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Cultural diversity for an inclusive university: a systematic review

Diversidad cultural para una universidad inclusiva: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

Cultural diversity plays a decisive role in improving the quality and equity of higher education, particularly as growing numbers of students from different parts of the world now study side by side. This study set out to examine what recent scientific literature reveals about the trends, benefits, and challenges associated with cultural diversity in higher education. An exhaustive search of the SciELO, Dialnet, and ScienceDirect databases was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines, considering only studies published between 2021 and 2026 that addressed cultural diversity in higher education specifically and were available in full text; duplicate records and publications unrelated to the topic were discarded. The search yielded 30 relevant articles. The findings show that intercultural education helps students recognize and value different cultural identities, fosters inclusion, and promotes collaborative learning. A solid understanding of different cultures, moreover, allows people to communicate more effectively in academic settings and adapt to diverse situations. Significant challenges remain, however, including the need for better teacher training and the removal of barriers embedded in curricula and educational institutions. Universities must therefore act in a coordinated and committed manner to advance inclusion.

Keywords: intercultural education, cultural intelligence, educational inclusion.

Resumen

La diversidad cultural es muy importante para mejorar la calidad y la equidad en la educación superior, especialmente cuando cada vez más estudiantes de diferentes partes del mundo están estudiando juntos. En este estudio, se buscó analizar lo que la ciencia ha descubierto recientemente sobre las tendencias, los beneficios y los desafíos de la diversidad cultural en la educación superior. Se hizo una búsqueda exhaustiva de artículos en bases de datos como SciELO, Dialnet y ScienceDirect, siguiendo las pautas de la guía PRISMA. Solo se consideraron estudios publicados entre 2021 y 2026 que trataran específicamente sobre la diversidad cultural en la educación superior y que estuvieran disponibles en su totalidad. Se descartaron los documentos repetidos y las publicaciones que no se centraban en este tema. La búsqueda encontró 30 artículos relevantes. Los resultados muestran que la educación intercultural ayuda a reconocer y valorar las diferentes identidades culturales, fomenta la inclusión en la educación y promueve el aprendizaje en equipo. Además, tener una buena comprensión de las diferentes culturas permite a las personas comunicarse mejor en contextos académicos y adaptarse a situaciones diversas. Sin embargo, todavía existen desafíos importantes, como la necesidad de formar mejor a los docentes y superar las barreras que existen en los currículos y en las instituciones educativas. Por lo tanto, es necesario que las universidades trabajen de manera coordinada y comprometida con la inclusión.

Palabras clave: Educación intercultural, inteligencia cultural, inclusión educativa.

Introduction

Cultural diversity has become a major challenge for higher education worldwide, driven by rising student mobility, migration processes, and university internationalization. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022) and UNESCO-IESALC (2024) argue that universities must respond to increasingly diverse academic communities through policies that prevent exclusion and guarantee equitable opportunities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) likewise stresses that diversity strengthens educational quality once institutions build respectful, inclusive environments. Training in intercultural competencies benefits collaborative learning and students' overall development (Guillén-Yparrea & Ramírez-Montoya, 2023), and universities that actively promote cultural diversity tend to show higher levels of well-being, integration, and harmonious coexistence between domestic and international students (Ward et al., 2025).

In Latin America, cultural diversity constitutes a defining feature of regional identity, rooted in the long historical coexistence of Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and other culturally heterogeneous groups. UNESCO (2022) maintains that higher education institutions should not only foster intercultural formation but also recognize and value different systems of knowledge. Inequalities nonetheless persist in the access, retention, and recognition afforded to students from Indigenous communities (Quichimbo, 2022), which underscores the need to weave interculturality into university governance and academic processes more broadly. Intercultural dialogue among students, faculty, and communities remains essential for building more inclusive and socially relevant universities (Álvarez & Valencia, 2023).

In Peru, cultural diversity is among the most distinctive features of society, with 55 officially recognized Indigenous peoples and 48 Indigenous languages. Peru's Ministry of Culture (2024) underscores the need to build public policies that safeguard cultural diversity and interculturality across all levels of education, while Peru's Ministry of Education (2025) contends that universities must move toward an interculturality grounded in respect for cultural differences and equal opportunity.

Yet discrimination and exclusionary practices continue to affect various universities across the country (Torres, 2023), and the uneven implementation of intercultural policies in Peruvian higher education limits the effective recognition of cultural diversity and points to the need for further research on the problem. Cultural diversity thus remains an issue that demands sustained attention and action to secure equal opportunity and respect for cultural differences within higher education (Castillo, 2025).

It is worth noting that multiculturalism holds that contemporary societies are shaped by groups with distinct identities, values, traditions, and worldviews, whose legitimacy institutions and social spaces alike must recognize. Seen from this angle, cultural diversity is not an obstacle but a resource for learning, dialogue, and relationships grounded in respect and equality. Within universities, this calls for formative conditions in which cultural expressions find genuine opportunities, favoring democratic and inclusive academic communities (Varga et al., 2021).

Quichimbo (2022) further argues that interculturality should be strengthened as a core axis of higher education by promoting recognition of diversity, the exchange of knowledge, and interaction among students from different cultural backgrounds. Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) note that intercultural competencies improve student interaction, the collaborative construction of knowledge, and inclusive participation, while Strotmann and Kunschak (2022) show that university internationalization fosters intercultural communicative competencies. Álvarez and Valencia (2023), meanwhile, demonstrate that dialogue among students, faculty, and communities reinforces the recognition of cultural identities and universities' social responsibility. Taken together, these contributions consolidate multiculturalism as a foundation for institutions open to diversity and intercultural learning. Educational inclusion, in turn, holds that everyone should be able to access, participate in, and remain within the education system on equitable

terms, placing the student at the center of the formative process regardless of cultural, social, economic, ethnic, or linguistic background (Filippou et al., 2025).

From this standpoint, equal opportunity requires responding to each student's needs and dismantling institutional barriers through inclusive policies embedded in university governance (Filippou et al., 2025). Carrillo-Sierra et al. (2025) highlight the role of faculty in consolidating inclusive higher education, while Oswal et al. (2025) emphasize accessibility and academic support. O'Callaghan et al. (2025) link inclusion to the right to education and equity, and Gube and Arat (2024) connect it to institutional resilience.

Building on the foregoing, this study aims to analyze the scientific evidence published between 2021 and 2026 on cultural diversity in higher education, integrating contributions on educational inclusion, interculturality, cultural intelligence, teaching practices, institutional action, administrative organization, and technological innovation. Although scholarly output on the topic has grown, studies remain scattered across partial approaches, making it difficult to understand how universities respond to students with different identities, languages, customs, and social histories. This review organizes the evidence into five strategic components in order to identify advances, trends, and gaps, highlighting challenges such as the weak incorporation of interculturality, discrimination, linguistic barriers, and limited teacher training, while offering input for future research, university policy, and inclusive learning environments.

Methodology

This study takes the form of a narrative documentary review of cultural diversity in higher education. A structured process of identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of studies was followed to ensure transparency, traceability, and methodological coherence throughout the analysis of the scientific evidence.

Search terms were used in both Spanish and English, including “diversidad cultural,” “interculturalidad,” “educación superior,” “inclusión educativa,” “competencias interculturales,” “cultural diversity,” “higher education,” “inclusive education,” and “intercultural competencies,” combined through the Boolean operators AND and OR to optimize retrieval.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Peer-reviewed, indexed articles published between 2021 and 2026, in Spanish or English, were included provided they offered full-text access and followed quantitative, qualitative, mixed, documentary, theoretical, or review-based approaches. Non-peer-reviewed and duplicate publications, those without full-text access, methodologically insufficient studies, and works unrelated to the objective or falling outside university-level higher education were excluded.

Study selection process

A total of 311 records were identified across SciELO, Dialnet, and ScienceDirect. Ninety-one duplicates were removed using Zotero, leaving 220 publications; 164 were then excluded by title and abstract. Of the 56 articles assessed in full text, 26 were discarded, yielding a final sample of 30 studies.

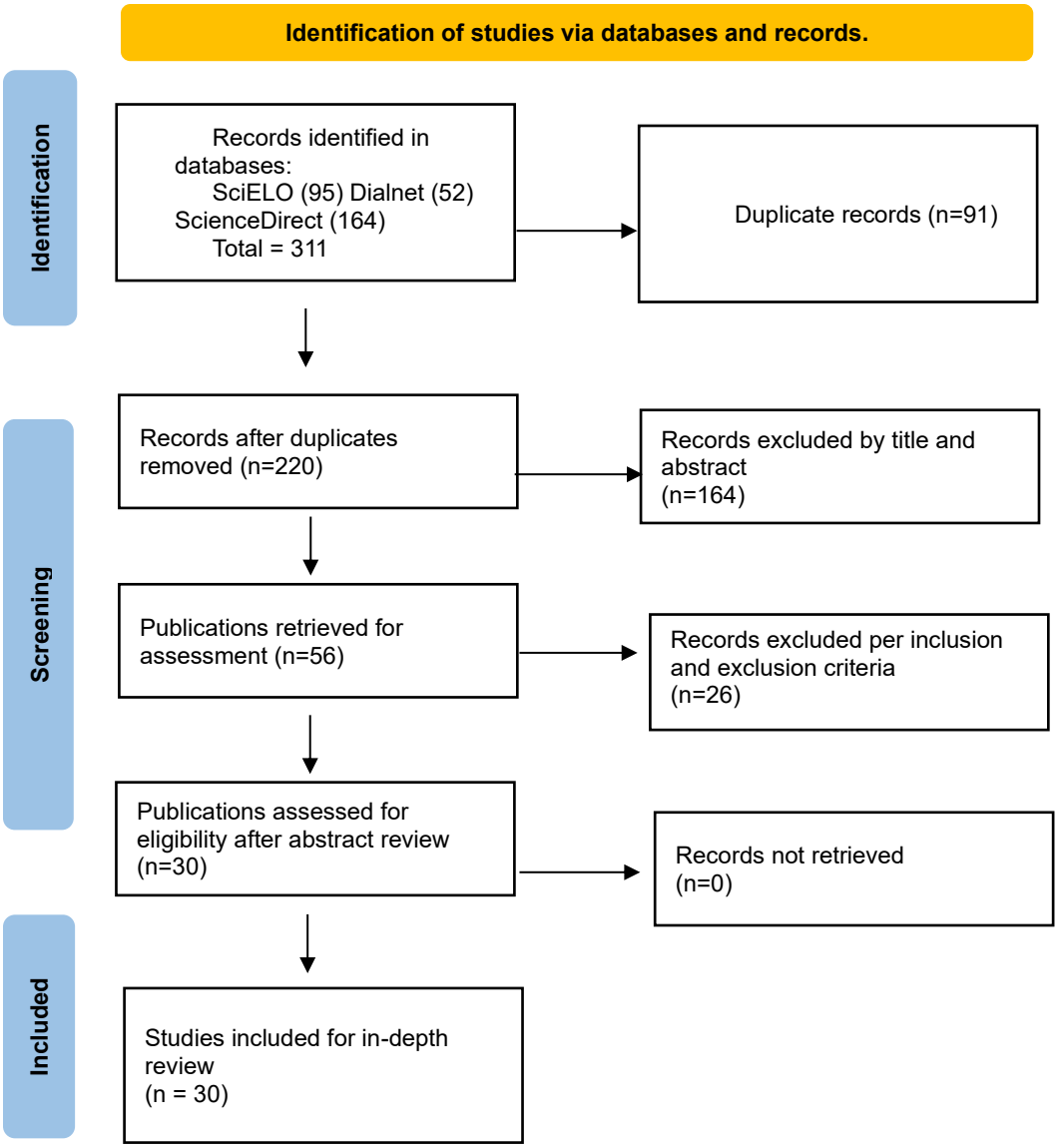
Data extraction and organization

The information was organized into a matrix recording authors, year, country, database, design, objective, results, conclusions, and contributions. The studies were then grouped by conceptual affinity through thematic analysis, which made it possible to identify patterns, differences, trends, and gaps concerning cultural diversity in higher education.

Evidence analysis method

The evidence was analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis, comparing and interpreting the findings. The articles were organized into five axes (interculturality and inclusion, cultural intelligence, pedagogical practices, organizational management, and technological innovation) which made it possible to integrate the evidence and address the research objective.

Figure 1. *Document screening and selection process*



Results

The results are presented at three levels of analysis: the general characteristics of the included studies; the main objectives, findings, conclusions, and scientific contributions of each study; and the studies organized into five thematic axes that make it possible to identify the main trends observed in the literature on cultural diversity in higher education.

Table 1. *Characteristics and Main Findings of the Studies*

No.	Author(s)	Title	Country	Year	Database
1	Ponomareva et al.	Cultural diversity in top management teams: Review and agenda for future research	Sweden / United Arab Emirates	2022	ScienceDirect
2	Chuquín-Cuatis et al.	Integration of ancestral knowledge into university curricula: Challenges and opportunities for intercultural higher education	Ecuador	2026	SciELO
3	García-Segura & Agudo	Attention to cultural diversity in the curricula of future early childhood education teachers at Andalusian public universities	Spain	2024	Dialnet
4	"Sousa, M."	Cultural intelligence in higher education: Promoting inclusion and global collaboration	Portugal	2025	ScienceDirect
5	Quichimbo	Exploring the concept of interculturality in higher education	Ecuador	2022	SciELO
6	Sánchez et al.	Diversity management in organizations as a factor of innovation: A theoretical approach	Mexico	2021	Dialnet
7	Lau, Y.	Does racial diversity improve academic outcomes? A natural experiment in higher education classrooms	United States	2022	ScienceDirect
8	Hinojosa et al.	Intercultural bilingual education and the construction of Quechua-Aymara citizenship among university students in the Altiplano region	Peru	2024	SciELO
9	Lozada	Human talent management in the integration of multicultural teams: The influence of globalization on 21st-century organizations	Ecuador	2025	Dialnet
10	Karlsen & Nazar	How cultural diversity affects communication and collaboration within global high-performance project teams?	Norway	2024	ScienceDirect
11	Huanca Bravo	Multiculturality in the school environment: Challenges and opportunities	Peru	2025	SciELO
12	"Lara-García et al.	The importance of cultural diversity in the global company	Mexico	2021	Dialnet
13	Presbitero et al.	Employee engagement and retention in multicultural work groups: The interplay of employee and supervisory cultural intelligence	Australia / United States / Malaysia	2025	ScienceDirect

14	Altamirano-Navarro	Social and intercultural responsibility in relation to the work of judicial officials	Peru	2024	SciELO
15	Gómez & Osuna	Cultural diversity as seen from Mexico's indigenous and intercultural universities	Mexico	2023	Dialnet
16	Prodanova & Kocarev	Engagement and interaction in a culturally diverse higher education setting	Macedonia	2024	ScienceDirect
17	"Ortiz Moya et al.	Impact of diversity and inclusion on academic performance in higher education	Ecuador	2025	SciELO
18	Markey et al.	Educate, Excite, engage: Embracing classroom cultural diversity: Innovations for nurturing inclusive intercultural learning and culturally responsive teaching	Ireland / Cyprus / Ghana	2021	ScienceDirect
19	Aronés et al.	Opportunities and challenges: Scholarship programs within the framework of interculturality	Peru	2025	SciELO
20	Alexandra et al.	Cultural intelligence, perceived inclusion, and cultural diversity in workgroups	United States	2021	ScienceDirect
21	Saavedra et al.	A scientific approach to public policies on interculturality	Peru	2026	SciELO
22	Khlifi & Hermi	Artificial intelligence adoption as a mediator of executive cultural diversity-ESG performance nexus: evidence from European companies	Tunisia	2026	ScienceDirect
23	Ochoa et al.	Intercultural higher education and ancestral knowledge: Pillars for knowledge management and community development	Ecuador	2025	SciELO
24	Hofhuis et al.	Examining strategic diversity communication on social media using supervised machine learning: Development, validation and future research directions	Netherlands	2024	ScienceDirect
25	Grosch & Hoefnagels,	Cultural intelligence and the role of international classroom composition: Insights from Dutch higher education	Netherlands	2023	ScienceDirect
26	Tesfaye et al.	Exploring cultural intelligence and academic self-efficacy among teacher trainees in a context of intra-cultural diversity	Ethiopia	2025	ScienceDirect

27	Livermore et al.	Organizational CQ: Cultural intelligence for 21st-century organizations	United States / Singapore	2022	ScienceDirect
28	Chédru & Ostapchuk	Development of cultural intelligence during international student mobility: The role of prior intercultural exposure and personality	France	2025	ScienceDirect
29	Lee & Hwang	Antecedents of American hospitality students' intercultural communication apprehension: Effect of ethnocentrism, cultural intelligence and core self-evaluations	United States	2024	ScienceDirect
30	Briceño	Cultural diversity in virtual learning environments in higher education in São Paulo: A quantitative correlational study on effective integration using artificial intelligence	Brazil	2024	ScienceDirect

Table 1 shows considerable methodological diversity, with a predominance of quantitative approaches, and points to strong international interest in cultural diversity in higher education, particularly through recent publications in ScienceDirect, SciELO, and Dialnet.

Table 2. *Strategic Components Analyzed*

Strategic Components	Authors	Synthesis and/or Conclusions
1. Interculturality, cultural diversity, and inclusion in higher education	Chuquín-Cuatis et al. (2026); García-Segura & Agudo (2024); Quichimbo (2022); Hinojosa et al. (2024); Gómez & Osuna (2023); Ortiz Moya et al. (2025); Aronés et al. (2025); Ochoa Carrión et al. (2025).	There is consensus that universities must mainstream cultural diversity and overcome curricular, linguistic, and institutional barriers.
2. Cultural intelligence and the development of intercultural competencies	Sousa (2025); Presbitero et al. (2025); Alexandra et al. (2021); Grosch et al. (2023); Tesfaye et al. (2025); Livermore et al. (2022); Chédru & Ostapchuk (2025); Lee & Hwang (2024).	The evidence shows that cultural intelligence strengthens communication, inclusion, leadership, and learning through university experiences and programs.
3. Pedagogical practices, teaching, and learning in multicultural contexts	Huanca Bravo (2025); Markey et al. (2021); Prodanova & Kocarev (2024); Lau (2022); Briceño Núñez (2024); Saavedra et al. (2026).	The evidence highlights that teaching practice, inclusive methodologies, technology, and educational policy all strengthen intercultural higher education.
4. Organizational management, leadership, and	Ponomareva et al. (2022); Sánchez Leyva et al. (2021); Lozada Acosta (2025); Karlsen &	The evidence shows that the inclusive management of cultural diversity

performance in culturally diverse settings	Nazar (2024); Lara-García et al. (2021); Altamirano-Navarro (2024).	strengthens leadership, innovation, trust, and institutional performance.
5. Innovation, technology, communication, and emerging perspectives on cultural diversity	Hofhuis et al. (2024); Khlifi et al. (2026); Briceño Núñez (2024); Ponomareva et al. (2022); Lozada Acosta (2025); Livermore et al. (2022); Alexandra et al. (2021).	The evidence indicates that technology, strategic communication, leadership, and innovation strengthen intercultural inclusion and management.

Discussion

Interculturality, cultural diversity, and inclusion in higher education

The evidence reviewed confirms that cultural diversity is central to strengthening inclusion and equity in higher education, even though its implementation still faces limits. Quichimbo (2022) argues that interculturality should run through the whole of university education, while Gómez and Osuna (2023) warn of conceptual and institutional confusion. García-Segura and Agudo (2024) note that training in cultural diversity tends to be confined to elective courses. Within the Peruvian context, Hinojosa et al. (2024) highlight the contribution of bilingual intercultural education to citizenship, Aronés et al. (2025) document linguistic, economic, and territorial barriers, Ortiz et al. (2025) point to the limits of diversity policies, and Ochoa et al. (2025) underscore the importance of the university-community relationship.

Cultural intelligence and the development of intercultural competencies

The studies reviewed indicate that cultural intelligence carries considerable weight in higher education, particularly where internationalization and diversity are concerned. Sousa (2025) finds that exposure to different cultural contexts strengthens three key dimensions: motivation, the capacity to reflect on one's own thinking, and behavior itself. Livermore et al. (2022), for their part, link cultural intelligence to universities' capacity to adapt globally and function in a culturally intelligent manner. Researchers such as Presbitero et al. (2025) and Alexandra et al. (2021) have found that individuals with greater cultural competence also report higher engagement and a stronger sense of inclusion.

Grosch et al. (2023), however, caution that effective international coexistence requires well-planned pedagogical strategies. Other studies, among them Tesfaye et al. (2025), Chédru and Ostapchuk (2025), and Lee and Hwang (2024), have stressed the importance of self-confidence, international mobility, and reduced communication anxiety, all of which bear on cultural intelligence and its influence on higher education.

Pedagogical practices, teaching, and learning in multicultural contexts

The literature reviewed shows that instructors play a key role in turning cultural diversity into a learning opportunity. Huanca (2024) argues that inclusion is tied to curricular change and ongoing faculty training. Markey et al. (2021) emphasize teaching methods that take students' cultural backgrounds into account to foster learning and participation. Prodanova and Kocarev (2024) note that when instructors engage with society and remain attentive to cultural differences, they create a more inclusive learning environment. Lau (2022) contends that classroom diversity can improve student performance and educational progress. Briceño (2024) suggests that artificial intelligence can help personalize instruction, while also warning of the cultural biases it may introduce. Saavedra et al. (2026) call for public policies that support intercultural teaching. Overall, the literature underscores the need for instructors and educational policy to work in tandem to build a learning environment that values and draws on cultural diversity.

Organizational management, leadership, and performance in culturally diverse settings

The evidence reviewed shows that managing cultural diversity can become a strategic advantage once it is embedded within the organization. Ponomareva et al. (2022) note that managing cultural diversity influences organizational performance, although research on how this plays out in practice remains scarce. Studies such as that of Sánchez et al. (2021) show that managing cultural diversity is linked to innovation and social responsibility.

Lozada (2025), for his part, stresses the importance of inclusive leadership and flexible systems within multicultural teams if the management of cultural diversity is to be effective. Research by Karlsen and Nazar (2024) emphasizes that trust underlies effective communication and collaboration in multicultural teams. Lara-García et al. (2021) found that managing cultural diversity can help improve an organization's competitiveness through the management of cultural conflict, and Altamirano-Navarro (2024) shows that managing cultural diversity has a positive effect on public institutional performance. Applying cultural diversity management within a university, however, calls for care and for developing context-specific models of intercultural leadership tailored to the institution's particular needs.

Innovation, technology, communication, and emerging perspectives on cultural diversity

Recent studies show that digitalization is transforming how cultural diversity is managed within organizations and educational institutions. Hofhuis et al. (2024) developed machine-learning tools to analyze communication about diversity, while Khlifi et al. (2026) concluded that artificial intelligence strengthens the effect of cultural diversity on governance and sustainability. Briceño (2024) highlighted its potential to personalize learning, while also warning of algorithmic bias. Livermore et al. (2022) link cultural intelligence to innovative responses in complex contexts, and Alexandra et al. (2021) connect inclusion to intercultural competencies. Lozada (2025) and Ponomareva et al. (2022) note that technology adoption requires leadership and organizational strategy. Descriptive and contextual studies nonetheless continue to predominate in this area.

Conclusions

This study examined research published between 2021 and 2026 on cultural diversity in higher education. The findings indicate that the topic extends well beyond inclusion alone to encompass cultural intelligence, leadership, pedagogical innovation, and digital transformation. Cultural diversity, moreover, needs to be embedded in management, curricula, and teaching alike in order to improve coexistence, equality, and the overall quality of university life. The studies reviewed conclude that cultural intelligence and intercultural competencies improve communication, collaboration, and adaptation to diverse contexts, provided they are cultivated through well-planned training programs centered on meaningful learning experiences. Universities therefore need to incorporate these competencies into higher education, particularly given the challenges posed by increasingly global academic environments.

The review shows that faculty training, inclusive methodologies, and intercultural leadership are essential to building more participatory university environments. Yet the differences across studies reveal uneven implementation of these efforts, particularly among Latin American universities, which makes it essential to strengthen faculty training and to evaluate and measure the outcomes of institutional policies.

The review further concludes that artificial intelligence and digital transformation offer opportunities to improve the management of cultural diversity and the teaching-learning process, provided they are applied with ethical principles, equity criteria, and mechanisms that guard against cultural bias. Comparative and longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the impact of intercultural strategies and emerging technologies on inclusion, academic performance, and the overall quality of higher education.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is that it analyzed only articles published in SciELO, Dialnet, and ScienceDirect between 2021 and 2026, meaning that relevant research from other databases may have been left out. The diversity of methods, regions, and university systems represented also made direct comparison across some studies difficult.

Future Research

Future empirical and longitudinal studies should assess the impact of cultural diversity policies on academic performance, student retention, quality of life, and students' sense of belonging within the university. Further inquiry is also needed into the relationship among artificial intelligence, cultural intelligence, intercultural leadership, and digital transformation, particularly within Latin American universities.

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