

FAZEKAS-VINKOVITS Ágnes Sarolta

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Bárczi Gusztáv Faculty of Special Needs Education, Institute for Disability and Social Participation

fazekas.agnes.sarolta@barczi.elte.hu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7460-2077>

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Unpacking Higher Education Governance and its practices regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. The CHARM-EU Alliance's Journey

Abstract

This article serves as a think piece and provides an overview of diversity, equity and inclusion (referred to later as DEI) and their significance within the governance of higher education institutions. The objective is to investigate various perspectives on mainstreaming DEI principles in higher education governance. Drawing on the diversity, equity and inclusion Model Process (Rae, 2022), the article underscores notable milestones in the development of the CHallenge-Driven, Accessible, Research-based and Mobile European University (referred to as CHARM-EU) which was created in January 2019 and co-funded by the Erasmus+ program. The findings presented in this article act as food for thought for the readers.

Keywords: higher education governance, business case, inclusion, CHARM-EU – CHallenge-Driven, Accessible, Research-based and Mobile European University, DEI – Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

A felsőoktatás-irányítási, egyetemi kormányzás, a sokszínűség, méltányosság és befogadás kibontása a CHARM-EU Szövetség munkájában

Absztrakt

A cikk profilja inkább egy gondolati munka a sokszínűségről, a méltányosságról és a befogadásról, valamint ezek kapcsolatáról a felsőoktatási irányítással (governance). A cikk célja, hogy feltárja a különböző nézőpontokat: hogyan ágyazódik be, vagy hogyan foglalkoznak a sokszínűség, méltányosság és társadalmi befogadás témakörével a felsőoktatás irányításában. Ez a cikk (Rae, 2022) egy sokszínűség, méltányosság és társadalmi befogadás (DEI) modellfolyamatból merítve feltárja és kiemeli a CHARM-EU társadalmi befogadás és sokszínűség terén tett útjának mérföldköveit. Az eredmények gondolatébresztőnek (food for thoughts) szolgálnak az olvasóközönség számára.

Kulcsszavak: felsőoktatás-irányítás, üzleti modell, társadalmi befogadás, CHARM-EU, DEI – sokszínűség, méltányosság és társadalmi befogadás

Unpacking Higher Education Governance and its practices regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. The CHARM-EU Alliance's Journey

Exploring the relevance of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education

The relevance of diversity, equity and inclusion (*later referred to as DEI*) in higher education, from a historical point of view, is significant: it is essential not only to have a brief historical overview but also to reflect on the evolution of societal values, continuously evolving paradigm shifts in how people's circumstances, backgrounds and structural barriers are seen and understood, and how legal frameworks and educational priorities have been changing. When mentioning the history of recent centuries it cannot be missed to contextualise the field of area. The 20th century witnessed significant atrocities, particularly during both World War I and World War II. These periods were marked by profound hardship and suffering, highlighting the urgent need for the protection and promotion of human rights. In response to these historical events, the commitment to safeguarding human rights has become more critical than ever on a global scale. 1948 was a key milestone, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was brought to life (Brown, 2016). Over the centuries, historical exclusion and segregation have been witnessed. Throughout history, people from diverse backgrounds and experiences have faced challenges in accessing and participating in higher education due to their interactions with societal structures. Many groups have been facing barriers, such as women or individuals with disabilities and other individuals and groups from mainstream spheres of life, including education (Sweet, 2023). As an example in the United States, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) should be mentioned (Wong & Nicotera, 2004). On a global scale including Europe as well, legislations have gradually challenged segregation and discrimination, laying the groundwork for greater access to and participation in education. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60's brought significant attention to issues of inequality and discrimination, leading to increased advocacy for equitable access to education. Policies such as affirmative action were introduced to address historical inequalities and promote diversity in higher education admissions and employment. Beyond—and also connected to—these societal changes which have been happening, broadening access and participation has gained further attention (Huisman & Van Vught, 2009). The second half of the 20th century saw a significant expansion and diversification of higher education, with increased efforts



to include groups with different backgrounds, different circumstances who were standing at the doors of education. 'New' groups had been historically marginalised or faced barriers in access to and participation in education. These changes also led to greater attention and requirements on DEI work in education. Diversity had slowly come to be seen as a value, and a paradigm shift could be detected gradually, hand in hand with a shift in attitudes (Kottman et al., 2019). By the late 20th century, there had been a growing recognition of the value of diversity in enhancing the educational experience for all students. Diversity began to be seen not just as a legal or moral obligation, but as a strategic advantage. This was also supported by further research and evidence, meaning that there was an increase in studies showing that diverse educational environments lead to better learning outcomes, critical thinking, and preparation for a global workforce (Gurin, Nagda & Lopez, 2004).

Increased focus and attention have been seen in the last decades; however, significant challenges and backlash still exist on a global scale. There is still resistance and there are legal challenges. Various initiatives, efforts to promote DEI have been subject to feeling opposition and legal barriers. For example, affirmative action policies have been subject to numerous court cases, reflecting ongoing debates about the best ways to achieve equity and diversity. Within the recent decades, in various areas of the globe changes in political and social climates have led to shifts in DEI policies and priorities over time, with periods of progress and regression (Chaisson-Cárdenas, 2022).

Nowadays relevance includes areas such as the concept of "inclusive excellence" which incorporates DEI into the core mission of higher education institutions, emphasizing that excellence and diversity are mutually reinforcing (Williams, Berger & McClendon, 2005; Varga, 2015). Furthermore, looking at the increasing globalization and internationalization of higher education, there is an increasing interconnectedness of the world which has underscored the importance of preparing individuals for a diverse, complex environment (Mitchell & Nielsen, 2012). Beyond these aspects there is a focus on equity and social justice, addressing not only access but also the systemic barriers that affect students' success and well-being. The relevance of DEI in higher education, from a historical perspective, is rooted in the need to address historical injustices, promote social equity, and enhance the educational experience. Understanding this historical context helps to appreciate the progress made, recognize ongoing challenges, and reinforce the importance of continued commitment towards creating meaningfully inclusive and equitable educational environments (Bunn & Bennett, 2023).

About higher education governance in a nutshell

Higher education governance refers to the structures, processes, and practices through which higher education institutions (HEIs) are directed, controlled, and held accountable. It includes the various stakeholders and bodies involved in decision-making and policy implementation within the various institutions. Effective governance ensures that institutions fulfil their educational missions, comply with

regulations, manage resources efficiently, and respond to the needs of students, faculty, and society.

There are key components of higher education governance. Effective higher education governance is critical for ensuring that institutions can fulfil their educational missions, adapt to changing environments, and contribute positively to society (Kennedy, 2003). When mapping stakeholders, it is important to mention various individuals responsible for overall policy direction, financial oversight, and strategic planning. There are also faculty and student representatives in governance, focusing on academic policies, curricula, research priorities, and academic affairs. These representatives are responsible for implementing the policies set by the governing board and overseeing the institution's daily operations. In addition, there are faculty committees and councils that are involved in decision-making, and there are representatives of the student body, advocating for student interests, organizing activities, and participating in institutional governance through advisory roles or voting positions on committees. Last but not least, external stakeholders from business and society and alumni are also part of the decision-making process (Bótas & Huisman, 2012). Providing an overview of higher education governance was essential, as later in the article, connections and reference points will be made to the distinctions, innovations, and benefits of creative and inclusive governance models.

DEI in higher education governance

Higher education institutions vigorously compete with one another to establish themselves as prime examples of best practices for promoting student mobility, fostering inclusiveness, maintaining high quality, enhancing competitiveness, and exemplifying the implementation of global values and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This entails the adoption of various innovative approaches, policies, and practices that are in line with global values and the SDGs. Likewise, there is an unequivocal necessity and growing demand to delve into and reconsider new paradigms and strategies for governance structures, management, curriculum design, and the cultivation of dynamic teaching and learning environments within 21st-century higher education (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023). Universities must update their governance models, strategies, and management structures to attract and retain top students and staff while continuing to attract funding that contributes to their rankings and other reputational factors. Universities that demonstrate their commitment to meeting the needs of students and staff with diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, and access requirements will be able to raise their profiles and take their places among the leading innovative universities of the 21st century (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017). Many higher education institutions around the world tend to place the scope of the DEI area within service provision units or governance bodies rather than within strategic university governance bodies. While universities are developing various new, innovative structures, policies, and practices to enhance their reputation and rankings, meaningfully incorporating DEI into governance or working towards an inclusive university governance structure should be strategically prioritized rather than merely being empty phrases when promoting the institution (Fazekas & Johnson, 2022).



Higher education institutions can be governed through various structures and models, each reflecting different approaches to decision-making, authority distribution, and stakeholder involvement. These governance structures and models are designed to ensure effective management, academic freedom, and accountability. There are different governance structures and models in higher education, just to mention a few: shared governance, bureaucratic governance, corporate governance, collegial governance (Van Vught & De Boer, 2015). In recent years, extensive research and projects have focused on the collaborative approach and broadly on inclusive governance. The literature on fostering inclusivity within university governance structures is extensive, including the work of Graham Wise and his colleagues (Wise et al., 2018), as well as Hinrichs and Johnston (2020) and Gindlesparger (2023). These studies explore various strategies for promoting inclusive governance, examining the significance of inclusive structures from multiple perspectives. Additionally, projects such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have further reinforced the importance of inclusivity in governance structures.

Inclusive governance in higher education refers to the policies, practices, and structures that ensure all stakeholders—students, faculty, staff, administrators, and the broader community—have a voice in the decision-making processes that affect the institution. This approach aims to create a greater equitable, participatory, and transparent governance system that values diversity and promotes a sense of belonging for all members of the academic community (Wise, Dickinson, Katan & Gallegos, 2020). In addition, the concept of Distributed Leadership gained higher attention in recent years. It is a leadership approach in which multiple members of an organization share responsibility for leading and managing tasks. Rather than relying on a single leader or a small group of top executives, distributed leadership disperses leadership roles and functions across various individuals and teams within the organization. This model leverages the skills, expertise, and perspectives of a broader group of people, promoting collaboration, innovation, and adaptability (Curtis et al., 2021).

In connection to the CHARM European University (CHallenge-driven, Accessible, Research-based, Mobile European University) Alliance and academic collaborations, Fazekas presented her work: *The 4 Ws & 1 H of inclusiveness and Distributed Leadership* at the event titled *Toward a more pluralistic approach to leadership in healthcare: the case for Distributed Leadership (DL)*, hosted by Elizabeth Ann Curtis and other colleagues from the School of Nursing & Midwifery, Trinity College Dublin on the 1st of September 2022 (Fazekas, 2022). There are advantages and disadvantages related to the challenges and facilitators of Distributed Leadership and inclusive governance in higher education. However, many researchers emphasise that this model can greatly enhance the ability of higher education institutions to innovate, adapt, and engage their members. It is achieved by leveraging the collective talents and insights of a diverse group of leaders. By fostering a culture of collaboration, empowerment, and shared responsibility, higher education institutions can improve decision-making, boost morale, and achieve their strategic objectives effectively. However, successful implementation requires careful coordination, communication, and alignment to overcome potential challenges and realize the full benefits of this leadership approach. (Dombia, 2019).



The process of getting buy-in from leadership

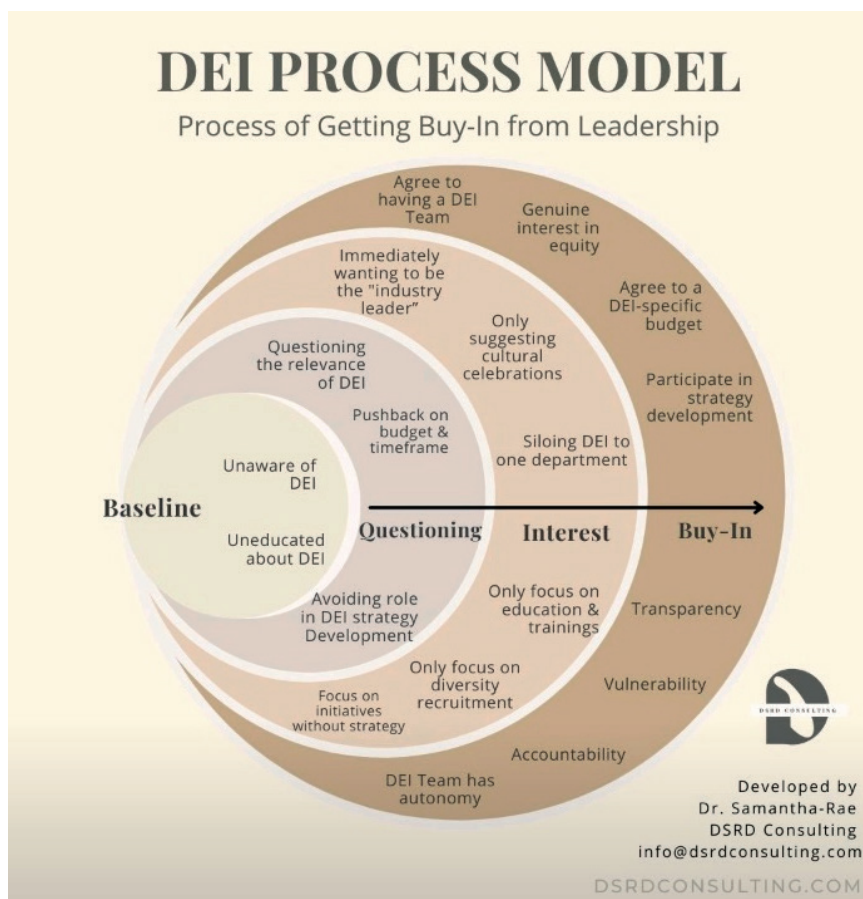
It is important to provide a disclaimer at this stage of the article. The following model represents one viewpoint from a theoretical and practical perspective. There are several models and scholars who have various understandings and approaches of DEI being embedded in organisational cultures and higher education governance. From my perspective, this model highlights areas where researchers and practitioners in higher education and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) may find common ground based on their experiences. My takeaway from this model is that the various stages or aspects can occur simultaneously or coexist in a mixed format, meaning there is not always a clear distinction between the elements it addresses. It reflects the hybrid and complex reality of higher education institutions and their organisational culture. In her work, Rae (2022) shares her viewpoint about the “executive leadership buy-in” Dr. Samantha (Sam) Rae, EdD, MPH, developed a DEI process model in 2022, which delineates the progression individuals undergo in their commitment to DEI initiatives. She presented this model, underscoring its resemblance to the DEI Adoption Cycle previously discussed in her work. Dr. Rae asserts the significance of comprehending the varying stages individuals experience throughout their DEI journey, proposing that such understanding enables organizations to tailor their DEI strategies with greater effectiveness.

This model serves as a complement to the DEI Adoption Cycle, establishing a comprehensive framework for fostering DEI within organizational contexts. It is consistent with a range of other models that articulate the evolution of DEI engagement. For instance, *The Five Stages of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Maturity* by Anukwe, Eze, Onyeke and Iloka (2024) investigates five stages of DEI maturity, providing a strategic roadmap for organizations aspiring to cultivate equitable environments. Moreover, the work of Elżbieta Karwowska and Michał T. Tomczak (2024) concentrates on the development of a DEI Maturity Model within the sphere of responsible business education. Their research examines the means by which business schools can implement and evaluate DEI practices using this model to advance fairness, equity, and inclusivity in educational settings.

Rae makes a clear distinction and addresses the fact that getting executive buy-in is not about getting leadership to sign a DEI programme. The buy-in happens when governance bodies are committed to develop a strategy where DEI measures are meaningfully incorporated into the overall structures and governance, and they include all areas. Rae reflects on how language is used when it comes to DEI matters. She highlights that there is a clear distinction between a “DEI programme” or “DEI efforts” and a “DEI Strategy.” Organisations should reflect on how they approach DEI matters. Rae pinpoints the potential risks or pitfalls of approaching DEI work on a surface level. Various actions, such as professional development sessions, curricula design and shaping the teaching and learning environments require a clear commitment as part of the overall strategy.

Clear vision and mission are needed where DEI is at the heart of the overall commitment, application, and monitoring. Without these, there is a potential failure to create real change.





Rae created the model to illustrate how she views the process of getting executive leadership buy-in. Inspired by this model, this exercise reflects on CHARM-EU's organisational development in the area of inclusion and diversity. Rae highlights experiences from various organisations, including businesses and the public sector, noting that many organisations go through what she describes as the „interest phase” which she interprets as the „performative DEI phase”. In her explanation, this is the phase where DEI practitioners might have the false sensation that this means success in getting buy-in. However, having an interest in the matter does not equal to full commitment. Rae highlights the responsibilities of those passionate about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). She argues that merely addressing the issues is often not specific or intentional enough; sometimes, DEI advocates compromise with leadership and settle for less than needed. In her work, particularly during professional development sessions, Rae emphasises that securing leadership support for the DEI Blueprint is rooted in concepts like emotional intelligence and psychological safety. She explains that the DEI Blueprint is an innovative and comprehensive set of tools and resources designed to empower organisations in developing and implementing effective strategies that meaningfully embed diversity,

equity, and inclusion (DEI). It emphasises the importance of a clear and measurable commitment and accountability from higher education governance and relevant stakeholders to ensure that all individuals involved contribute to the overall operation (Rae, 2022).

A case study – CHARM-EU's journey

A brief overview of the CHARM-EU European University Alliance

In January 2019, the CHARM European University Alliance was born, co-funded by Erasmus+. It has been a consortium of five universities (as of 2023, nine universities), part of the European University Initiatives where there was a clear vision to stimulate the international competitiveness of higher education institutions across Europe. After completing the 2019–2022 period, CHARM-EU applied for and was awarded the grant¹ under the 2022 Erasmus+ European Universities Call². During the 2023–2026 period, it includes nine public higher education institutions. It receives financial support for its projects as an Alliance of the European Commission (Erasmus+ and Horizon frameworks). The overall goal is to pilot a new Inter-European University aligned with the Global European Values and SDGs to become a world example of good practice to foster mobility, inclusiveness, quality, and competitiveness across European higher education. It represents a 'testbed' model where accessibility and inclusion are interwoven into its DNA. DNA stands for deoxyribonucleic acid (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025), a molecule that carries genetic information for an organism's development and functioning. In the article, this terminology is used symbolically, meaning that inclusion and diversity should be seen as an integral, organic aspect of the overall operation and governance. (Deliberately having a holistic, intersectional and human-rights-based approach, *Inclusion by Design* means that inclusiveness is strategically mainstreamed into the culture, design, delivery and monitoring of all areas of the Alliance and its Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability (Fazekas& Johnson, 2022).

The CHARM-EU WP6 Inclusiveness Working Group has been of central importance in the organisational structure of CHARM EU and its Master's program focusing on inclusivity and diversity, which affects all areas of organisational culture and operation. Responding and providing a solution to the lack of adequate resource allocation planning at the beginning of the project, CHARM-EU WP6 operated as a temporary CHARM-EU Office of Diversity and Inclusion between January 2021 and December 2022 during the Masters. Moreover, during the entire project period (2019–2022), it functioned as an expert community which continuously supported and collaborated with the relevant partner universities, CHARM-EU actors and organisational units in order to ensure that everyone remains committed to creating an inclusive CHARM-EU experience, in line with the capacity and resources of CHARM-EU. It worked to remove structural barriers that hinder the access and participation

¹ CHARM-EU secures funding to expand and implement its innovative vision | CHARM-EU Utolsó elérés: 2025/05/15

² 2022 Erasmus+ European Universities call launched | Erasmus+ Utolsó elérés: 2025/05/15

of students and staff. From 2023 on, the new name in the new governance model is CHARM-EU Diversity, equity, and inclusion Office (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023).

Step by step embracing a greater inclusive governance in CHARM-EU

Upon reviewing the historical timeline of CHARM-EU's organisational development, I engaged in a reflective exercise to connect with various model sections and highlight certain unique or interesting aspects. The baseline stage was extra apparent back in 2019 and 2020 when CHARM-EU started to bloom, and many individuals and stakeholders were not aware of the DEI issues. As mentioned in the recent article (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023), creating an *"open-door approach"* was gradually shifting from the organisational culture towards a better recognition and visibility of the DEI agenda. Applying mainstreaming inclusion and diversity means becoming a consistent, passionate real-time 'door opener', creating dialogues and cooperation with colleagues within and between CHARM-EU institutions' various organisational units, where inclusion and diversity work had not been introduced or considered before the CHARM-EU Inclusiveness Team safeguarded that inclusion becomes everybody's shared business and responsibility, avoiding the risk of inclusion remaining an empty phrase and just a tick-box (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023).

The journey towards a deeper understanding of DEI is a continuous one that transcends the foundational stage. This evolution is driven by the expanding reach of the CHARM-EU Alliance and the increasing number of individuals actively participating in its initiatives each year. As we foster greater awareness and engagement, we can create an inclusive and equitable environment for everyone involved. Moving towards the *questioning phase*, with honesty and transparency I can say that it is still apparent. Historically, looking at higher education on a global scale, this is not a surprise. The DEI agenda, as outlined above, is still a new dimension in the history of higher education. Professionals working in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) operate in a complex and relatively new field compared to areas like marketing and communication, which are already essential parts of institutional culture and operations. DEI efforts often lack the same level of organisational support and resource allocation. Individuals in DEI roles must invest considerable energy and demonstrate a strong sense of mission, passion, and resilience to drive meaningful change. Additionally, it is crucial to prioritise their well-being to ensure they can effectively lead these initiatives. The organisation needs genuinely passionate DEI people and equally interested colleagues who see value in the field and are not immediately resistant but open to the discourse. Their role is outstanding since they will be the actors who will be ambassadors of the change process and support DEI enthusiasts (Fazekas-Vinkovits, 2023). The Interest phase of CHARM-EU became evident around 2021. A significant milestone was the accreditation of the CHARM-EU Master's programme, which had a notable impact over a relatively short period. This impact on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) was observed within the immediate leadership network and the broader community of colleagues and audiences. To elaborate, individuals interested in the Master's admission process can



experience a meaningful and human-centred approach to inclusion measures within the admissions process. This experience can strengthen their trust in CHARM-EU as an organisation where inclusion is not just a buzzword, but a commitment reflected in both words and actions. We are thankful to all who have contributed to this trust. CHARM-EU's reputation has gradually enhanced in various areas, particularly in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). CHARM-EU needs to uphold its responsibility in this field. Furthermore, the buy-in phase began in December 2021, when CHARM-EU started preparing its governance model. The Inclusiveness Team emphasised a strategic approach, transitioning to a more focused strategy than the previously mentioned service-oriented approach (Sándor et al., 2024).

The buy-in phase is still ongoing with ups and downs, but we are grateful to those leaders and individuals who are becoming deeply committed and engaged towards the DEI agenda and the cause of social inclusion, social justice and embracing diversity and equity. To conclude the takeaways from the model, not in a detailed theoretical or practice-oriented way, but on a broader, human level: in my opinion everything is connected to human relations, human behaviour, attitude, hearts and minds. Success or failure of organisational culture depends on individuals, stakeholders, leadership and the design and realisation of governance and overall operation, it is about both the top-down and the bottom-up approach.

Willigness

As the CHARM-EU DEI Team Leader, I am grateful for the leadership, the team members, and all the individuals and stakeholders who have actively contributed to the success of the Alliance and the meaningful realisation of our inclusion and diversity efforts. Based on my experience with CHARM-EU since 2019, the people involved in the Alliance have been incredibly driven. From both ELTE and CHARM-EU's organisational experiences, it is clear that starting a new project or pursuing innovative initiatives usually arises from dedicated individuals. These changemakers are motivated from within to shift the environment and create something new and inclusive. While developing individuals into passionate, active, and professionally engaged contributors is possible, this dedication must come organically from within. We are grateful that CHARM-EU was recognised with the Zero Project Award.³

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3 CHARM-EU is a Zero Project Awardee for pioneering inclusivity in Higher Education - CHARM-EU Utolsó elérés: 2025/05/15

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