
Article:
Licsandru, T.C. orcid.org/0000-0002-7557-2762, Mari, C. orcid.org/0000-0002-9133-8765, Kipnis, E. orcid.org/0000-0002-7976-0787 et al. (8 more authors) (2025) Integrating diversity, equity and inclusion in management education: an empathy framework. British Journal of Management. ISSN 1045-3172

https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.70008

BJM BRITISH JOURNAL of MANAGEMENT
BRITISH ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT
British Journal of Management, Vol. 00, 1–22 (2025)
DOI: 10.1111/1467-8551.70008

Integrating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Management Education: An Empathy Framework

Tana Cristina Licsandru [1], Carlo Mari [2], Eva Kipnis [3], Cristina Galalae [4], Emma Johnson,[5] Samantha N. N. Cross [6], Charles Chi Cui [7], Shauna Kearney,[8] Verónica Martín Ruiz,[9] Lizette Vorster Larsen [10] and Irem Yoruk [11]

[1]Department of Marketing, School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK, [2]Department of Economics, University of Molise, Campobasso, 86100, Italy, [3]Department of International Business, Marketing and Strategy, School of Management, University of Bradford, Bradford, UK, [4]Department of Strategy and Marketing, The Open University Business School, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK, [5]Sheffield University Management School, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 1FL, UK, [6]Division of Marketing, Babson College, Babson Park, MA, 01003, USA, [7]Westminster Business School, University of Westminster, London, NW1 5LS, UK, [8]Department of Business, Digital Transformation and Entrepreneurship, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, B4 7BD, UK, [9]Department of Marketing, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, MA, 01003, USA, [10]School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, Aarhus C, DK-8000, Denmark, and [11]Department of Marketing, California State University Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, 90032, USA
Corresponding author email: t.licsandru@qmul.ac.uk

Are future managers well equipped to drive the transformation towards more inclusive and just societies? This paper presents the perspectives of business school students on integrating diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) principles into management education. We engage students as participants, co-researchers and consultants in a student voice-informed, multi-method qualitative study taking place in the United Kingdom (East and West Midlands, South East and West and North regions) and in the United States (Midwest region), focusing on marketing as a case discipline. Findings illuminate student critiques of the prevalent normative coverage of DEI, to the detriment of applied knowledge and action-oriented learning. We draw on the concept of empathy as a foundational lens for understanding and conceptualizing student expectations and develop a theoretical framework for holistically integrating DEI into management education. Our framework offers a theoretical understanding of shortcomings in current DEI learning in business schools and advances empathy as integral to both DEI and responsible management education. It proposes a novel direction for pedagogical innovations addressing social justice broadly and DEI specifically and showcases the value of student-voice-informed methodologies in education research for curriculum change.

Introduction

Policymakers, workforce and the public expect organizations to drive the transformation towards more inclusive and just societies (Churchill, 2020; Euromonitor, 2020; United Nations, 2023). Managers are expected to have the 'knowledge and skills to effectively work with, for, and manage diverse others in various contexts' (Bell, Connerley and Cocchiara, 2009, p. 598). Students, industry leaders and international accreditation bodies and charters (e.g. EFMD Quality Improvement System - EQUIS, Association of MBAs - AMBA, Athena Swan Charter, Principles for Responsible Management Education - PRME) demand meaningful change towards socially just management education (Hoffman, 2023; Toubiana, 2014). These expectations place accountabil-

We would like to extend our gratitude to the five student researchers for their valuable contributions to the empirical work for this manuscript. We also express our sincere appreciation to the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) Movement for providing a vital platform to advance this project through the TCR Dialogical Conferences held between 2021 and 2025.

ity on business and management schools (hereinafter 'business schools') for developing responsible managers and business professionals who foster and positively leverage the diversity of their internal (workforce) and external (suppliers, customers) stakeholders (Anderson *et al.*, 2018; Dachner and Beatty, 2023; Śliwa *et al.*, 2022).

Within this landscape, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) has gained prominence as a key framework for advancing social justice and responding to calls for greater organizational accountability. Despite recent contestation in some contexts (Creary, 2025; Ng *et al.*, 2025), DEI's underlying ethos remains a guiding principle in corporate and institutional efforts to build more inclusive environments (Drenon, 2025; Perkel, 2025). In higher education, initiatives such as the Business School DEI Collaborative (BUSDEIC, 2022) reflect engagement with this ethos. Yet, progress towards DEI-integrated management learning remains slow and will likely be further stymied by recent challenges. Business schools have predominantly focused on building and promoting their DEI credentials, rather than embedding DEI principles into educating and training future generations of managers (Colombo, 2023; Grace and Ammerman, 2022). Like most organizations, business schools are also grappling with effectively translating DEI principles into practice (CABS, 2018; Dar *et al.*, 2021; Tatli, 2011). Addressing these challenges, this paper draws on student insight to investigate the following research question: How can students' experiences and expectations of DEI teaching inform the development of a pedagogical model that coherently conceptualizes and practically operationalizes DEI principles into their learning?

Foregrounding the perspectives of students as near-future management practitioners (Anderson, Ellwood and Coleman, 2017), we conducted an inductive qualitative study taking marketing as a case discipline. Marketing is representative of most management disciplines where DEI education is in early emergence (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020), akin to accounting and finance (Kyriakidou *et al.*, 2016), international business (Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024) and public administration (Brainard, 2021). Inductive research generates theoretical insights via an iterative process of gathering and coding raw data and continually considering emergent themes in relation to the relevant literature (Eisenhardt, Graebner and Sonenshein, 2016; Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). Thus, taking an inductive approach helps expand the limited theory around DEI-integrated management education and create better 'meso' theories explaining how business schools can develop signature pedagogies across disciplines (Mason *et al.*, 2024).

We grounded our research design in the student voice approach – a critical precursor to pedagogical innovation in social justice (Mansfield, 2014) – engaging students as participants,[1] co-researchers and consultants. Our multi-method study encompassed 25 in-depth interviews, conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States and 10 self-introspections. Three key findings illuminate students (1) being frustrated with the normative emphases in DEI education, (2) identifying gaps in their disciplinary DEI knowledge and (3) desiring a curriculum that builds applied DEI-related skills for professional practice. Analysing these findings in conjunction with the literature, we identified linkages to the concept of empathy as a foundational lens for understanding and interpreting student experiences and expectations for DEI-integrated curricula (Bialystok and Kukar, 2018; Edmondson, Formica and Mitra, 2020).

Following guidelines for reporting inductive research, the remainder of the paper is presented in a 'conventional' structure (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). The literature informing our understanding of the research problem and the empathy grounding of our conceptualization are presented first, providing a broad view of the adopted theoretical perspective. It should be noted, though that empathy's suitability for interpreting and theorizing our findings emerged as we cycled between data and literature. Rationale for our case discipline, marketing, follows. We then outline the methodology and present the themes that emerged from our analysis, and their conceptualization into an empathy framework for integrating DEI in management education. Our framework, derived from student voice, balances principle-based education (activating and leveraging moral and affective empathy capacity) with action-based education (building cognitive and behavioural empathy capacity). We conclude with a discussion of the implications and contributions.

DEI education in management

Extant reviews examining the evolution of research on DEI education in management highlight mixed effects on diversity attitudes and skills, alongside ongoing challenges in teaching and learning diversity (Dachner and Beatty, 2023; Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024). Recent calls for *doing diversity* as a social accomplishment situated in recurring practices offer a promising path forward (Stierncreutz and Tienari, 2024). This direction parallels the wider movement of humanist and transformational pedagogy and the principles for responsible management education (Mason *et al.*, 2024; UN

[1]We note that the original source (Mansfield, Welton and Halx, 2012) utilizes the term 'active respondents' when referring to students' participation in educational research. In this paper we utilize the term 'participants' given the qualitative nature of our study design.

PRME, 2022), which aim to 'develop people who will help their organizations create inclusive prosperity while promoting freedom, justice and peace' (UN PRME, 2022). However, despite the growing presence of both DEI and responsible management education (RME) in pedagogic discourse, these concepts remain mostly rhetorical rather than driving educational innovations (Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024).

RME progress reviews (Hibbert and Wright, 2023; Mailhot and Lachapelle, 2024) note that, despite strides in establishing responsible management as a set of guiding ideas and values, two significant limitations remain. First is the vagueness in defining responsibility as a managerial concept and connecting it to frameworks that articulate public value goals, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Gupta and Cooper, 2022; Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019). Second is the enduring 'awareness-action' disconnect – limited theoretical and operational understanding of how to convert responsible management concepts into impactful, skills-oriented curricula (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015; Mason *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, efforts to integrate DEI principles in business and management education suffer from conceptual vagueness and lack of 'curricula commitment' (Perriton, Elliott and Humbert, 2022, p. 59). Overcoming these limitations requires moving beyond raising awareness towards curricula embedding DEI as an applied business and management competency (Grace and Ammerman, 2022; Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024).

Conceptual vagueness

Early management education studies primarily emphasized incorporating diversity into curricula (e.g. Bell, Connerley and Cocchiara., 2009; Lindsay, Jack and Ambrosini, 2018). This focus was critiqued as reductionist, omitting the 'social justice component' of diversity education (Schoorman and Bogotch, 2010). Consequently, attention shifted towards inclusion and the more comprehensive DEI term (and variations such as EDI – equality, diversity and inclusion). Although positive in substance, this shift introduced conceptual confusion regarding the individual and collective meanings of these terms.

An integrative review of DEI definitions across the past two decades of management literature (see Appendix 1 in the Supporting Information) shows them as often overlapping and tailored to specific contexts (academic, corporate, community) or select diversity dimensions (gender, race). This opacity narrows applicability and complicates operationalization across disciplines. Consequently, management education developments favour certain diversity dimensions (e.g. gender; Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2023) or disciplines where these concepts are clearly defined (e.g. human resource management; Rich, 2023). Furthermore, nomenclature variations between DEI, EDI and other similar acronyms place differential emphases on some concepts (e.g. 'E' for equality vs. equity). While reflecting conceptual and contextual differences, these variations might translate into students graduating with varied 'baseline' understandings of these terms. Discrepancies may be further amplified across contexts as the DEI term, and some of its practices become subject to politicized debate (Creary, 2025). These debates notwithstanding, DEI's ethos remains widely endorsed by international and national governing and institutional bodies (e.g. United Nations, UK Government, European Commission, EQUIS) and organizations (e.g., Costco; Deutsche Bank; Transport for London), affirming its continued relevance for these institutions in shaping responsible professionals (Drenon, 2025; EFMD Global, 2025; European Commission, n.d.; Goss, 2025; Gov.UK, 2022; Perkel, 2025; UN Global Compact, n.d.).

Our study adopts the DEI acronym given its widespread use in research (see Appendix 1 in the Supporting Information) and business education standards (e.g. AMBA). We define DEI-integrated management education as pedagogical approaches aimed at (i) promoting understanding and appreciation of multicultural diversity and its relevance to managerial practice, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, migration and neuro status; (ii) enabling critical assessment of socially (un)just organizational, economic and market environments, systems, structures, conditions and practices; and (iii) developing skills for identifying and taking professional actions that advance DEI.

Lack of 'curricula commitment'

Several management literature streams highlight slow progress in holistically embedding DEI into business schools' curricula (Kipnis *et al.*, 2021; Perriton and Elliott, 2018; Schwabenland and Kofinas, 2023). Corroborating Jackoway's (2014, p. 28) observation that DEI curricula components remain 'the exception to the rule', the DEI void is exemplified across management (Perriton, Elliott and Humbert, 2022), international business (Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024), accounting and finance (Kyriakidou *et al.*, 2016), public administration (Brainard, 2021) and marketing education (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020). Lacking DEI learning leaves many business school graduates unprepared for contemporary professional practice (Poole and Garrett-Walker, 2016). Despite calls for integrating DEI across management learning, the significance of disciplinary contexts for comprehensive DEI pedagogy is under-recognized (Dachner and Beatty, 2023; Stentiford and Koutsouris, 2021). A key reason for this lack of 'curricula commitment' is the dearth of DEI-integrated education models theoretically and axi-

ologically grounded in management, rather than 'fitting' DEI into existing managerial concepts and frameworks (Perriton, Elliott and Humbert, 2022, p. 59).

Concurrently, recent research calls for curriculum innovations that position management as an applied practice (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015), grounded in care and respect for humanity and dignity (Hartwell *et al.*, 2017; Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019). Developing such models is necessary to avoid reproducing dominant managerialist perspectives centred around the financial bottom line (Keshtiban, Gatto and Callahan, 2023). A concept offering both a theoretical perspective grounded in care and respect, and a direction for operationally integrating DEI in management curricula is empathy. The empathy concept is briefly introduced next as the most valuable 'theoretical possibility' emerging from our data analysis through data-literature iterations (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013, p. 22).

A multidimensional empathy lens for DEI-integrated management education

Conceptually, empathy encompasses the ability to appropriately understand, acknowledge and address other people's needs (Hall, Schwartz and Duong, 2021; Smith, 2017). Practically, empathy has emerged as one of the key competencies for inclusive leadership (Asare, 2018; Bourke and Titus, 2019) and organizational capabilities for understanding different audiences (Bourke, 2021). The education literature hails empathy as a core ingredient of democratic pedagogy for '21st-century social and economic development' (Edmondson, Formica and Mitra, 2020, p. 225; Morrell, 2007).

Recent studies point to the relevance of empathy for developing managerial DEI competencies, linking it to ethical decision-making (Baker, 2017), attitudes towards inclusion (Rivera *et al.*, 2020) and cultural intelligence (Young, Haffejee and Corsun, 2018). Others highlight empathy as an antecedent to social justice attitudes (Cartabuke *et al.*, 2019) and a driver for inclusive intercultural communication (Broome *et al.*, 2019). However, these nascent developments are yet to reach consensus regarding empathy's conceptual characteristics (see Table 1). Moreover, *how* empathy can be developed through responsible management learning remains under-theorized in the management education literature, similar to other educational settings (Barton and Garvis, 2019). Hence, while offering a relevant theoretical foundation for advancing DEI-integrated management curricula, there is scope to unpack empathy's conceptual characteristics and explore them as potential pedagogical goals.

The clinical care pedagogy literature establishes empathy as a foundation for theorizing and implementing new practitioner education (Engbers, 2020; Jeffrey and Downie, 2016; Levett-Jones and Cant, 2020). Advancements of empathy in this field stem from understanding others' needs and circumstances lying at the heart of clinical care ethos and practice (Mercer and Reynolds, 2002). Jeffrey (2016) integrates extant conceptualizations of empathy for clinical care education, delineating it as a multifaceted concept with four dimensions. *Cognitive empathy* encompasses the ability to identify and understand another person's perspective and state, and to communicate this understanding. *Affective empathy* entails the ability to share the feelings of a person in need, which, unlike cognitive empathy, represents an emotion-driven (or empathic) concern that precedes and contributes to helping behaviour. *Behavioural empathy* represents the ability to act upon concerns for another person, performing helpful behaviours. *Moral empathy* encompasses an internal desire to relieve a person's suffering, which, unlike previous dimensions, represents an ethical motivation rather than ability.

Shapiro (2011) emphasizes the multidimensional empathy perspective as critical in education, highlighting that selective emphasis on either moral or affective, versus cognitive or behavioural, dimensions can be ineffective and counterproductive. Emphasizing moral and affective empathy can invoke resistance to the curriculum if learners feel patronized or presumed to have limited empathy capacity shaped by prior personal experiences (Roberson, Moore and Bell, 2024; Seidel and Tanner, 2013; Stierncreutz and Tienari, 2024). Conversely, selective focus on cognitive and behavioural empathy risks learners understanding and adopting these abilities as mere performance in certain situations.

Arguments for balancing all empathy dimensions in pedagogy resonate with the education literature (e.g. Hartwell *et al.*, 2017; Stewart, Crary and Humberd, 2008), asserting that DEI instruction should (1) acknowledge and activate students' potential prior knowledge of social injustices prompting DEI action, (2) connect learning to students' focal discipline and (3) provide tools for applied learning. We understand these assertions as leveraging moral and affective empathy and developing cognitive and behavioural empathy capacity, respectively.

Given the importance of balancing different empathy capacities in professional practice, we reason that adopting an unrestricted theoretical perspective on empathy can unpack its varied effects in DEI management education. Hence, in our empirical endeavour, we retain conceptual openness to all four empathy dimensions (Jeffrey, 2016). We next outline our disciplinary focus – marketing – as a case example of a management discipline requiring DEI-integrated education.

Table 1. The concept of empathy in the management literature

Author/Year	Study focus and context	Empathy dimensions addressed*				Conceptual application of empathy explained
		C	A	B	M	
This paper	Theorizing DEI learning in business schools through an empathy lens in a student voice-informed study	√	√	√	√	Draws on multidimensional empathy
Baker (2017)	Exploring empathy as an antecedent to ethical decision-making and instructional strategies to increase it	√	√			Draws on two dimensions referred to as 'perspective taking' or 'empathic concern'
Broome *et al.* (2019)	Exploring empathy as a driver for developing an inclusive climate for intercultural communication		√			Identifies empathy as an important affective dimension in every model of intercultural communication competence reviewed in the study
Cartabuke *et al.* (2019)	Investigating empathy as an antecedent to social justice attitudes and perceptions				√	Applies empathy broadly, while defining it as 'a positive moral emotion that effectively broadens reasoning and perspective-taking and promotes interpersonal relationships' (p. 606)
Kipnis *et al.* (2022)	Exploring consumers' conceptions of service robots in long-term care	√	√	√	√	Applies multidimensional empathy to theorize how consumers envisage robots' care capabilities in robot-integrated service research
Pedersen (2021)	Conceptual introduction of an empathetic approach to marketing	√				Focuses on empathy as a cognitive process of perspective taking, defining it as 'the capacity of understanding another person's perspective and feelings' (p. 470)
Rivera *et al.* (2020)	Exploring the link between empathy and students' attitudes towards and advocacy for people with disabilities					Applies empathy as a broad (unidimensional) concept
Wieseke, Geigenmüller and Kraus (2012)	Investigating customer and employee empathy and their impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty	√	√			Draws on three forms of empathy, including perspective-taking and two emotional forms, for example, empathic concern and emotional contagion
Young, Haffejee and Corsun (2018)	Investigating the impact of participating in a diversified mentoring relationship on mentors' empathy and cultural intelligence	√	√			Applies emotional and non-emotional (cognitive) forms of empathy

Note: C, cognitive; A, affective; B, behavioural; M, moral.

Marketing as a case for DEI-integrated management education

Marketing uniquely serves as the public 'voice and face' of organizations, addressing external (consumers, suppliers, governments) and internal (employees) stakeholders (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2022). Thus, marketing holds a significant role in shaping public perceptions, societal norms and organizational cultures; it is a recognized core 'management responsibility' (Lusch and Webster, 2011, p. 129) and an established business school discipline. Yet marketing, like most business and management disciplines, is critiqued for lacking 'curricula commitment' (Perriton, Elliott and Humbert, 2022, p. 59; Crittenden, Davis and Perren., 2020) and is arguably among the most visible organizational contexts exposing DEI failures, notably in advertising (e.g. Peloton – Belam and Partridge, 2019) and frontline customer service (e.g. Starbucks – Feldberg and Kim, 2018). Hence, marketing managers require competencies for applying DEI principles to recognize and address market injustices (Grier, 2020; Henderson and Williams, 2013).

Early marketing education literature (1990s–2000s) proposed integrating diversity into curricula to prepare students for work in diverse, globalized markets. Some suggested practical initiatives, like study abroad and experiential learning (Stern, 2008; Wright and Clarke, 2010); others recommended curricular reforms through theoretical exploration of multicultural issues (Burton, 2005; Cui, 1996). However, these efforts remained primarily conceptual and limited to (ethnic) diversity. Recent literature responded to emerging global issues like racial reckoning (Norman and McFarlane-Alvarez, 2023) and social movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter; Protopapa and Plangger, 2023), calling for attention to inclusion, alongside diversity. A handful of studies introduced hands-on tools such as film (Chang, 2020), photovoice (Pierce and Longo, 2020) and problem-based projects (Grier, 2020) to integrate social realities and DEI topics in managerial education.

Table 2. A re-interpretation of the student voice continuum

	Student as a data source	Being heard: students as active respondents (or participants)	Collaborating with academic staff: students as co-researchers	Building student leadership capacity: students as researchers
Educator action	Acknowledging	Hearing	Listening to learn	Listening to contribute
Student role in pedagogical research	Passive recipients, for example, educators analyse data on student performance	Discussants, for example, educators conduct student surveys and focus groups; students possess unique knowledge that educators cannot gauge elsewhere	Co-researchers, participating in the dialogue, for example, educators conduct pedagogical research with students; students rely on educators' expertise; educators and students collect data together	Initiators of change, leading the dialogue, for example, students conduct research and run sessions for educators; they are trained in research skills; students share the leadership of the initiative
Student involvement in curriculum design	None, for example, educators independently develop the curriculum, without student input	Informants, for example, educators develop the curriculum based on student feedback through surveys or focus groups	Co-designers, for example, students and educators work together to co-create the curriculum, integrating both perspectives	Curriculum design consultants, for example, students are directly involved in developing the curriculum, contributing ideas and shaping content as experts in their learning experience
Reflection on the student-academic relational practice	None	Implicit (not deliberate)	Explicit via dialogue (between educators and students)	Explicit via data compilation (e.g. introspection)
Occurrence	Most common	Fairly common	Less common	Least common

Note: The table is based on the model by Mansfield, Welton and Halx (2012), which integrates and extends Fielding's (2001) and Mitra and Gross's (2009) earlier conceptualizations.

Others defined DEI competencies students should acquire, such as aligning business actions with sustainability and ethics (Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019).

Despite re-energized efforts, there is limited empirical support for most frameworks and recommendations for marketing DEI instruction (Crittenden, Davis and Perren, 2020; Riedel, Beatson and Gottlieb, 2023). Notably overlooked is the perspective of students. Hence, our empirical exploration focuses on capturing and theorizing student perspectives on learning competencies for understanding and executing DEI principles in management practice. We next outline our relational approach to leveraging student voice.

Methods

Research design: Participatory pedagogy and the student voice approach

Our approach, inspired by relational management practice, foregrounds students as current and future practitioners, and thus key knowledge co-producers in higher education (Anderson, Ellwood and Coleman, 2017). This perspective emphasizes that, for research and theory to remain relevant beyond the classroom, students should co-create knowledge with academics and peers, mirroring academics' collaborative inquiry with practitioners (Rigg, Ellwood and Anderson, 2021). While recognizing the importance of student feedback in teaching, universities often overlook students' perspectives in designing policies, research, and curricula, which are created *for* rather than *with* them (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011; Lac and Mansfield, 2018). A bottom-up approach involving students in DEI-integrated pedagogy can enhance the relevance and impact of DEI management learning in and beyond the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2020).

Our design draws on collaborative, relational and participatory pedagogical models (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011; Kumpulainen and Lipponen, 2012). These encompass overlapping approaches such as participatory action research (students engage in research for social change; Welton, 2011), pedagogical partnerships (students contribute to curricular decisions; Matthews, 2017) and authorizing student perspectives, known as student voice initiatives (understanding and learning from students' viewpoints; Lac and Mansfield, 2018). Such approaches strengthen student engagement and commitment to learning, critical consciousness, self-efficacy, autonomy, democratic values and civic habits (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011).

We adopt and extend Mansfield, Welton and Halx' (2012) student voice continuum model, which outlines four levels of students' role and involvement in pedagogical research and curriculum design, as given in Table 2. We chose this model for its breadth and flexibility, as it supports varied student roles, from recipients to participants, co-researchers and researchers and offers a

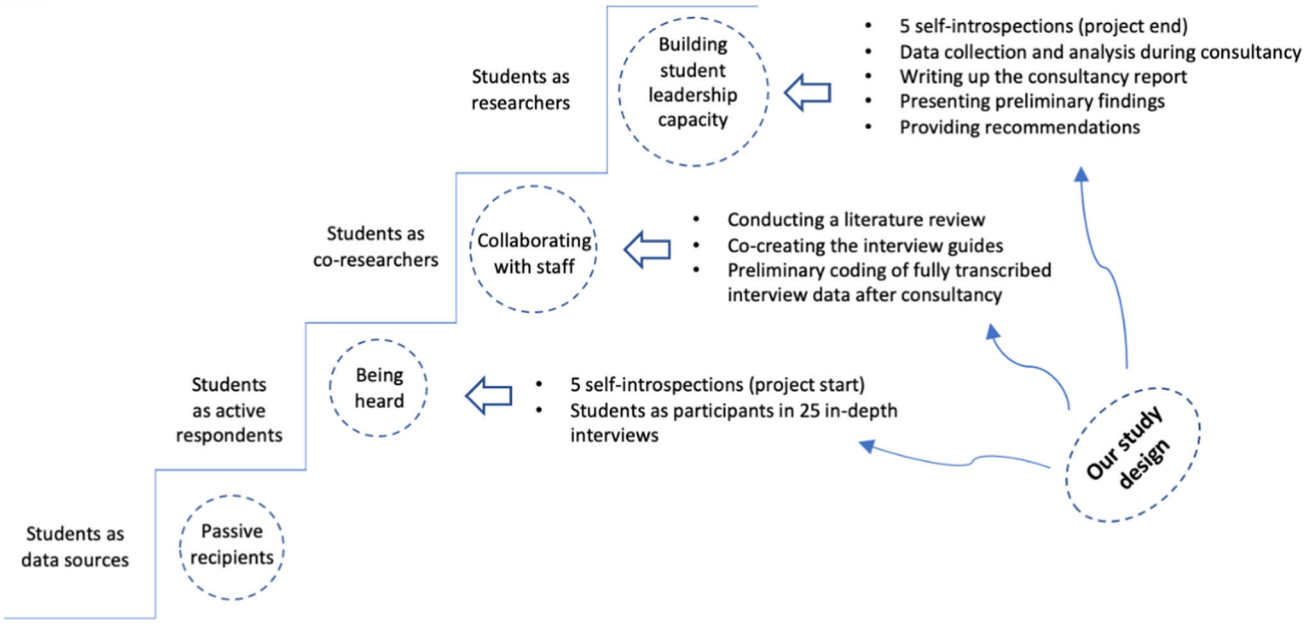

Figure 1. The student voice informed research design.

broader scope than other forms of participatory pedagogy individually.

Student voice is gaining recognition in higher education policy (e.g. the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework or the US's National Survey of Student Engagement). However, curriculum development initiatives underutilize it, mostly constraining students' role to 'active respondents' whereby their input is sought after pedagogical interventions have occurred (Brokerhof *et al.*, 2023; Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2019; Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019). Conversely, our epistemological and methodological approach strategically mobilized multiple levels of the student voice continuum, *before*,[2] rather than *after*, developing a DEI-integrated curriculum. We deemed listening to student voice relevant as societal recognitions of DEI have been integral to young people's daily lives for longer than any other generation (Harris, 2013). Allowing student voice to 'construct ways of working that are emancipatory in both process and outcome' was key in our endeavour (Fielding, 2001, p. 124). Figure 1 summarizes how our study engages student voice.

Recruitment and data collection

The project was developed and commissioned by the author team through a student consultancy initiative at a UK university affiliated with one of the authors. This project comprises a series of studies exploring student and educator perspectives on DEI-integrated learning and teaching, with this paper presenting findings of the study focused on student perspectives. We recruited five student-researchers (Table 3) for a paid, 10-week research consultancy project at their university.[3] Student-researcher selection was informed by their interest in the research topic and desire to develop research skills. At the project outset, they received a comprehensive briefing and training on study objectives, ethical considerations, diversity dimensions and research methodologies. We aimed to explore student-researchers' own understanding of DEI and its evolution throughout the project; therefore, the training did not include predefined DEI conceptualizations.

The student-researchers worked with the author team on data generation, collection and preliminary analyses, as follows:

Stage 1. After training, student-researchers first engaged as participants, probing their DEI knowledge, understanding, and experiences that might not otherwise surface (Banbury, Stinerock and Subrahmanyan, 2012). They wrote a two-page self-introspective account (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993) on their: (1) general views on multicultural societies; (2) understanding of DEI in marketing contexts; and (3) assessment of DEI-relevant knowledge and skills acquired during their degree, including extra-curricular activities.

Stage 2. The author team and student-researchers co-created the interview guide (see Appendix 2 in the Supporting Information), which student-researchers

[2]Italics added for emphasis.

[3]This project was designed in adherence with institutional research ethics/review board requirements of this paper's author team and was granted ethical approval.

Table 3. Student-researchers

Student researcher code (*Gender**)	Undergraduate (U)/ master's (M) degree	Multicultural background
SR1 (*F*)	U – Marketing management	Born and raised in Austria, lived in the United States before studying in the United Kingdom
SR2 (*F*)	M – Marketing	Born and raised in India
SR3 (*M*)	U – Business and management	Born and raised in a very multicultural city in Kazakhstan
SR4 (*F*)	U – Marketing management	Born and raised in a Hungarian-dominant village in Slovakia
SR5 (*F*)	M – Marketing	Half Cypriot, half British; living in the United kingdom

Note: Gender: F = Female; M = Male.

subsequently used to interview student-participants, exploring topics such as experiences of living and interacting with diverse cultures, DEI understanding, knowledge and experience outside and inside the classroom, views on DEI relevance to professional futures and desired DEI curricula. To accurately assess participants' DEI understanding, student-researchers intentionally did not define the terms during the discussion, allowing for organic, participant-led discussions.

Three student-researchers conducted in-depth interviews with other marketing and business students, leveraging shared backgrounds to create 'insiderness' and enhance rapport, comfort and disclosure, for their peers' voices to be heard (Harrison, Thomas and Cross, 2015; Mitra and Gross, 2009). All five student-researchers contributed to data interpretation and final report development. To recruit participants, the authors promoted email calls at their institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States and student-researchers used a snowballing approach among peers. The rationale for selecting the United Kingdom and the United States as study contexts is twofold. First, given the exploratory, theory-development goal of our study, we followed Whetten's (2009) guidance on the value of context for theory development. Second, inspired by methodological innovations promoting socially transformative and democratizing qualitative approaches (Edwards and Brannelly, 2017; Huffman, 2013), we sought to engage students across different universities and national contexts. We thus captured core experiences from 'common patterns that emerge from great variation' (Patton, 1990, p. 172), while recognizing contextual specificities where present.

Participation was voluntary, with no monetary incentives; US participants were offered class credit as per university policy. Twenty-five (17 undergraduate and eight master's) students, enrolled in over 14 different programmes from six universities in the United Kingdom and one in the United States, participated (Table 4). The interviews took place online, lasting 36 minutes on average (range: 18–65 minutes) and were conducted within a three-week period. Student-researchers met with the lead author for debriefing and consultation throughout data collection.

Stage 3. The five student-researchers wrote a second three-page self-introspective account, considering their: (1) skills and knowledge acquired, (2) evolved understanding of DEI and (3) recommendations for business schools.

Data analysis

Interview data were transcribed verbatim. Student-researchers conducted a preliminary analysis and produced an 18-page consultancy report, presented to a panel comprising two authors, learning professionals, and faculty members from the funding university. By presenting their findings and recommendations for a DEI-integrated curriculum, students demonstrated 'leadership capacity', acting as consultants and 'initiators of change' (Fielding, 2001; Mitra and Gross, 2009). Subsequently, the author team analysed both the interview data (over 270 pages of double-spaced text) and the pre- and post-self-introspective accounts (27 double-spaced pages). The student-researchers' report was used to inform and triangulate the analysis, findings and pedagogical recommendations presented in this paper. One student-researcher continued to be involved in the project as a paid research assistant. Studying commitments and funding limitations precluded further involvement from others.

We followed Gioia's methodology – a grounded-theory inspired systematic approach to inductive, theory development inquiries (Gehman *et al.*, 2018; Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013), in a dynamic yet structured examination of the relationship between raw data and emerging concepts for theory building. The research assistant developed initial first-order codes from the interview transcripts and introspections. Two authors refined and (where relevant) derived additional first-order codes, exploring similarities and differences across individual interviews/introspections and UK/US datasets, subsequently grouping constellations of first-order codes into second-order categories. A third author conducted axial coding to interpret and abstract categories into aggregate themes, iterating between data and literature to identify relevant theoretical concepts and insights (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Saldaña, 2021).

Table 4. Interview participants

University	Pseudonym (*Gender*[*])	Undergraduate (U)/Master's (M) – degree	Multicultural background[**]
UK 1	Mario (*M*)	U – Marketing and management	White British
	Nathan (*M*)	U – Marketing and management	Half Greek, half British
	Janvi (*F*)	M – Marketing	Indian, living in the United Kingdom
	Sarah (*F*)	U – Marketing and management	Hungarian, lived in Australia, based in the United Kingdom.
	Don (*F*)	U – Marketing and management	British Indian
UK 2	Anthony (*M*)	U – Business management (Marketing)	Polish
	Alice (*F*)	M – Marketing	Chinese
	Rachel (*F*)	U – Business management (marketing)	Born in Lithuania, has lived primarily in the United Kingdom and for one year in South Korea
	Jonathon (*M*)	M – Business administration	Spanish
UK 3	Brian (*M*)	M – Marketing	Nigerian
	Susana (*F*)	M – Digital marketing	White British
	Julia (*F*)	M – Business management (marketing)	White British
UK 4	Megan (*F*)	M – Marketing management	British
	Emma (*F*)	M – Digital marketing	British, born in Brunei, lived in the United States and the Netherlands
UK 5	Aaya (*F*)	U – Digital marketing	British living in the United Kingdom
USA	Candice (*F*)	U – Supply chain management and marketing	White American
	Amber (*F*)	U – Business and management	White American
	Emily (*F*)	U – marketing	American
	Alex (*M*)	U – International business and marketing	White American
	Gina (*F*)	U – Marketing and entrepreneurship	White American
	Mollie (*F*)	U – Digital marketing	American
	Grace (*F*)	U – Finance and marketing	White American
	Rashmi (*F*)	U – Marketing and supply chain management	White American
	Samuel (*M*)	U – Marketing	American
	Chloe (*F*)	U – Marketing and event management	American

[a] Gender: F = Female; M = Male; Pseudonyms assigned by the student-researchers
[b] This column reflects students' demographic self-identification. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the sample, we did not want to prompt students to classify themselves based on demographics. As such, some profiles lack explicit information regarding their ethnic or racial background.

In this process, empathy emerged as a suitable lens for theorising student voice data, as its conceptual characteristics resonated with emergent themes. The full author team had regular online meetings to discuss and agree on the data structure (Table 5) and theorise the final themes into a conceptual framework.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of student-participants' interviews and student-researchers' introspections elicited three themes: (1) Current understanding of DEI: frustration with curriculum disregard for students' existing moral and affective empathy foundations; (2) Critique of gaps in DEI learning: call for greater cognitive and behavioural empathy-driven curriculum content; and (3) Imagining a holistic, empathy-balanced DEI curriculum: desired skills, curriculum design and learning outcomes. Building on the dynamic relationship between these themes, we propose a student voice-derived empathy framework for integrating DEI learning in management education (Figure 2).

Our framework integrates student experiences, critiques and vision via Jeffrey's (2016) four empathy dimensions, while extending their definitions into a management education context. In our conceptualization, moral empathy encompasses the development of students' ethical motivation to contribute to public value for all people and communities, while affective empathy denotes the development of students' care for socially just market environments. Cognitive empathy represents the development of students' abilities to rationally perceive and critically assess socially unjust organizational, economic and market systems, structures and practices, while behavioural empathy centres on developing students' abilities to take professional actions addressing social injustices via managerial DEI practice.

Data analysis and interpretation suggest that the current shortcomings in DEI learning within the contexts we studied stem from an overemphasis on developing moral and affective empathy, which students already display, to the detriment of developing cognitive and behavioural empathy, required for action in professional settings. Hence, our framework (Figure 2) depicts a holistic DEI-integrated management education cur-

Table 5. Data structure

First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate themes (grounded theoretical framework)
Previous exposure to different cultures	Lived experiences of diversity	**Current understanding of DEI: frustration with curriculum disregard for students' existing moral and affective empathy foundations**
Interest in different cultures		
Personal experiences and/or own learning of a multicultural society	Pre-understanding of DEI	
Personal experiences and/or own learning of discrimination		
Views on DEI through personal experiences and/or own learning		
Don't teach us not to be bad people	Dissatisfaction with current 'normative' DEI teaching	
Lack of an applied focus in teaching DEI		
DEI coverage in marketing courses and non-marketing courses	Views on the current DEI curriculum	**Critique of gaps in DEI learning: call for greater cognitive and behavioural empathy-driven curriculum content**
DEI topics covered in the current curriculum		
Developing cultural awareness/eye-opening experience		
Relevant to the current society	Relevance of DEI curriculum to future professional practice	
Career development/employability/employees' relationships		
To develop a better marketer		
Questioning the need to teach DEI-integrated marketing	Relevance questioned without knowledge and action-oriented education	
Instrumental approach to teaching DEI-integrated marketing		
Need for in-depth DEI knowledge		
Need for action-oriented DEI learning		
Tolerance/acceptance	Interpersonal skills	**Imagining a holistic, empathy-balanced DEI curriculum: desired skills, curriculum design and learning outcomes**
Respect		
Open-mindedness		
Cultural intelligence/awareness		
Emotional intelligence		
Compassion		
Adaptability/flexibility		
Helpfulness		
Teamwork		
Communication		
What topics would I like to learn about DEI-integrated marketing	Topics and pedagogical approaches	
Teaching activities (in-class and out-of-class)		
Assessment and marking [grading]		
Format: Compulsory versus optional	Delivery format	
Format: Embedded focus needed		
Year to be taken		
DEI learning	Relational pedagogies learning outcomes	
Professional skills		

riculum to: (1) leverage students' established DEI understanding, experiences and capacity for affective and moral empathy, and (2) develop students' capacity for cognitive and behavioural empathy within their studied professional context (in our case, marketing). This approach addresses participants' expectations for learning that enhances their ability to recognize and appreciate the perspectives and needs of organizational stakeholders facing social injustices (including consumers, employees), while empowering them to take effective *action* addressing these needs in professional settings as DEI-competent managers.

We now elaborate on each theme underpinning our framework, with data illustrations from student-participants (using pseudonyms) and student-researchers (denoted as SR). Appendix 3 in the Supporting Information presents additional and extended data quotes.

Theme 1: Current understanding of DEI

This theme captures students' views on current teaching's failure to acknowledge and mobilize their existing DEI knowledge, reflecting a disproportionate curriculum emphasis on moral and affective empathy. This is a critical oversight, as 'how knowledge is being taught and learned must be located in the social, cultural and/or political processes produced in the classroom' (Trehan and Rigg, 2022, p. 122).

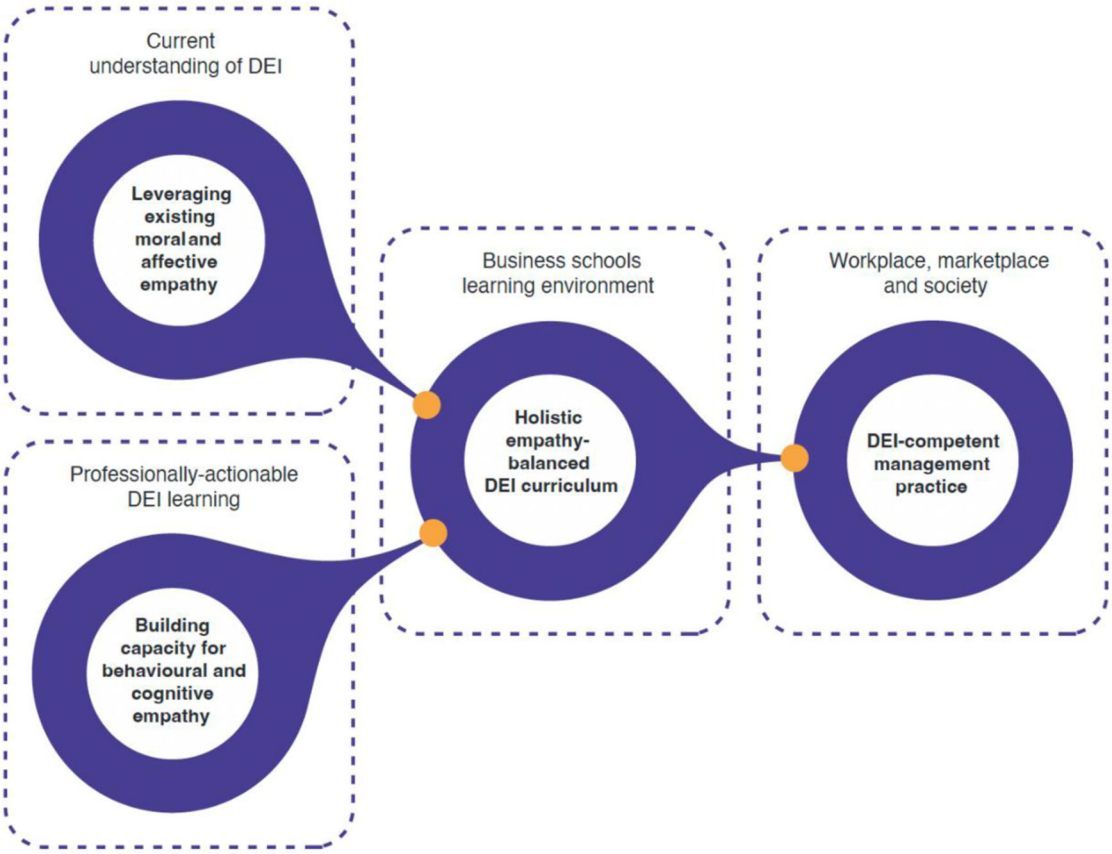

Figure 2. An empathy framework for integrating DEI in management education

Participants describe prior exposure to cultural diversity through upbringing in multicultural contexts: 'having grown up in different cultures and around different people, it's amazing how much you learn' (Emma); traveling: 'Traveling is where I've definitely gotten most of my cultural experience' (Chloe); or studying abroad: 'a lot of it came from studying abroad' (Mollie). For some, the university experience furthered cultural learning: 'those first few weeks [of college] were kind of a shock getting to meet all these new people who have such different backgrounds from me… definitely a learning curve' (Amber). Irrespective of their background, all students articulate care for multicultural diversity and DEI, reflecting affective empathy and offer personal definitions and examples: '[discrimination is] purposely putting someone at a disadvantage' (Julia); while inclusion is 'making sure that everyone's listened to, and then that's also actioned as well' (Susana).

While participants demonstrate awareness of the multi-faceted diversity dimensions and their links to inclusion/exclusion, some dimensions – namely race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation – feature more prominently, mirroring findings spotlighting selective recognition and fragmented knowledge of diversity dimensions in management practice (Galalae *et al.*, 2022; Priola *et al.*, 2014). Students also report uneven exposure to DEI topics, primarily present in select disciplines outside marketing (e.g. economics, law, religion). This pattern of lacking 'curricula commitment' (Perriton, Elliott and Humbert, 2022) is consistent across participants' comments regardless of programme or university attended. Only three students mentioned a dedicated diversity and inclusion module [i.e., course][4]; others encountered these topics within broader modules. Students highlight that, when DEI is introduced in the marketing curriculum, it is limited to selected topics, such as advertising and international marketing, and diversity dimensions (race, religion, culture, disability, gender). This fragmented diversity coverage risks 'perpetuating the practice of making distinctions between dimensions of difference that are

[4]In this paper, the terms 'module' and 'course' are used interchangeably to describe an individual unit of study within an academic degree. The term 'module' is more commonly used in the UK academic context, while 'course' is the preferred term in the United States.

sanctioned and valued, and those that are not' (Stewart, Crary and Humberd, 2008, p. 375).

Student expectations of DEI teaching to acknowledge and celebrate their lived experiences and care for DEI reflect affective empathy capacity. Their desire to develop skills for applying this understanding in future professional practice suggests a need for cognitive and behavioural empathy development. Such expectations align with DEI pedagogy recommendations outside the management literature to activate learners' prior knowledge, connect it to the discipline and provide tools for learning and practice (Hartwell *et al.*, 2017).

In describing current learning experiences, students characterize DEI-related teaching as moralistic and dogmatic, expressing frustration with its normative approach. They perceive current instruction as preaching how students should not be '*terrible people'* (Anthony), indicative of a moral empathy emphasis. Several participants deem this 'unnecessary', 'boring' or 'wasting one's time'. Alex's experience in the 'Management of diversity' class at their US-based university is illustrative: 'It was just kind of annoying having to go through a whole class, that pretty much just taught me … Treat others as you like to be treated … because I just felt, I know all of this. (…) There's no reason to teach me that racism is bad [laughs] you know?' Indeed, moral learning as a 'transformative process' that helps students recognize ethical decisions and engage in critical reflection, requires understanding of the predispositions that students bring to their studies (Blasco, 2012, p. 367) – an understanding that our participants perceive to be missing.

While perceived educators' failure to acknowledge students' existing moral and affective empathy capacity contributes to their resistance against normative DEI learning, students recognize the value of moral content if coupled with actionable skills training. Reflecting on their UK-based university curricula, Anthony notes how normative-focused teaching (i.e. modules like CSR or 'Economy in the society') describes moral norms of desirable manager behaviour but fails to offer the skills for enacting these norms (i.e. lacking behavioural empathy focus): 'when it comes to teaching how to work in a diverse and inclusive environment, they do more parenting than they do teaching. So when it comes to, like, actual skills, I don't think I've learnt any'. These reflections echo the awareness-action disconnect identified in RME studies, as 'awareness of ethical concerns, by itself, does not help students take personal responsibility for their actions' (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015, p. 177).

Theme 2: Critique of gaps in DEI learning

This theme encapsulates students' expectations for DEI learning applied to their professional practice, pointing to the lack of cognitive and behavioural empathy-grounded content.

Several students see DEI learning as essential for navigating workplace diversity and serving diverse stakeholder audiences. Samuel articulates: 'to be able to work in today's workforce, you need to be inclusive and diverse. You're going to be working with people that are from different backgrounds, and you're going to be marketing towards people and clients that are diverse'. Students also recognize the role of marketing education in advancing DEI-integrated practices, as Aaya illustrates: 'if there needs to be more of that [DEI-integrated] marketing, then it should start with learning. If we don't learn about it at university, then it's hard to know where to learn it from'. Concurrently, some participants are sceptical about DEI learning as a stand-alone module, mirroring resistance seen in response to modules on gender (Stierncreutz and Tienari, 2024) or organizational diversity training (Roberson, Moore and Bell, 2024). Unlike those cases, where resistance stems from seeing these topics as marginal, our participants recognize DEI's importance but question its tangible career impact. Sarah summarizes this perspective: 'I think cultural awareness or diversity awareness is important. But I'm not sure that we need a specific module dedicated to that (…) I wouldn't see the tangible outcome from how it's going to advance me, based on what I've seen and heard and done before'. Anthony adds that universities include DEI in their curriculum simply to satisfy university rankings requirements, echoing Gioia and Corley's (2002) critique of institution-driven motives.

To 'move from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility' (Hackman, 2005, p. 106), students envisage a DEI-integrated curriculum covering skill development and knowledge on how '*to do'* DEI in professional practice, reflective of cognitive and behavioural empathy: 'If you're in that situation where you see someone that's excluded, how can you help rectify that scenario or situation, and, you know, turn that exclusion into inclusion? (…) I would also like to have seen more, um, real life examples' (Nathan). They agree that the current turbulent context, where 'tolerance, understanding, empathy have actually been on the decline' (Brian), requires actionable DEI education.

In envisaging DEI-integrated marketing learning that extends their cognitive and behavioural empathy capacity, participants articulate expectations of moving beyond learning *what* is good to do, towards understanding *why*, *how* and *for whom*. One student-researcher summarizes these expectations as learning 'how to think, be and act inclusively in a marketing environment' (SR1). For such action-focused learning to take place, students expect real-life examples, knowledge-informed explanations and deeper critical discussions: 'there was a lack of any kind of depth. Nobody went into why it happened. Nobody was talking about why

the gender discrimination happens' (Anthony); 'I feel it didn't focus on the bigger issue' (Nathan).

Students envisage professionally actionable DEI learning to positively impact the social performance of marketing practice, meeting the public demands: 'it's becoming more at the forefront of conversation (…) it would be very beneficial to everyone on the degree' (Emma). These sentiments corroborate Rivera et al.'s (2020, p. 38) argument that 'the number of organizations successfully applying an inclusive approach may increase if universities incorporate the issue in their marketing curriculum'.

Theme 3: Imagining a holistic empathy-balanced DEI curriculum

This theme captures the skills and attributes student-participants and student-researchers deem relevant for implementing DEI-related actions in professional practice based on their visions of an ideal marketing curriculum integrating DEI.

Participants identify competencies linked to cognitive empathy, such as open-mindedness, cultural awareness and understanding of social injustices, as well as skills related to behavioural empathy, such as adaptability, flexibility, helpfulness, communication and teamwork. Students also deem sensitivity to the feelings of others key to professional conduct, reflecting that, while disapproving of an excessive curriculum emphasis on affective empathy, they acknowledge its significance as a crucial DEI competency: 'willingness to learn, willingness to adapt (…) as a team player, I would have to be responsive to that. In a compassionate way' (Don); 'Knowing how to be empathetic and put yourself in other people's shoes, what can be offensive and what's not' (Candice).

For acquiring desired cognitive empathy-linked competencies, participants envisage a contextualized approach to integrating DEI topics in marketing learning, resonant with recommendations for connecting DEI knowledge to specific disciplines (Hartwell *et al.*, 2017). Some suggest incorporating content that explores sociocultural and historical contexts that impact organizational DEI initiatives. Don illustrates: 'a bit of historical context, but also to look at current affairs and current issues happening right now. Because sometimes with modules, it's a bit like we're put in a bubble. It's not like the real world'. Others ask for deeper contextual exploration of marketing campaigns that reproduced or fostered social (in)justice, as Emily reflects: 'seeing where companies and brands might have gone wrong in trying to be, um, inclusive and (…) studying those injustices and coming up with solutions on how it could have been done right'.

Students expressed a desire to learn about other cultures and discuss uncomfortable topics, reflecting the need to acquire cognitive and affective empathy-linked competencies (e.g. cultural literacy, Ochoa and McDonald, 2020; emotional intelligence, Fernández-Abascal and Martín-Díaz, 2019): 'Maybe just [learning] how to be more inclusive all around – some things maybe I'm unaware of, just because I'm White. Maybe little things I say, maybe talking about little cultural differences, and maybe somewhat racist remarks or thoughts, how we can change those mindsets' (Rashmi); 'Reframing how you think and putting yourself into other people's shoes that aren't like you' (Candice). Students advocate leveraging classroom diversity for learning, proposing interactions with peers and instructors on DEI topics: 'Conversations about discrimination, race, culture and inclusion are essential, and it is crucial to be able to state opinions and discuss these issues respectfully and politely' (SR1). This points to a demand for relational pedagogical approaches, such as 'zones of understanding' where uncomfortable topics can be discussed safely and receptively and reflexive learning activities link students' experiences to DEI ethics and practice (Amoroso, Loyd and Hoobler, 2010; Hartwell *et al.*, 2017; Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015).

Students also wish to learn how to practically address social injustices in market environments, aligning with behavioural empathy: 'I feel like people think it's too much of a big task, and having this [DEI curriculum] helps students in their careers think about a lot more, you know, think about their actions' (Nathan). These expectations reflect demand for a curriculum that explicitly advances competencies for professional action, paralleling developments in wider RME literature, including relational pedagogies, which emphasize exposing students to applicability of theory beyond the classroom (Anderson, Ellwood and Coleman, 2017; Rigg, Ellwood and Anderson, 2021) and the giving voice to values curriculum (Gentile, 2017), which focuses on developing behavioural practices for voicing and acting on one's values in the workplace.

The learning outcomes of actionable DEI learning are illustrated with student-researchers' reflections on their experience of working on this project. Some mention developing skills for emotionally connecting with culturally different others (in this case, their peers), aligning with affective empathy learning: 'I realized that when building a relationship with a person who is from a different culture, it is important to find warm places, namely what unites you, later it is easier to share what is different with you and this will have a positive effect on your relationship' (SR3). Others articulate gaining deeper knowledge and understanding of diversity and how their future professional practice impacts inclusion, aligning with cognitive empathy: 'I started noticing campaigns that are inclusive and now I more appreciate brands that are promoting inclusivity. This project helped me grow as a future marketer and I became aware

of issues that I haven't extensively thought about before' (SR4). Further, student-researchers consider the project to have built and/or strengthened their professional and research execution skills, particularly for sensitively conducting DEI research, reflecting advanced behavioural empathy. While small in scale, the project activated and facilitated student researchers' development of affective, cognitive and behavioural empathy capacity.

Beyond curriculum content, learning activities and outcomes, students provide strategic recommendations regarding when, where and how to integrate and assess DEI learning. Most participants envisage DEI as a mandatory component of management education to maximize its reach beyond 'like-minded students' (Mario) and create a cultural shift. These expectations resonate with calls for stronger DEI commitment across business schools' programme portfolios (Perriton, Elliott and Humbert, 2022; Rivera *et al.*, 2020). Students also favour integrating DEI learning across various modules rather than a dedicated one, ensuring it 'keeps resonating with you throughout your years in college' (Rashmi). Opinions varied on the timing for introducing DEI content, with some advocating for first-year exposure to promote inclusion, and others recommending later exposure to enable a discipline-applied understanding. Such differences in perspectives suggest that programme-level DEI teaching strategies may require a carefully considered timing.

A guide for DEI-integrated curricula development

We synthesize and build on the findings to offer a guide that outlines essential curriculum content, instructional activities for educators and recommendations for business school leadership and accreditation bodies (Table 6). The guide integrates student expectations with our recommendations for actionable curriculum innovations, building on literature on empathy-driven pedagogy (Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019; Shapiro, 2011), responsible management education (Gentile, 2017; Mason *et al.*, 2024) and recent DEI management pedagogy developments (Chang, 2020; Grier, 2020; Pierce and Longo, 2020).

Our guide shows that educators can helpfully utilize empathy dimensions to balance the DEI curriculum foci for varying student contexts and needs. In Table 6, we visually illustrate a curriculum calibration utilizing a colour-coded continuum ranging from red (low focus) to green (high focus). From our thematic findings, we map student learning experiences and expectations to each of the empathy dimensions (indicated with a mortarboard image). As reported, within the educational contexts we investigated, students perceive their DEI learning as over-saturated with moral and (to a lesser extent) affective empathy and desire more cognitive and behavioural empathy-focused content. While recognizing this saturation, we note that prior research cautions against selectively privileging particular empathy dimensions in pedagogical innovations, as this may cause resistance if students feel patronized (Roberson, Moore and Bell, 2024; Seidel and Tanner, 2013; Stierncreutz and Tienari, 2024) or encourage an instrumental 'performance' of empathy without moral underpinnings (Shapiro, 2011, p. 280). Further, learner needs may vary depending on educational contexts, baseline curriculum and pre-existing DEI understanding and experience; therefore, student cohorts may require differently balanced dimensional empathy foci. Hence, our guide provides holistic recommendations for curricula development across *all* empathy dimensions, articulating goals of acknowledging and building on students' existing experiences and understanding (leveraging learner capacity for moral and affective empathy), while fulfilling their aspirations for knowledge and action-oriented learning (developing cognitive and behaviour empathy capacity).

Implications and conclusion

The framework derived from our findings (Figure 2) addresses calls for 'meso theories for curriculum and pedagogy innovation' with a focus on DEI-integrated management education (Mason et al., 2024, p. 544). It conceptualizes students' experiences and expectations of DEI learning through an empathy lens and operationalizes this understanding into a practical guide for DEI curricula development in management education (Table 6). By prioritizing student voice and grounding our conceptualization in multi-dimensional empathy, we offer four contributions.

First, by delineating the four dimensions of empathy as complementary foundations of DEI-integrated management education, our framework provides a theoretical understanding of gaps in current DEI learning in business schools and practical direction for addressing the 'awareness-action' disconnect (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015; Mason *et al.*, 2024), within and beyond marketing DEI education. The multi-dimensional empathy underpinning can serve to rebalance the extensive focus on developing students' affective and moral empathy (principles-based education) and the insufficient focus on building cognitive and behavioural empathy (actions-based education). Students interviewed voiced concerns about how well their business schools prepare them to drive positive change, calling for more applied DEI learning. The current selective focus on moral and affective empathy development in DEI teaching appears to drive the frustration and disengagement some expressed. However, as moral and affective empathy

Table 6. A guide for DEI-integrated curricula development

Recommendations for curricula development and empathy calibration			
Moral empathy 	Affective empathy 	Cognitive empathy 	Behavioural empathy 
Goal: Establish a baseline of prior experience and knowledge to leverage ethical motivation to contribute to public value for all culturally diverse people and communities	*Goal*: Activate prior experience and knowledge in context, to encourage care for socially just market environments and conditions	*Goal*: Connect knowledge to discipline to develop the ability to rationally perceive and critically assess socially unjust organizational, economic and market systems, structures and practices from a DEI perspective	*Goal*: Develop skills to take professional actions that practically address social injustices in organizational, economic and market environments through DEI managerial practice
Student expectations of knowledge and skills to be included in their learning, as voiced by this study participants			
Not present in the data	Emotional intelligence, compassion and sensitivity to the feelings of others	Open-mindedness, cultural awareness, social justice and DEI literacy	Adaptability, helpfulness, communication, teamwork, civic engagement, problem-solving, researching DEI
Our recommendations for curricula components and pedagogical approaches to address student expectations			
Curriculum focus: Why 'do' DEI? *Curriculum components*: Cultural humility, critical thinking, moral reflexive practice and ethical dimensions of DEI *Pedagogical approaches*: • Creating 'zones of understanding' where students discuss 'difficult' topics without feeling judged and moralized, facilitated by elicitation techniques, such as tasks involving constructing materials in response to stimuli (topic/question), or arranging and explaining topic-related materials – for example, LEGO® Serious Play®; • Encouraging students to draw on individual lived experiences to discuss ethics of DEI via autobiographical learning (e.g., reflective journals or photovoice); • Writing a personal mission statement to practice moral reflexivity; • Discussing the moral implications of decision-making in business; • Exploring the moral responsibilities tied to privilege and power	*Curriculum focus*: For whom to 'do' DEI? *Curriculum components*: Conscious and unconscious bias, DEI values-focused thinking, experiencing 'being different' *Pedagogical approaches* • Case studies deconstructing assumptions about other's experience based on limited knowledge; • Critical action learning to encourage students to observe, interpret and question their own assumptions and emotions as they relate to others; • Class discussions encouraging consideration of being an 'insider' versus 'outsider' based on individual experiences; • Personal Map activity to foster emotional intelligence and diversity awareness by encouraging students to explore visible and invisible aspects of self and peers	*Curriculum focus*: Where to 'do' DEI? *Curriculum components*: Understanding of DEI, vulnerability and injustice in market environments, across contexts and disciplines *Pedagogical approaches* • Defining language and comprehensive dimensions of diversity (e.g. core terms and their use/application); • Providing up-to-date resources and readings on historical and current DEI foundations; • Using case studies from different economic, cultural and social contexts to examine DEI implementation in context (e.g. Global South, Global North); • Showcasing experiences of vulnerable populations via films or role play; • Providing insight into the history of systemic discrimination and inequality and its impact on organizational DEI initiatives; • Implementing relational pedagogies and research approaches to co-produce DEI knowledge with students.	*Curriculum focus*: How to 'do' DEI? *Curriculum components*: Practical applications of DEI in context; working in diverse environments and with/for diverse stakeholders *Pedagogical approaches* • Community-based or service-learning projects to encourage student engagement with diverse communities; • Invited speakers specialized in different diversity dimensions to run skills-building workshops and share best practices; • Collaborative projects with organizations to address real-world DEI challenges and exercise decision-making and action-taking; • Generative AI-powered simulations that enable immersive and experiential learning; • Problem-based scenarios with behavioural scripts for voicing and acting upon DEI concerns in the workplace, including conflict resolution and facilitation; • Group work in multicultural teams, asking students to provide feedback on their inclusive behaviour in collaborative settings.

Relevant literature: Amoroso, Loyd and Hoobler (2010); Anderson, Ellwood and Coleman (2017); Avery and Steingard (2008); Blasco (2012); Chang (2020); Fernández-Abascal and Martín-Díaz (2019); Galalae *et al.*, 2022; Gentile (2017); Grier (2020); Hartwell *et al.* (2017); Heath, O'Malley and Tynan (2019); Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015); Litvin and Betters-Reed (2005); Mailhot and Lachapelle (2024); Ochoa and McDonald (2020); Pierce and Longo (2020); Schwabenland and Kofinas (2023); Sipos, Battisti and Grimm (2008); Stewart, Crary and Humberd (2008); Stierncreutz and Tienari (2024); Trehan and Rigg (2022)

Table 6. (Continued)

Recommendations for business school leadership and accreditation bodies for DEI integration in the curricula
Student expectations of programme-level DEI learning experience, voiced by this study's participants:
1. Make DEI learning a compulsory curricula component.
2. Teach DEI topics across all components of the studied programme rather than as a stand-alone module.
3. Address strategically whether DEI should occur in the 1st year of learning versus later years.
4. Assess DEI topics in a non-conventional manner.
Our recommended actions for business schools and accreditation bodies to address student expectations:
1. Articulate the adopted DEI/EDI definition at the level of programme and module learning outcomes.
2. Incorporate relational pedagogical approaches underpinned by empathy-building goals in DEI-integrated teaching.
3. Engage students in reviewing and developing both formal (class-based) and hidden (extracurricular) DEI curricula.
4. Equip faculty with the training, resources and clarity needed to effectively engage with DEI principles before integrating them into curricula.
5. Articulate curriculum commitment to embed DEI as an applied management competency across programmes' portfolios.
6. Invest in research on DEI learning and pedagogy to enable the development of school-wide meso theories for curriculum and pedagogy innovation.
7. Develop assessment innovations for DEI topics (for example, a 'learning diary' to demonstrate learning and reflect on its value).
8. Introduce applied community and/or problem-based projects as an essential accreditation standard for evidencing course-level commitment to DEI.
9. Incorporate DEI curriculum commitment across business schools' portfolio of programmes in accreditation criteria.
Relevant literature: Keshtiban, Gatto and Callahan (2023); Mason *et al.* (2024); Perriton, Elliott and Humbert (2022); Rivera *et al.* (2020); Stierncreutz and Tienari (2024)

motivate ethical practice grounded in values of care and respect (Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019), we argue that all four dimensions are essential. We thus recommend three overarching priorities for developing DEI-integrated teaching and learning: (1) balance value-based and practice-oriented learning, (2) integrate DEI as a foundational management competence across business school programmes and (3) strengthen DEI's practical relevance through business education standards.

Second, by demonstrating the importance of the four empathy characteristics, we extend pedagogical research examining how empathy can be developed in educational settings (Barton and Garvis, 2019; Edmondson, Formica and Mitra, 2020). This advances nascent research highlighting empathy as foundational to RME (Heath, O'Malley and Tynan, 2019), given its role as a catalyst for action-taking and change-making (Wilson, 2021). Balancing values-based awareness with practical action is equally relevant in other RME domains, beyond DEI, such as sustainability (Kolb, Fröhlich and Schmidpeter, 2017) or corporate social responsibility (Høgdal *et al.*, 2021). Hence, our framework and guide exemplify how RME curricula can be designed using all empathy dimensions to identify focused teaching and learning goals, components and approaches.

Third, we provide a versatile blueprint for pedagogical innovations addressing social justice in multicultural societies. While management educators play a key role in preparing students to work in multicultural organizations (Dachner and Beatty, 2023), teaching these topics can disproportionately burden faculty of diverse backgrounds (Faucett *et al.*, 2022; Layne *et al.*, 2023) or increase the levels of faculty's anxiety (Schwabenland and Kofinas, 2023). The purposively open conceptual grounding of our framework and the richness of student voice – drawing on multi-disciplinary learning experiences – enable extension and application across subject areas. Business schools and faculty can utilize our framework and recommendations to systematically integrate DEI principles into business and management learning and overcome siloed teaching, answering students' calls for DEI learning to be embedded throughout their studies rather than confined to specific modules (Riedel, Beatson and Gottlieb, 2023). Amid current debates around DEI, our conceptual grounding in empathy may inspire 'adaptive and resilient' pedagogical practices sustaining inclusion ethos (Ng *et al.*, 2025; Prasad and Sliwa, 2024). Educators applying our framework can observe how students respond to the activation of each empathy dimension through class exercises, helping establish the right balance (Bartunek and Ren, 2022).

Finally, this research offers a methodological contribution by showcasing the value and feasibility of engaging multi-level student voice in education research for curriculum change, extending Mansfield, Welton and Halx's (2012) model into management pedagogy. It highlights the critical role of participatory approaches in capturing and translating students' expectations into conceptual advancements and actionable directions for shaping their education, enabling a bottom-up approach to curriculum development. However, student voice projects require scholars to navigate delicate

trade-offs between what they gain – richer data, increased access and rapport – and what they concede, including time invested in training students and, sometimes, a compromise in the ability to probe responses for further depth. While engaging multi-level student voice at scale, that is, module level, can be complex amid the 'massification of higher education', it remains feasible with careful adaptation (Anderson *et al.*, 2018). Hence, we join Thomas and Ambrosini (2021) in calling for a shift in business schools' mindset from seeing university administrators and staff as sole knowledge-makers to co-creating knowledge and value with their main stakeholders: students. This is particularly relevant when addressing social injustices; as we show, centring students' experiences and amplifying their voice elicits unique insights concerning current DEI teaching and critical curricula gaps.

Several limitations need acknowledging, opening future research avenues. Although foregrounding student voice uncovered student perceptions of DEI learning experienced (or not) in their degrees, and their vision of an ideal DEI-integrated curriculum, developing and evaluating said curricula was beyond our focus. Future research could draw on our empathy framework and recommendations to co-create curricula responding to students' calls for more action-based DEI education. One area to explore is how AI-powered simulations, enabling immersive, scenario-based experiential learning, could facilitate this process and enhance cognitive and behavioural empathy capacity (Hermann, De Freitas and Puntoni, 2025; EFMD Quality Improvement System; van Esch, Cui and Heilgenberg, 2024).

The single-discipline contextual grounding of our study (marketing) enabled in-depth exploration of student perspectives in one management education component. However, as DEI is key across all organizational functions (Hunt *et al.*, 2020), it should be integrated throughout business school curricula, including currently overlooked disciplines (finance, international business), to prepare students across cohorts for entering the workforce. Scholars in other business and management areas can explore how our framework applies to their disciplines and provide subject-specific solutions. Further studies could compare dedicated DEI modules with DEI-embedded components, exploring how varying integration levels influence student learning experiences and outcomes.

Our findings reflect views of undergraduate and master's students across two countries, yet doctoral students' perspectives, as future scholars and instructors creating and disseminating DEI knowledge, merit attention. Further research could examine DEI learning in doctoral training. Faculty perspectives on developing and delivering DEI content are also important to explore, alongside industry insights on DEI-related competencies required in the job market. We also acknowledge that interviews were conducted in 2020, during the early COVID-19 pandemic and the surge of the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements, which may have influenced some students' reflections. Future research might provide complementary perspectives.

While our sample included students of diverse backgrounds, all studied in western business schools, opening avenues for research in other contexts, including the Global South. This aligns with scholarship challenging the epistemological dominance of western contexts to allow for other ways of knowing (Hutton and Cappellini, 2022). It is also crucial to recognize how diversity in the Global North is shaped by histories of colonization and slavery in the Global South, raising contextual issues such as indigenous rights, postcolonial identity and economic inequality that deserve recognition in DEI learning. Therefore, DEI-integrated management education requires a consideration of diversity in context (Post *et al.*, 2021). Grounding such education in empathy can help embed these nuances in training managers capable of navigating diversity within and across our interconnected societies with care and transformative impact.

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Tana Cristina Licsandru is a senior lecturer (associate professor) in marketing in the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London. Tana's research interests lie in the broad area of transformative consumer research, with particular focus on consumer diversity, inclusion and well-being in multicultural marketplaces. Her current projects delve into the ways in which historical and social hierarchies, power, privilege, and individual actions impact the consumption experiences and daily lives of marginalised groups.

Carlo Mari is an associate professor of marketing at the University of Molise in Italy where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in marketing. Prior to starting his academic career, he worked in the automotive industry as an organizational analyst and as an assistant product manager. His research interests are transformative consumer research, management and marketing education, qualitative research methods, and the bicycle industry.

Eva Kipnis is a professor in marketing at the University of Bradford, UK. Her research intersects culture-informed consumer behaviour, marketing's impact on social inclusion in multicultural marketplaces and transformative consumer research, focusing particularly on the advancement of frameworks for advancing diversity and inclusion-engaged marketing. She applies these foci in various contexts, including product and service design, advertising and brand communications and marketing education.

Cristina Galalae is a senior lecturer (associate professor) in marketing at the Open University Business School, UK. Cristina's research interests lie at the intersection of ethics, transformative consumer research and critical diversity scholarship. Her current projects explore the socio-historical contexts and the experiences of people who are marginalized by the market or/and by academic research, with the view to inform change.

Emma Johnson is a final-year PhD student at the University of Sheffield. Her current research draws from social psychology and identity theory with a focus on the lived experiences of same-sex-attracted individuals who were raised in a religious environment. It explores the strategies they utilize to negotiate potential cultural identity conflict and how this is manifested in their desire for (non)representation in brand communications and their brand relationships.

Samantha N. N. Cross is an associate professor of marketing, F.W. Olin Distinguished Chair of Global Business, at Babson College. She incorporates innovative multi-method approaches in her research, which examines how diverse identities, perspectives, beliefs and abilities co-exist in consumers, households and the marketplace. She has received several awards for her research and serves on a number of editorial review boards, association boards, committees and councils in her field.

Charles Chi Cui is a professor of marketing at the University of Westminster, UK, where he heads the Research Group for Inclusive and Sustainable Business. Previously, he held the roles of departmental research coordinator at the Alliance Manchester Business School and research director at Newcastle Business School. His research interests lie in international marketing, behavioural science, diversity and inclusion, sustainability, branding, and AI and digital marketing.

Shauna Kearney is a lecturer in sport and event management at Birmingham City University. Shauna's research interests lie in theorizing and examining the role of ableism in the marketplace inclusion/exclusion experiences of people with disabilities linked to para-sport events. Shauna also focuses on transformative consumer research with an interest in multicultural marketplaces and consumer inclusion (particularly focused on consumers with disabilities). Shauna's research considers sport management and marketing alongside the lived experiences of PWD.

Verónica Martín Ruiz is an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Substantively, Verónica researches how cultural factors affect consumer and employee behaviours in healthcare and service situations, triggered responses and potential interventions that can be used to redirect behaviour. She conducts TCR research in multicultural marketplace well-being and DEI matters. Methodologically, she researches methodologies to enhance cross-cultural research.

Lizette Vorster is an assistant professor in strategic business communications at Aarhus University. She does interdisciplinary research in marketing, consumer behaviour and social psychology, with a focus on the role of marketing in facilitating consumer engagement and marketplace well-being in superdiverse societies. Via a creative design thinking approach, she seeks deeper understanding of and solutions to real-world problems. She is also a former marketing practitioner with experience in working in developed and developing countries.

Irem Yoruk is an assistant professor of marketing at California State University, Los Angeles. Her research focuses on multicultural market spaces and the impact of cross-cultural issues on consumer and societal well-being. She aims to gain a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour in rapidly transforming and diverse markets, observing cultural and global movements. In her teaching, Dr. Yoruk emphasizes marketing research, global marketing and consumer behaviour.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.