

Beancounting Diversity in Business Schools

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“Oh but you’ll get the job for sure,
you’re a woman and you’re Arabic,
they can’t say no to that.”

INTRODUCTION TO THE DAILY LIFE OF DIVERSE PROFESSORS

Are you bothered by the opening quote? Welcome to our daily exchanges as *diverse* professors! This quote was said to the first author by one of her colleagues and exemplifies how calculative practices, such as rankings, quotas, or accreditation requirements, are transforming diverse professors into artefacts of diversity representation in business schools.

When joining business schools over the course of our careers, we have both been confronted with HR forms where we formally tick ‘diversity boxes’, identified as queer, Arabic, female, or international. As a result, our social identities – our sexual orientation, skin colour, gender identity, and background – have become information that is both appropriated by and at the disposal of business schools. In doing so, business schools, like many higher education institutions, are collecting an increasing amount of data on the diverse social identities of faculty members to meet new diversity-related key performance indicators (KPIs). What does this mean for us? In our experience, this box-ticking approach achieves little and often harms faculty members. We, diverse professors, are now counted not for our value as scholars but for what we represent in terms of diversity. Indeed, when business schools appropriate our social identities, they reinforce power imbalances by failing to take meaningful action to address the discrimination that justifies collecting such data in the first place. Instead, they exploit these social identities for

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profit, reducing them to mere commercial assets. Thus, we call these counterproductive and harmful calculative practices ‘beancounting diversity’, which leads to no meaningful actions or changes.

Contrary to common belief, we argue that simply collecting more data about diversity is not the solution, especially when individuals are reduced to numerical units to satisfy institutional pressures (e.g., accreditation, rankings, and funding) rather than valuing diversity as an intrinsic priority. In our experience, this approach does not lead to meaningful improvements for diverse faculty. This process may even exacerbate the negative effects of beancounting by providing the false impression that diversity issues have been addressed. Instead of promoting inclusion, beancounting treats diversity as symbolic and may further marginalize diverse professors. Although business school leaders likely did not intend to cause harm with their current approach to measuring diversity by blindly adhering to external reporting requirements, the negative consequences of these practices cannot be overlooked.

In this essay, we reflect on our professional experiences across multiple business schools in five different countries to highlight beancounting diversity and discuss its consequences. We call on business schools to end beancounting diversity and their appropriation of faculty social identities. We conclude by proposing an alternative approach, grounded in accountable, and ethical principles and practices, to enable business schools to respect individual uniqueness and foster meaningful dialogue and action on diversity.

FROM DIVERSITY TO BEANCOUNTING

Business Schools Create an Illusion of Progress through Beancounting Diversity

From our perspective, the main problem with diversity in business schools is that institutions blindly collect diversity data merely to satisfy the requirements of rankings, accreditations, and funding agencies. For example, business schools have – intentionally or not – mistaken faculty diversity for ‘international attractiveness’, a KPI that is commonly included in university rankings, such as the Financial Times or required for compliance with international accreditations. As a result, diversity has been reduced to the percentage of ‘international’ staff within a faculty. We have both attended business school assemblies where diversity was addressed solely through professors’ nationalities. Raw numbers were displayed alongside positive statements, such as ‘Almost 60% of our staff is now international’ or ‘We have now reached gender equality in staff’. However, do these KPIs alone measure success in diversity? These data create the false impression that a cohort has diversity. Achieving diversity in a single social identity (such as nationality or gender) does not dismantle structural power dynamics; rather, it incentivizes opportunistic behaviours in business schools.

The perverse consequence is that business schools then focus on hiring professors from overseas or those with dual citizenship. We have heard statements, such as ‘Do you happen to have another nationality, perhaps from your parents?’ – a question often

posed to racialized faculty. Indeed, the first author (French) was asked about a potential second nationality during several job interviews based solely on her Arab physical traits; this is a clear manifestation of the influence of external rankings on business schools' diversity targets, dehumanizing our identities, and reducing them to a mere 'passport' count, which, in turn, reinforces the often distressing experience of being 'othered'. At the same time, she has experienced verbal abuse from her (often cis-white male) colleagues through statements, such as 'We thought of you because we needed a woman to fill the quota', or the remark we used to open this essay. Furthermore, our inclusion stops at the point of contributing to an externally imposed KPI.

To move away from these current practices – in which business schools appropriate our diversities and then check boxes across rankings, accreditations, and funding agencies – we urge business school leaders, such as Deans, Vice Chancellors, or Presidents to free themselves from this ranking and quota tyranny, which is causing more harm than it resolves. At this stage, it remains unclear who truly benefits from this partial and biased measure of diversity.

Business Schools Lack Accountability and Transparency in Turning Diversity Data into Action

In our experience, what is problematic is not only that demographic data about our social identities are blindly collected but also that once diversity data have been gathered, the failure to take action becomes the norm. Indeed, although extensive data on faculty diversity have been collected, few institutions have practices in place to support it. For example, the presence of the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) KPI implied that the first author's Arabic background had to be counted upon her entering a UK business school. However, this information was only ever used at the school level for reporting and has not contributed to substantive action, such as addressing imbalances in career progression for BAME academics. Similarly, the second author was able to select the 'nonbinary' option when joining a new workplace. When they received the minutes of their first department meeting, professors' attendance was divided between females (in French, *Mmes* [plural], i.e., *Mrs.*) and males (in French, *MM* [plural], i.e., *Mr.*). When asked to update this representation, the department chair opted to list attendees in alphabetical order for subsequent meetings, acknowledging that the binary gender split was a legacy of outdated routines that had not been reviewed by HR, although the latter had allowed the author to choose the 'nonbinary' option only a few months earlier.

The key question here is as follows: Who is responsible for this failure to act on diversity data? Human resources? Deans? Heads of departments? All of them? As diverse professors, we do not even know to whom we can complain. We think that, as the main sources of these data, we deserve to know who handles this diversity information, where it has stopped trickling down into daily practices and for what reasons. Without any transparency, we are dispossessed of our identities, which become mere data points recognized in KPIs but not reflected in practice.

Moreover, when business school leaders need this information, they know exactly where to find it. Indeed, once they have ticked the queer box, the second author

frequently becomes the target of additional diversity-related tasks or questions, showing that the diversity information is available but only used when it benefits the business school. For example, they received a personal invitation from the faculty operations office to join a committee on rethinking restroom signage to make it gender-neutral. In this case, the diversity information was available and at the disposal of the operations office.

In the end, we do not truly know who can access diversity data, and this raises major ethical concerns, especially for invisible diversity, which, once disclosed, cannot be undisclosed. ‘Coming out’ as a marginalized group, such as gay, lesbian or queer often takes a significant toll on an individual, especially as they must do this multiple times. If they decide to do so formally by declaring it to human resources, this should not become a reason for them to be constantly outed. Essentially, these examples raise ethical questions about accountability for the data collected, as well as transparency regarding how the data should be used and aggregated.

Thus, we face a situation where the collection of diversity data is a one-way process, from faculty to the school, with no turning back. Business schools opportunistically appropriate diversity through its counting, serving both as a marketing tool and as a means to increase schools’ rankings. Given the increased focus on diversity, inclusion, and ethical reflection, we cannot ignore how our personal data on diversity are used, by whom, and to what end. Thus, we strongly encourage business schools to increase their level of accountability and transparency in terms of how data provided by diverse professors to their employers are used, which is the same way that we do for our own research through ethical consent and ethics committees. Without any accountability or transparency in the collection and use of our diversity data, we feel that our diverse identity is used by business schools to meet rankings and social expectations without any impact or, worse, with negative consequences for the working lives of diverse professors. As such, if business schools collect data about us, we need to know who handles it, how we can amend such information, and whether we have the ability to withdraw any data concerning us at any time.

More Data, Yet Diversity Efforts Are Not Valued

Perhaps somewhat naively, but still conscious that all diverse identities could not be counted with a box-ticking approach, we were initially both happy and hopeful to see the increase in diversity data collection and the inclusion of more types of diversity (e.g., nonbinary and Indigenous) or even across activities (e.g., the presence of diversity topics in teaching and research) by business schools, seeing it as a first step. Indeed, we are both somehow stactivists (Bruno et al., 2014), and we were initially happy to see the sudden interest in collecting data about diversity in business schools.

For example, beyond demographic data, business schools are increasingly asking professors to report or produce a list of diversity-related activities in their teaching and research for accreditation and ranking purposes. In our experience, diverse professors usually take the initiative to incorporate diversity into their teaching and research. For example, the first author was asked at the end of the semester to tick a box indicating whether her courses included diversity-related content. However, the business school showed no interest in the substance of the course content, in the

students' experience or in the level of integration of diversity with the subject overall. In another case, the other author, who is active in organizing events about diversity and business, was asked to prepare a spreadsheet on 1 day of all the events they had organized in previous years, the number of participants and the stakeholders involved (i.e., students, faculty, and the general public). This request was prompted by the business school's realization that they did not have enough diversity activities to include in the renewal of one of its three major accreditations, which was due for submission the following day. Furthermore, the great majority of activities listed had not been financially supported by the business school (some were even financially sponsored out of this author's own pocket), no one reviewed the data provided, and there was no feedback on how the information had been used, any recognition of the effort to run the events, or efforts to provide data at short notice.

Increasing beancounting diversity has not only failed to improve diversity in business schools but also highlighted the misalignment between the data collected on diversity and business schools' practices. Moreover, the responsibility of carrying out the 'diversity' agenda was entirely placed on us, as diverse professors, so this burden is added to our workload without recognition. This 'invisible' labour, which is often dismissed as volunteer work or self-fulfilling, not only makes our academic work more challenging but also further reinforces our marginalization.

Ultimately, this highlights that adding more beancounting does not lead to a better understanding of diversity but rather to increased marginalization on the basis of social identities. Beancounting has failed to transform the internal school culture, leaving diverse professors to handle challenges independently. At best, beancounting addresses symptoms rather than tackling root causes. Women's quotas for representative groups (interview panels, boards, committees, etc.) do not prevent mansplaining or dominance dynamics in discussions. Similarly, increasing the number of international staff does not prevent racism. Exceptions include few practices about collecting and counting data about faculty diversity that respect and help individuals understand their uniqueness, privacy, and right to disclose. For instance, one of the authors observed that UK business schools respect individual choice by including a 'rather not say' option when recording social identities, such as ethnic background. Some business schools have started offering (compulsory) online training on diversity and inclusion, which provides opportunities to further create safe learning spaces. These practices, independent of ranking considerations, highlight the noble intentions that can exist within business schools.

As a result, and contrary to common belief, collecting more data on diversity is not the solution, as it fails to improve a diversity culture in which everyone is respected and considered for what they are and not what they represent in terms of KPIs.

A CALL TO PUT ACCOUNTABILITY WHERE IT BELONGS

We have proposed a few easy-to-adopt measures to address the urgent issues we face. However, grounded in our lived experiences, we also envision bolder and fundamental actions for business schools so that they can put an end to beancounting diversity.

From Beancounting to a Fight against Discrimination

We ask business schools to take a political stand in their language, discourse, and actions. Beancounting depoliticizes and desocializes diversity, stripping it of its activist foundations and the social justice objectives traditionally associated with diversity practices, which aim to address power imbalances between groups. By reducing their efforts toward the simplistic idea of beancounting ‘diversity’ rather than recognizing it as a genuine ‘fight against discrimination’, business schools embellish an ongoing political and historical struggle, thereby diminishing their responsibility toward their staff in terms of both physical and emotional protection. When diversity initiatives are highly scrutinized, we ask business schools to fully embrace them and publicly acknowledge their active role in fighting discrimination toward all social identities. It would illustrate that discrimination associated with diversity is not a matter of individual behaviour – such as being considered ‘deviant’ in academia for being Arabic, female, queer, or international – but rather that exclusion is embedded in social structures.

This shift in perspective is actionable by deans and associate deans for diversity, as they are key players in perpetuating beancounting diversity, whether intentionally or not. For instance, they could start by acknowledging the existence of discrimination within business schools and further implementing initiatives aimed at reducing, or even eliminating, it. When this is called a fight against discrimination, the responsibility shifts from diverse faculty to human resources and deans, who should ensure a work environment that is free from discrimination.

From Beancounting to Making Everyone Feel Responsible for Fighting Discrimination

By embracing the fight against discrimination, business schools – rather than their diverse staff – become the primary actors that are responsible and accountable for diversity. The responsibility shifts, making business schools accountable for their actions in combating discrimination, which is a source of both physical and psychological distress for diverse staff. This also means highlighting not only what is going well but also what is failing within business schools in terms of discrimination and inequality. For example, deans could first commission an external company to conduct an anonymous survey on staff discrimination and psychological safety and then take corrective actions accordingly. These figures should be communicated to staff and external stakeholders, not those that only partially measure our social identity. Similarly, instead of simply measuring the binary gender pay gap, deans and deans for diversity or faculty could report and track the number of actions taken to close this gap or analyse how it has evolved over time, thereby demonstrating the impact of their initiatives.

Furthermore, business schools should adopt a reflexive approach, detailing which organizational actions contribute to power imbalances that hinder their fight against discrimination and, more broadly, their failure to take action. To move away from beancounting activities, we think it is important that business schools report on actions that continue to perpetuate a lack of diversity within their practices and among stakeholders. This approach would be helpful for moving beyond the assumption that

simply showcasing faculty diversity enhances a school's image. Rather, it would promote an understanding of what is not working and encourage accountable and ethical changes.

From Beancounting to Valuing Effort to Erase Discrimination

When diversity-related initiatives are led by individual professors or groups, these efforts should be formally recognized as part of their workload. Treating such initiatives as 'volunteering' or 'self-fulfilment' activities suggests that business schools exploit the time and effort of professors, who, in our experience, are almost always marginalized communities, without proper acknowledgment; in doing so, schools not only exploit faculty members' commitment to fostering diversity but also limit the time they can devote to research and teaching, which remains central to current KPIs. As a result, their work in diversity becomes even more invisible.

Thus, we encourage deans to recognize and integrate these, thus far invisible, activities into workload calculations; this could include formally acknowledging efforts related to the fight against discrimination as part of faculty members' responsibilities rather than treating them as voluntary or secondary commitments. Actions, such as challenging discriminatory practices, advocating for fair recruitment and promotion processes, mentoring staff facing discrimination, and ensuring that institutional policies, actively prevent exclusion should be valued and accounted for in workload distribution. By valuing these efforts, deans send a strong message that eradicating discrimination is a collective responsibility rather than a burden placed on marginalized faculty.

Ultimately, embedding these commitments into formal workload frameworks would make it clear that combating discrimination is not an individual struggle but rather a fundamental duty of the entire institution.

CONCLUSION

Business schools must abandon their logic of beancounting diversity. This ranking-driven and competitive approach to diversity data reduces people to mere pawns in a game and fosters unsafe environments, as also emerged from the opening quote. Instead, business schools should immediately embrace the actionable practices we have suggested so that they can begin repairing the harm caused by beancounting our diversities and fighting against discrimination in academia.

We recognize that our experiences are context-specific and represent only some perspectives of diverse professors within business schools. However, by sharing these reflections, we hope to encourage others to acknowledge and support the need to move beyond beancounting diversity and engage in a more thoughtful and well-resourced process.

To conclude, our proposals are not intended to be a one-size-fits-all solution but rather a starting point for developing ethical principles and practices on diversity within the academic community. We strongly urge business schools to take immediate, ethical, and accountable action to address the harm caused – harm that we, as diverse professors, continue to experience as a result of beancounting diversity.

In this way, in a world of business schools beyond beancounting diversity, we would hear a colleague say:

“Oh, but you’ll get the job for sure! You’re an amazing scholar. Just make sure the school truly values diversity, actively fights discrimination, and recognizes your efforts toward inclusion.”

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