in the United Kingdom, organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) enable universities to become actors within the inclusion-oriented organisational field (see Chapter 4 illustrating *Function 2*). Furthermore, while the impact of OCIs on the demographic groups they are concerned with was limited, I did find some evidence in this sense (see Chapter 5 illustrating *Function 1*). From 2018/19 to 2022/23, the numbers of female professors and the numbers of disabled staff

were more favourable in universities referring to equality legislation on their inclusion-oriented webpages, as opposed to those universities who did not. A rather unexpected finding also emerged: for the period under investigation, among students, the number of females, ethnic minorities and disabled individuals fared especially well in Russell Group universities, controlling for the overall increase in the student body and net of institutional-level differences.

It appears that the mainstreaming of OCIs coincides with a ‘wind of change’ in the role of elite universities in the pursuit of inclusion: if prestigious universities used to be pockets of underrepresentation for women and minority groups, in the recent years they incorporated more females, ethnic minorities and individuals with disabilities than all other universities.

In my previous work on the relationship between reputation and organisation in the UK university sector, I noted that on the long run, the tension between inclusion and elite status may disappear as OCIs slowly institutionalise inclusion as part of what a ‘good university’ is expected to do (Baltaru, 2023). In the United Kingdom, the integration of inclusion as a dimension that feeds into the relative standing of universities has been systematic, as in the award levels of equality charters (Bronze, Silver, Gold awards) or the temporary conditioning of research funding on holding a Silver Athena SWAN award by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) (Advance HE, 2020). Perhaps the inclusion trend we see between 2018/19 and 2022/23 in UK’s elite universities stems from the long-term institutionalisation of inclusion-oriented commitments. Indeed, in the early 2000s Russell Group distinguished themselves through a remarkable display of OCIs. They were represented among the founding universities of Athena Swan, and established equality and diversity offices (Baltaru, 2020) and published EDI strategies (Saloniki et al., 2024) more so than the other universities.

However, when interpreting the positive association between Russell Group membership and the number of females, ethnic minorities and disabled individuals, one should look for meaningful change at the most senior staff levels, where pockets of underrepresentation are most prevalent (Advance HE, 2024). Even when looking at the recent 2018/19 to 2022/23 timespan, I did not find a statistically significant association between elite status and the share of females or ethnic minorities among professors. Nevertheless, given that prior to 2018/19 Russell

Group Universities had remarkably lower shares of historically underrepresented demographic groups in higher-level contracts compared to all other universities (see [Baltaru, 2023] for a study specifically on ethnic minority staff), a state where Russell Group universities do not substantially differ from other universities in terms of staff inclusion in the higher-level contracts may be interpreted as a sign of progress.

*Over-Coupling: Commitments to Historically Underrepresented
Demographics Which Are Currently Overrepresented,
and the Socio-economic ‘Elephant in the Room’*

In Chapter 5, I provided an overview of key equality and widening participation data in the early 2000s. We have seen scenarios where demographic groups highlighted in universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion are currently overrepresented, for example, when considering the shares of ethnic minorities and females in the total number of students. I propose describing these instances as *over-coupling*, i.e., whereby commitments to inclusion are maintained in relation to demographic groups that are already represented. When talking about over-coupling it is important to specify the level at which representation has been achieved, i.e., whether among students or among staff, and whether at the aggregate level or at the sub-group level (across disciplines or staff ranks). This is because, as outlined in Chapter 5, pockets of underrepresentation remain, e.g., females and ethnic minorities continue to be underrepresented among professors.

While one may argue that organisational commitments to inclusion are automatically concerned with specific areas of underrepresentation, OCIs tend to be expressed in generalist form (e.g., ‘gender equality charter’, ‘race equality charter’), and pressing current inequalities are not subject to organisational commitments to the same extent as historically underrepresented groups. For example, the underrepresentation of White boys eligible for free school means has not been a notable or popularised concern of the ‘gender equality charter’ neither of the ‘race equality charter’.

There are multiple factors contributing to over-coupling, including: a bias towards *historically* underrepresented groups, inertia when it comes to expanding organisational commitments to include current inequalities, cultural and political factors and systemic downplaying of specific types of disadvantage. An example for the latter is illustrated in the

case of socio-economic background. Although people from poorer social strata have been historically underrepresented in higher education (see Chapter 2), socio-economic background is not in the list of protected characteristics by the Equality Act of 2010. Not surprisingly, references to socio-economic schemes and data collection tools such as POLAR are minimally highlighted in universities' inclusion-oriented web pages (see Chapter 4), and social class is hardly measured when it comes to university staff (Bradshaw et al., 2024).

Over-coupling is not an issue on its own. Maintaining commitments to include historically underrepresented groups, even where they have already reached representation, acknowledges the long-term implications of historical inequalities for institutional cultures. Even where a university becomes inclusive, diversity needs maintaining. Over-coupling becomes problematic when linked with the downplaying of inequalities in other currently underrepresented groups, especially when an intersectional approach has the potential to benefit the pursuit of inclusion.² In fact, the only impact of equality charters identified in the current empirical analysis (see Chapter 5) was the positive and borderline statistically significant association between the Race Equality Charter and the percentage change in students from low-participation neighbourhoods from 2018/19 to 2020/21. Furthermore, HE statistics reports have shown that as of 2022/23, only 23% of Black Caribbean students (boys) eligible for free school meals (FSM) have started HE by age 19; and for White British students (boys) eligible for FSM, i.e., only 14% have done so by the age of 19 (Bolton, 2025). Clearly, a 'blind' approach to socio-economic disadvantage is not well-equipped to meaningfully tackle ethnic and gender inequalities in higher education. An intersectional approach to current inequalities (that includes, problems faced by boys from poorer backgrounds when it comes to educational transitions) may further consider the biographical processes and historical contexts in which disadvantage unfolds (Vogt, 2020).

Policy-oriented initiatives taking into account *over-coupling* may consider: (a) expanding organisational commitments to highlight more of the current inequalities; (b) encouraging an intersectional approach to identifying underrepresentation, for example, supporting initiatives that

² The term 'intersectionality' is borrowed from the seminal work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989); in the original text, the term referred to overlapping race and gender inequalities affecting the experiences of Black women.

explore gender, ethnicity and disability across levels of socio-economic disadvantage. For this, we need finer grained publicly available data on student and staff composition by HE provider. Currently, provider-level, student and staff open data can be broken down by major demographic groups (incl., gender, disability, ethnicity) but it is not possible, for the public user, to disaggregate these categories further by socio-economic background.³ While a concern may be the indirect identification of individuals based on low numbers, limiting the number of filters beyond socio-economic background (for example, by collapsing study levels or full-time/part-time markers) and applying suitable data rounding strategies may alleviate this issue. The government can take an active role in this process by adequately resourcing data collection agencies and commissioning policy-oriented research on the relevance of OCIs to current inequalities. Furthermore, adding socio-economic background in the list of characteristics protected by the equality legislation may encourage an intersectional approach to the inequalities that women and ethnic minorities continue to experience when it comes to the highest paid positions in academia, while stimulating research into the factors that prevent White British students eligible for free school meals from applying to university, and tackling unfair inequalities where identified.

COMMITMENTS TO INCLUSION UNDER DURESS: PRESSURES TO ACT AND POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

Throughout this book I emphasised that universities have been developing organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs) at a time when inclusion, equality and diversity (EDI) are culturally valued and organisational proactiveness expected. However, at the time of writing this book, dimensions of EDI are being challenged in the political, cultural and educational spheres, more so than in the last couple of decades.

In the United Kingdom, concerns have been raised that diversity actions corrode freedom of speech. For example, in 2021, University College London ended its involvement with the workplace equality index of the LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall, amid concerns that running programmes inhibited open discussions around sex and gender (Adams,

³ For example, the publicly available data provided by the Higher Education Statistic Agency under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence.

2021). The issue is especially prominent in relation to recognitional matters concerning gender identity (Jeffreys, 2025) and race (Malik, 2019; Siddique, 2021).⁴ Universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations that work with HE institutions (HEIs) are expected to pay attention to how free speech and diversity work can be reconciled. With the enactment of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act of 2023, the advocacy organisation Universities UK announced guidance on how universities can protect freedom of speech while continuing to tackle discrimination (UUK, 2024, 2025), and Advance HE formally embedded the principles of freedom of speech and academic freedom in the EDI guidance (Advance HE, 2024; Bass et al., 2022). Actions aimed at tackling discrimination have also been scrutinised in France, where critiques of the so-called ‘woke’ culture and ‘cancel culture’ are being made (Kassam, 2025), in Hungary, where gender studies programmes lost accreditation (Central European University, 2018), while the federal DEI (‘diversity, equity and inclusion’) programmes were ordered to terminate in the United States (Aratani, 2025).

What will happen to universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion if the legitimacy of EDI work weakens? It is possible that OCIs will become less popular. This is because a lower cultural emphasis on inclusion is corrosive to *Function 2* of organisational commitments, i.e., OCIs would no longer strengthen the position of universities into the organisational field(s) in which they operate, simply because the environment to which universities adapt changes. For example, universities may choose to emphasise principles of freedom of speech and academic freedom instead. However, while being highly mediated, the challenges faced by EDI in the United Kingdom have not penetrated the institutional sphere as much as the political debate. As long as there is an overlap

⁴ When referring to equalities, the terms ‘recognitional’ and ‘redistributional’ are borrowed from Nancy Fraser (1995, see also Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Equality struggles for the ‘recognition of difference’ are linked, in the current investigation, with the rationalisation of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality as ‘protected characteristics’ within equality legislation. Emphasizing cultural domination, the classing of inequality (*sans* economic background) differs from traditional approaches concerned with ‘material’ inequalities, where socio-economic redistribution was an idealised form of justice. However, note that injustices that are not ‘socio-economic’ at face value (e.g., ‘gender’ as a protected demographic characteristic on its own) can themselves be underpinned by socio-economic injustices and may therefore be tackled through both recognitional measures and redistributive measures (see Fraser’s discussion of different ‘acts’ within second-wave feminism) (Fraser, 2012).

between the higher education field and the inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF) inhabited by Advance HE, equality-oriented public bodies and inclusion-oriented charities, I expect that OCIs will be minimally affected by the political debate. Were the IOF to fragment (e.g., were Advance HE to interrupt its equality charters) then we should expect much less inclusion-oriented ‘talk’ in universities.

What will happen to inclusion at the demographic level if universities’ organisational commitments to inclusion weaken? The answer depends on which commitments. According to the empirical analysis conducted in Chapter 5, universities’ references to equality legislation on their inclusion-oriented web pages was the only statistically significant predictor of change in the demographic groups of interest; this means that demographic inclusion is vulnerable to changes in equality legislation. As long as the Equality Act remains enacted, it is unlikely that inclusion at the structural level will be affected by the lowering of other forms of commitment such as memberships in equality charters. This is, perhaps, the ‘silver lining’ of the limited impact of organisational commitments to inclusion up to date.

The importance of equality legislation begs a reconsideration of the capacity of the state to facilitate demographic inclusion in universities. Centralised, inclusion-oriented measures, coupled with a reconsideration of recognitional inequalities from an intersectional lens that takes into account socio-economic background, might reduce the perceived gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ in universities’ pursuit of inclusion. Indeed, such an intersectional approach is also being called for in the UK’s third sector and the criminal justice system (Day & Gill, 2020). In Chapters 2 and 4, we have seen that the inclusion-oriented organisational field (where the inclusion ‘talk’ is being produced) was contemporaneous with the shifting of responsibility for inclusion from the government to individual universities. For example, as regulation surrounding the cap on tuition fees was relaxed, universities were expected to outline widening participation plans and commitments of their own. Inclusion progress started being conceptualised as a property of universities (depending on their organisational capacity) rather than a property of the state (depending on regulation and financial subsidies) (Baltaru, 2020).

Managing diversity in this form fuelled much inclusion-oriented ‘talk’ from universities and from other organisations supposed to have a stake in the pursuit of inclusion in higher education, from the Office for Fair Access to the Equality Challenge Unit and now Advance HE. A growing

body of research, on which the current analysis builds, has been showing that the public concerns about the perceived disconnectedness between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ are sustained (Ahmed, 2006; Baltaru, 2020; Gregory-Smith, 2017; Kimura, 2014; Nwosu, 2024). But the perceived gap between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ does not solely come from a lack of effectiveness of organisational commitments, neither is organisational ‘hypocrisy’ simply to blame. As I have argued in this book, this gap can be explained by the complexity of organisational commitments to inclusion; organisational commitments ‘work’ to help universities adapt to the cultural and institutional environments in which they operate (*Function 2*), in addition to their formal goal of including people in universities (*Function 1*), and depending on context, the two functions can nurture or inhibit each other.

A Toolkit for Assessing Organisational Commitments

The *two-way function* of organisational commitments proposed in this book can inspire the development of assessment toolkits that balance out the benefits that a given equality action brings to the organisation (*Function 2* of organisational commitments), with the direct benefits it brings to the targeted demographic groups (*Function 1* of organisational commitments). Table 6.1 illustrates potential indicators for each category of benefits. While both functions are important, a disproportionate allocation of resources to *Function 2* is expected to inhibit *Function 1*. While the *assessment toolkit* can be applied to various organisations (not only to universities) and to organisational commitments concerned with various societal goals (not only with inclusion), in Table 6.1, I exemplify how it could work specifically for universities and their organisational commitments to inclusion.

Criteria used to determine indicators for *Function 1* and *Function 2* are: directedness, clarity, specificity and measurability. *Directedness* is about identifying the immediate beneficiary of commitments. Take the example of signing a pledge to enhance the access of BAME students to postgraduate research. Within the *two-way function* conceptualisation, the university is the immediate beneficiary because the pledge increases the visibility of its commitments to other organisations. Although a long-term benefit to minority ethnic students can be theorised, the benefit is indirect, thus signing a pledge will firstly engage *Function 2* of OCIs. Pursuing the same end via BAME scholarships, however, would first

Table 6.1 Examples of items to assess inclusion-oriented initiatives by balancing Function 1 and Function 2 of organisational commitments to inclusion (OCIs)

Function 1 ‘OCIs work to include people in universities’ – direct benefits to the demographic groups of concern	(1) Does the commitment target an underrepresented demographic with a high level of specificity? For example, is the demographic group of concern clearly outlined and evidence for underrepresentation provided? (2) Does the commitment engage the targeted demographic in ways that can directly impact participation rates across the board or in specific programmes/HE levels? For example, what proportion of the funding allocated to enacting the commitment is to be awarded for activities such as bursaries and scholarships to individuals from the targeted demographic groups? (3) What is the projected impact of the commitment on the absolute and/or relative number of individuals from the targeted demographic? Will assessments be conducted prior and post ‘intervention’? (4) Does the commitment come with a concrete timeline for the expected impact to be realised?
Function 2 ‘OCIs work to include universities into the organisational field’ – direct benefits to universities	(1) Does the commitment expand the network of the university? For example, via memberships or partnerships with non-academic organisations such as charities, businesses and NGOs (2) Does the commitment increase the visibility of university’s equality work? For example, via pledges and equality awards (3) Does the commitment expand the managerial body of the university? For example, by adding more leadership roles (4) Does the commitment bring financial benefits to the university? For example, by making the university able to raise tuition fees or to apply for specific funding streams

Note for interpretation purposes Items on *Function 2* are desirable for sustaining the inclusion-oriented organisational field in which universities operate (see Chapter 4); however, a disproportionate focus on *Function 2* hampers *Function 1*

engage *Function 1*, as the immediate beneficiaries are individuals from the demographic of concern, and the expected impact on participation rates is direct. *Clarity* and *specificity* are also important criteria to indicate *Function 1*. Using the same example, delving deeper into which ethnic minority groups are more likely to be underrepresented in postgraduate research, and in what subjects, can increase the effectiveness of the scholarships. *Specificity* is also important for being able to detect and *measure* expected impacts. Ambiguous enactment of time in policy documents (as opposed to ‘concrete, time-bound actions’) prevent commitments from realising their potential (Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2023, p. 1). In sector-level equality initiatives, the government itself can ensure a minimal weight on *Function 1*, for example, by requiring that a proportion of the funding that the national research councils dedicate to researching

EDI is used to directly engage underrepresented demographics. This could be done via dedicated bursaries and scholarships, provided that lawful avenues are enabled and clear guidance for how to avoid positive discrimination is available.

Importantly, this is not to say that *Function 2* of OCIs, i.e., that of including universities in the organisational field in which they operate, is not desirable. To the extent to which one considers that universities should play a role in pursuing broader societal goods such as inclusion, it is important that universities adapt to what is culturally valued in society. In other words, one may want universities to keep ‘talking’ about inclusion. Even if the talk firstly benefits the visibility of the university as an inclusion-committed organisation, this message is in itself important for the legitimacy of EDI as an organisational direction. Of course, one may disagree that universities should play an active role in realising inclusive societies but nevertheless expect that their demographics reflect the structure of the populations that fund them (in other words, neither should universities perpetuate a culture of exclusion). In that case, one may reconsider the role that the state, as opposed to individual universities, can play in tackling barriers to representation. Here the possibilities are wide-ranging, from interrogating the use of tuition fees in higher education, revisiting the law on affirmative actions and tackling educational barriers that individuals face prior to considering a university education, to regulating (sic) the relative importance of a university degree for social mobility in the contemporary socio-economic context. In the latter case, one may reconsider whether a degree should be required for specific occupations as opposed to alternative tertiary education routes. Some see potential in the UK Government’s most recent Devolution White Paper (2024) to facilitate such a process through regional collaboration involving HEIs, employers and local authorities (Phoenix & Kolyva, 2025). Of course, one should ensure that a reduction in centralised frameworks is compensated by structures of devolved governance with clear responsibilities and enough power to govern, as opposed to ambiguous expectations of agency on the behalf of regional and local actors.

INCLUSION ORGANISATION IN SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONALIST LENS: A NOTE ON PROPOSED CONCEPTS AND TRANSFERABILITY ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Drawing on early and new institutionalist theories, this book has provided a sociological perspective on how organisational commitments to inclusion work (OCIs), i.e., for individuals and social groups (*Function 1* of OCIs) and for universities as adapting institutions (*Function 2* of OCIs) (see Chapter 3). I do not say that these functions will be effectively enacted in every scenario. The *Two-Way Function* of organisational commitments proposes an expanded way of thinking about how OCIs may work, opening empirical avenues for testing the impact of organisational commitments at micro-level (see the empirical applicability of *Function 1* as illustrated in Chapter 5) and at the institutional level (see the empirical applicability of *Function 2* as illustrated in Chapter 4). In the process of building the Two-Way Function, few other notions were developed: *Agentic Inclusion*, the *Inclusion-Oriented Organisational Field* (IOF), and *Over-Coupling*.

First time I coined the term ‘agentic inclusion’ was five years ago when writing about the remarkable spread of inclusion offices in UK’s elite universities (Baltaru, 2020). Drawing on the sociological institutionalist literature documenting the growing demands of formal organisation from universities (Baltaru & Soysal, 2017; Krücken, 2011; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013) and the spread of rationalisation and individual empowerment as cultural ideologies (Frank et al., 1995), I proposed that Agentic Inclusion should capture ‘the growing valorisation of universities’ agency in the pursuit of inclusion and its significance as a purveyor of institutional status for universities who become attuned to this expectation’ (Baltaru, 2020, p. 230). I argued that despite being historically exclusive institutions, throughout the new paradigm of Agentic Inclusion, elite universities can maintain their reputation as leaders, even when the understanding of what constitutes a stellar university is accommodating expectations of inclusiveness. For example, by developing inclusion offices elite universities can articulate themselves as proactive inclusive organisations irrespective of the state of inclusion at the structural level.

In the current book Agentic Inclusion was useful to put into perspective key changes in the governance and organisation of the UK HE: (a) the growing emphasis on ‘organisation’ (initially as an attribute of the HE

sector, and then as a capacity of individual universities); and (b) the valorisation ‘inclusion’ as an expanded mission of universities which, from the 1960s onwards, were looked upon as drivers of socio-economic development. In Chapter 2, I argued that these two historical developments are transforming the pursuit of inclusion in HE: from a social goal to be enabled via direct governmental regulation, to an outcome that resides in the organisational capacity of individual universities.

The concept of *inclusion-oriented organisational field* is also proposed in this book. It builds on DiMaggio and Powell’s fundamental observation that a set of organisations that begin to constitute an ‘area of institutional life’ (i.e., the ‘organisational field’) encourages the isomorphic spread of practices, goals and other ‘organisational innovations’ (1983; see also Powell & DiMaggio, 2023; Scott, 1991, 1994, 2013; Wooten & Hoffman, 2016). The needs of the collective entities populating these fields to be recognised as ‘legitimate’ organisations encourage mimicking, especially when it comes to rationalised organisational practices, an argument also made by sociological institutionalist scholars (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; see also Meyer & Bromley, 2014). In this book, I argued that organisational commitments to inclusion play an important role in purveying universities with legitimacy, as: (a) they articulate the organisational backbone of the university, a culturally desired characteristic from universities who are increasingly expected to behave like organisations and (b) they align universities with ‘inclusion’ as a normative, culturally embedded societal goal.

If we consider that universities have already established themselves in key institutional fields (for example, in the educational field), one may question whether they need ‘legitimacy’ to begin with. This is why demonstrating the presence of a new field of operation in which universities are establishing themselves, i.e., the ‘inclusion-oriented organisational field’ has been crucial to my argument. Drawing on netnographic data from the websites of universities and other inclusion-oriented organisations in the United Kingdom, Chapter 4 revealed an area of institutional life whereby universities, public bodies, charities and private companies are collectively set to accomplish equality and diversity in higher education. As expected in organisational fields, these organisations deal with large volumes of information, are aware of each other and engage with highly rationalised practices partly driven by the state (in this case, via equality legislation). Of course, I do not assume that an inclusion-oriented

organisational field overlapping with the institutional field of education applies to all HE sectors around the world. Cross-national research exploring *Function 2* of OCIs may take on the task of evaluating the empirical evidence on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, another concept that this book proposes is *over-coupling*, which also builds on the above sociological institutionalist and organisational perspectives. Rather than expecting newly adopted organisational practices to reflect internal attributes of an organisation, new institutionalists argued that legitimised practices are ‘loosely coupled’ with organisational behaviour (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; see also DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This thesis has inspired a voluminous body of research on the decoupling between commitments and practice, for example, when it comes to institutions safeguarding human rights (Cole, 2012; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). Decoupling was found to be conditioned temporally, by the recency of commitments, and object-wise, by the legitimacy of the causes targeted by commitments (Cole & Ramirez, 2013). The notion of ‘decoupling’ is obviously fit to describe the gap between universities’ commitments to inclusion and the underrepresentation of minorities especially in the higher-level contracts (Baltaru, 2023), an issue otherwise explored through the lens of ‘non-performativity’ (Ahmed, 2006; Kimura, 2014).

But how can we make sense of a scenario where an organisation initially characterised by decoupling between commitments and practice successfully achieves its target, but continues to resource the commitment in the same way as before?

Here I propose the concept of ‘*over-coupling*’. Just as ‘decoupling’, ‘over-coupling’ refers to loose coupling between legitimised practices and organisational behaviour, but unlike ‘decoupling’ (which applies to the initial widespread adoption of legitimised practices), ‘over-coupling’ takes place after a hypothetical coupling between legitimised practices and organisational behaviour. The legitimacy needs of the organisation can explain why ‘over-coupling’ occurs, to the extent to which the organisation operates in a cultural environment that valorises agentic models of actorhood. For example, if we go back to Agentic Inclusion as a paradigm in the pursuit of inclusion whereby universities’ proactiveness is paramount, in a scenario where a university becomes demographically inclusive one should not expect a proportional reduction in the resources that the university dedicates to its inclusion commitments, e.g., the university will probably not interrupt its membership in equality

charters, neither will it downsize the equality office. As outlined in this chapter, *Function 2* of OCIs can also manifest independently of *Function 1*. Mechanisms of over-coupling can be observed at the intersection between structural and cultural forces. For example, as historically under-represented demographic groups reach representation, they are able to question ‘the terms’ of inclusion, and as a result commitments are continuously elaborated and nuanced towards an ‘idealised’ form. For example, Ramirez and Kwak (2015) show that the growing representation of women in STEM subjects is paralleled by an increased (feminist) questioning ‘not about access per se but about structures themselves and whether the structures privilege men’ (p. 20). They contextualise this dynamic against the backdrop of cultural currencies such as individual empowerment, human capital research traditions and the emphasis on the role of higher education to foster national development and progress.

While the current book applies the above concepts in the case study of the pursuit of inclusion in the UK HE, this sociological and institutionalist framework has wider applicability. First, the framework can be used by HE researchers studying inclusion.

The ‘two-way function’ of OCIs can be explored in different HE systems where a gap between universities’ inclusion-oriented ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ is present. Even if universities have been increasingly acting as goal-oriented organisations, country-specific regulatory and resource conditions matter when it comes to ideological penetration, e.g., how management is valorised (Bleiklie et al, 2011). Perhaps the more equalitarian Nordic HE systems have not left inclusion up to universities’ organisational capacity to the same extent as the UK, although policies in this direction are emerging (consider Norway’s recent attempt to introduce tuition fees for international students). Meanwhile, studies focused on the UK HE sector may explore *Function 1* and *Function 2* of OCIs using different timespans. As noted earlier in this chapter, a range of variables, including the changing cultural climate in which universities operate, are consequential to the realisation of the two functions. Second, the Two-Way Function does not only apply to organisational commitments to inclusion, but it can also be used to explore organisational commitments in general, especially when the objects of commitments are culturally valued or align with societal goals (for example, in the case of commitments to protect human rights or commitments to climate actions). Third, while in this book I engaged with sociological institutional perspectives rather than with management scholarship, the latter may

also benefit from the conceptual framework. For example, the Two-Way Function of OCIs may aid in the ongoing efforts of unifying research concerned with the individual, organisational and extra-organisational levels of diversity management practices (Dwivedi et al., 2024).

CLOSING REMARK

One may question whether we can meaningfully speak about inclusion in an already massified higher education system, where the promise of social mobility through education is increasingly difficult to realise. Gale and Hodge (2014) outline the dilemma of diminishing economic returns that are expected as access to HE massifies, which in their words, might be ‘the ultimate treachery of social inclusion policy’ (p. 691). While this consideration is important to a healthy interrogation of social inclusion, we should not forget that returns are not diminishing across *all* higher education layers. As the participation rate in higher education expands, the returns may be greater at higher educational levels, in elite universities, or if graduating from prestigious educational programmes, because here the degree may still sustain a ‘differential advantage’ (Baltaru et al., 2022; see also Lucas, 2001). Meaningful inclusion can and should be pursued, especially in the most selective educational layers, just like historically underrepresented demographic groups are still to be fully included in the highest contract levels when it comes to universities’ personnel.

In the current political climate, where many have been ‘left behind’ and the legitimacy of diversity work is increasingly questioned, the socio-economically blind approach to inclusion should come to an end. In the United Kingdom, the pursuit of inclusion weighs heavy on the organisational capacity of individual universities, while a fully-fledged inclusion-oriented organisational field, led by charities that encourage and monitor universities’ organisational commitments, has filled the void of direct governmental intervention. In this context, we need to confront not only the formal purpose of organisational commitments to inclusion, which is to include people in universities, but also their ‘invisible’ role when it comes to including universities into the cultural and institutional environment in which they make ends meet. Differentiating between these two roles of commitments and finding a balance for pursuing meaningful inclusion are by no means easy tasks. Yet this challenge may enable universities to not cease from talking about inclusion in higher education, while also walking the walk.

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GLOSSARY

Concepts introduced in this book

Agentic inclusion	Paradigm in the pursuit of inclusion in higher education whereby inclusion is being shifted from the responsibility of the state (as a structural matter to be governed at the sector level) to the responsibility of individual universities, as a matter of organisational commitment (see also Baltaru 2020).	<i>Chapter 2</i>
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Over-coupling	This concept expands on the notions of ‘coupling’ and ‘decoupling’ in institutional research. ‘Coupling’ is a state where organisational forms reflect structural attributes and/or practices of the organisation/institution in question, and ‘decoupling’ is a state where organisational forms do <i>not</i> reflect structural attributes and/or practices of the organisation/institution in question. Over-coupling a state where organisational forms (once decoupled from the structural attributes and/or practices of the organisation/institution in question) become coupled, then again decoupled, but in the opposite direction compared to the original decoupling. For example, a university may formally commit to including females among its students because of females being underrepresented in the student body (original decoupling), over time females may achieve representation (coupling), then become overrepresented compared to males, while the university maintains its old commitment to female inclusion (this is, over-coupling).	<i>Chapter 6</i>
Function 2: the Institution-Centred Function of Organisational Commitments (F2)	An attribute of organisational commitments to enhance the adaptation of the organisation/institution to the cultural and institutional environment in which it operates, if: (a) the environment valorises formal organisation (as in the case of organisational fields); (b) the goal of the commitment aligns with cultural norms (e.g., ‘inclusion’ in the case of organisational commitments to inclusion in the early 2000s).	<i>Chapters 3, 4</i>
Function 1: the People-Centred Function of Organisational Commitments to Inclusion (F1)	An attribute of organisational commitments to inclusion. In the case of organisational commitments to inclusion in higher education, it refers to the purported role of these specific commitments to enhance the inclusion of people in higher education, especially people from historically underrepresented backgrounds.	<i>Chapters 3, 5</i>

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The Two-Way Function of Organisational Commitments	A framework for conceptualising and analysing the impact of organisational commitments from organisational and societal lenses, which takes into account both Function 2 of organisational commitments (the Institution-Centred Function, see above) and Function 1 of organisational commitments (the People-Centred Function, see above). The first illustration and application of this concept is made in this book, in relation to how organisational commitments to inclusion work in higher education.	<i>Chapters 3, 6</i>
Inclusion-oriented organisational field	This notion is an application of the concept of ‘organisational fields’ established in institutional research and defined by DiMaggio and Powell as a collective/set of ‘organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life’ (1983, p. 148). The inclusion-oriented organisational field (IOF) theorised in this book, forms where different collective structures (institutions/private companies/charities) interact with each other in the organised pursuit of inclusion, equality and diversity, which for some of these organisations is the primary mission, while for others is a secondary mission. In the United Kingdom in the early 2000s, for example, universities are embedded into an IOF formed of regulatory bodies, inclusion-oriented charities and companies and other universities which are formally committed to inclusion and which interact with each other to accomplish this purpose.	<i>Chapter 4</i>

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