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Navigating DEI in a Shifting Climate: A Developmental Approach Using the CADENCE Model

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Summary:

Despite the recognized importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), many organizations remain mired in compliance-driven efforts that can incite backlash or fail to produce lasting cultural change. This developmental paper investigates how to reframe DEI as an ongoing, business-critical process by applying the CADENCE model; a seven-step roadmap (Compliance, Alignment, Deployment, Evaluation, Normalization, Catalyzing, and Effectiveness). Drawing on contemporary data from major global companies in Europe, the UK, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, and the United States of America (USA), we highlight persistent gaps between signalled diversity efforts and the infrastructure necessary to achieve them. In light of growing resistance to DEI, notably in the USA, we propose that embedding DEI within broader business, political and social evolution is crucial for sustainable transformation. For the next phase of research, we will integrate additional empirical data, refine the model's relevance across different legal contexts, and welcome conference feedback to solidify practical recommendations.

Track: International Business and International Management Track

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Organizations continue to wrestle with translating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) aspirations into sustained practice. Executive commitment is a necessary, but rarely sufficient, condition for success. Momentum frequently stalls at the middle-management layer, where DEI is still treated as an optional add-on rather than a performance lever. For multinationals, the challenge is magnified: regional offices must reconcile headquarters' ambitions with local legislation, regulatory oversight, and socio-cultural norms, producing a patchwork of acceleration, compliance, and rollback—sometimes within the same reporting cycle.

Globally, the legal climate is also shifting. In the United States, recent litigation invokes the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to dismantle programmes deemed incompatible with “meritocracy” (Sharpeson and Dollens, 2025). Conversely, the European Union’s Women-on-Boards Directive (2022) requires listed firms to reach 40 percent female non-executive directors by 2026. In the UAE (United Arab Emirates) in 2021, listed companies were required to have at least one woman on their boards, followed by a similar mandate in 2025 impacting private joint-stock companies (Gaio et al., 2024; Yoshino et al., 2025).

Such cross-pressures expose three persistent weaknesses in existing DEI frameworks: episodic roll-outs that lack feedback loops, single-level toolkits that ignore macro–meso–micro interactions, and tenuous links to business outcomes. This development paper draws on signalling theory, which treats public disclosures as deliberate cues of strategic commitment for DEI goals. In this paper we introduce the CADENCE, a seven-step roadmap anchored in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model. The conceptual framework of the model is tested through an audit of 180 DEI signals from engineering and finance firms in three regions; Europe, GCC and North America. The goal is to move the conversation from descriptive snapshots to an integrated capability fit for today’s contested, multi-jurisdictional landscape.

1. From Descriptive Snapshots to Integrated Capability: A Critical Review of DEI Frameworks

DEI in organizations does not follow a uniform approach from its inception to mature development. Instead, the process can be best described as fragmented, often is a result of reactive responses to international events, with significant activity in response to global movements such as the “Me Too” movement (2006) or Black Lives Matter protests (2020).

Academic research in this field has rapidly expanded with numerous analyses and critiques that offer more detailed discussions on significant trends and behaviour patterns in DEI activities. Although the past decade has seen an increase in empirical studies, much of this research remains descriptive rather than explanatory (Park et al., 2025).

To better assess some of the gaps in the arena of DEI research, Roberson’s (2019) state-of-the-science review highlights an ongoing “blindness to context,” noting that programme inventories rarely examine how sectoral or regional conditions influence outcomes. Shore et al. (2018) add a measurement critique, observing that many widely used “inclusion” scales have not undergone convergent, or discriminant validity testing, leaving uncertainty about what they actually measure. Longitudinal evidence deepens these concerns; drawing on panel data from over 800 U.S. firms, Dobbin and Kalev (2018) demonstrate that compliance-focused training and grievance systems rarely produce lasting improvements and can even provoke backlash when implemented reactively, and insufficient attention is paid to adapting the culture.

Collectively, these critiques point out three main weaknesses in the dominant descriptive approach: a lack of context, fragile metrics, and uncertain behavioural impacts. Based on these observations, the push to incorporate multi-level context, validated external indicators, and a feedback-rich framework

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emerged as a way to address the current gaps. Much of the DEI scholarship remains descriptive and limited in its application to navigating the complexities of large global organizations.

A recent meta-analysis by Okatta et al. (2024) reinforces these concerns. While confirming a positive association between robust DEI practice and innovation, the study concludes that most research still treats context and feedback loops as afterthoughts. Put differently, organizations often broadcast diversity commitments yet lack the measurement architecture to verify progress; a signalling versus practice gap that further complicates cross-company comparison.

These gaps underscore the need for a framework that integrates multi-level context, validated external signals and continuous feedback loops. A focused review was therefore conducted across management and education literature, based on the idea that modern organizations must build adaptive capacity in response to increasingly complex environments; an insight rooted in organizational research (management) and lifelong learning theories (education). From the review of frequently cited frameworks in the DEI field, identified in both disciplines, three recurring categories emerged: (1) compliance-focused diagnostic tools, (2) multi-level analytical models, and (3) learning-based educational frameworks. Each category presents unique contributions as well as identifiable gaps. Table 1 provides an overview of these three categories and positions each framework within its relevant domain.

Table 1: Table of Analysis - Review of Existing Models Spanning Education and Management Disciplines (Theoretical and Practical Models from 1994 to 2021)

Category	Model (citation)	Year	Domain	Key focus / distinctive contribution	Typical limitation noted in literature
1. Compliance-centred diagnostic tools	Global DEI Benchmarks (O'Mara et al.)	2006 / 2021	Management, cross-sector	15 practice areas with five maturity levels; widely used checklist for external audits	Static “snapshot”; stops at meso-level; limited cultural traction
	Five-Stage DEI Maturity Model (Washington)	2022	Management, practitioner	Ladder from <i>Aware</i> to <i>Sustainable</i> that locates a firm's current stage and next rung	Linear, implicit change path; single-level focus
	Discrimination-and-Fairness paradigm (Thomas & Ely)	1996	Management, conceptual	Emphasises quotas, policy audits, and equal-opportunity compliance	Treats DEI as obligation; weak behavioural change
	Diversity-Strategy Continuum (Fink & Pastore)	1999	Management, descriptive	Maps four stances from Non-compliance to Proactive	Maturity continuum without feedback loop
2. Analytic multi-level models	Interactional Model of Cultural Diversity (Cox)	1994	Management, theoretical	Links diversity climate to individual, group, and organisational performance	Descriptive; no sequenced implementation
	Multi-Level Process Model (Nishii et al.)	2018	Management, integrative	Traces chain: practices to climate to outcomes, with cross-level moderators	Lacks built-in iteration; prescriptive guidance minimal
	Multicultural Organization Development	1994	Organizational Development / Education	Sequential evolution from Exclusionary to Multicultural	Linear; limited feedback; mainly meso-level with

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Category	Model (citation)	Year	Domain	Key focus / distinctive contribution	Typical limitation noted in literature
3. <i>Learning-oriented educational frameworks</i>	(MCOB). 6-Stage model (Jackson & Hardiman)				external social responsibilities
	Inclusive Workplace Model (Mor Barak)	2000 / 2011	Management, theoretical	Positions inclusion across internal, community, global layers	Describes ideal state, not an action roadmap
	Inclusive Excellence (Williams et al.)	2005	Higher education	Treats diversity as driver for better learning than an outcome; relies on multi-year strategic cycles	Focus on institution wide (macro) change with micro-level climate improvements, performance link weak
	Equity Scorecard (Bensimon et al.)	2004	Higher education	Data-driven cycle of inquiry: identify gaps, intervene, reassess to drive continuous improvement	Primarily institution-level, brings micro-level engagement for staff with emphasis on institutional responsibility

1.1 Compliance-Centred Diagnostics

Early DEI practice focused on legal compliance and risk mitigation, a trend that has continued today. O'Mara et al.'s Global DEI Benchmarks (2006/2021) and Washington's Five-Stage Maturity Model (2022) exemplify this strand. Both of these models provide user-friendly checklists that diagnose an organization's current state and prescribe the next target rung. Similarly, Thomas and Ely's (1996) Discrimination-and-Fairness paradigm and Fink & Pastore's (1999) strategy continuum emphasize representation quotas, policy audits, and mandatory training. These instruments are effective for diagnosing gaps and benchmarking an organisation against its peers; nonetheless, scholars identify three recurrent deficiencies: (i) the framework generates data that is a snapshot, a static orientation, without elements of a continuous-improvement cycle; (ii) they adopt a single-level analytic lens—focusing almost exclusively on the organisational (meso) level and ignoring how macro forces (e.g., regulation, industry norms) and micro dynamics (team climate, individual perceptions) interact with DEI efforts, and (iii) they achieve little lasting behavioural traction, rarely shifting day-to-day norms and practices.

Static-orientation frameworks rely on evaluations that are periodic pictures. Given this periodicity, change pathways are implicit rather than engineered; the diagnosis captures a moment in time but provides no built-in mechanism for converting findings into an iterative, continuously improving action plan. A second limitation of many compliance-centred diagnostics is their single-level analytical lens focus. Attention typically stops at the organizational layer (meso), with little effort to trace how DEI dynamics intersect with macro forces - legal mandates, political climates - or micro-processes such as team norms and interpersonal behaviour. Treating the organization as an isolated unit obscures the cross-level feedback loops through which external pressures and grassroots practices continually reshape one another and, therefore, offers an incomplete guide to sustainable change. A third limitation is limited cultural traction. This is when DEI is framed purely as a compliance exercise, or check-the-box exercise, where, in this instance, it rarely permeates everyday

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routines. By signalling an external mandate rather than an intrinsic organizational value, such programmes foster passive conformity at best and, as Dobbin and Kalev (2016) show, can even provoke defensive backlash that undermines their intended goals. To address the limitations of compliance-centred diagnostics, researchers have shifted toward analytic multi-level models that trace how diversity dynamics cascade across individual, group, and organizational strata from both a management and capacity-building perspective.

1.2 Analytic Multi-Level Models

Management scholars have answered the single-level critique with multi-level analytic frameworks. Cox's (1994) Interactional Model of Cultural Diversity links diversity climate perceptions to group and organizational performance, while Nishii et al.'s (2018) Multi-Level Process Model tracks the causal chain from espoused practices to employee attitudes, climate, and outcomes. Consequently, while these frameworks illuminate *what* happens when diversity climates emerge, they remain largely diagnostic rather than design-oriented and with minimal attention on the effects. Most of the research stops at mapping correlations and causal pathways and therefore offer little guidance on which levers to pull, in what order, and with what iterative controls to sustain change.

Attempts to go beyond diagnosis reveal two additional limitations. Jackson and Hardiman's (1994) six-stage MCODE model introduces sequencing but does so sequentially without a feedback mechanism to revisit earlier stages once a new one is reached. At the other extreme, Mor Barak's (2000) Inclusive Workplace model describes an ideal end state that combines internal and societal layers, yet remains silent on the operational path to reach it. In short, current multi-level frameworks either prescribe a one-way ladder or show the destination without a clear roadmap, leaving practitioners without a cyclical, adaptable guide for continuous improvement.

To complement the largely diagnostic and multi-level models derived from management scholarship, the review now shifts to education scholarship, used here solely as a conceptual lens rather than a sector of practice. Higher education researchers view DEI as an institutional learning and capacity-building challenge, outlining iterative cycles of goal-setting, intervention, and reassessment. These process principles, described as multi-level alignment, data-driven inquiry, and embedded feedback loops, are exactly what diagnostic and multi-level management frameworks lack. In the next section, the Inclusive Excellence and Equity Scorecard models are therefore examined for their learning mechanisms.

1.3 Learning-Oriented Educational Frameworks

Education research offers a third strand, treating DEI as an institutional learning journey. The Inclusive Excellence framework (Williams et al., 2005) positions diversity as integral to educational quality and recommends multi-year strategic plans with iterative assessment. The Equity Scorecard (Bensimon et al., 2004) goes further, embedding a cycle of inquiry through the identification of inequities, intervention, reassessment, all to drive continuous improvement.

When used as a conceptual lens for organisational capacity building and learning, higher-education frameworks offer two insights that complement and expand upon the perspectives in management scholarship. First, they link strategic intent at the institutional level to everyday experiences, progressing from mission statements through leadership commitment to tangible changes in pedagogy and campus climate, thus modelling the type of multi-level alignment often missing in corporate DEI initiatives. Second, both Inclusive Excellence and the Equity Scorecard include a

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formal cycle of inquiry, known as identify, intervene, reassess, which institutionalises feedback and ongoing improvement. Although the specific mechanisms they employ (e.g., curriculum redesign or disaggregated student outcomes) do not directly match profitability and market metrics, the core logic of an iterative, data-driven feedback loop offers a transferrable blueprint for corporate environments.

Taken together, the literature reveals a recurring triad of shortcomings that cut across the best-known DEI frameworks. First, the change in rhythm remains static rather than dynamic. Benchmarking tools such as O'Mara's (2006) Global DEI Benchmarks and Washington's (2022) Five-Stage Model excel at diagnosing the current state but do not embed an explicit plan-do-check-act loop for continuous improvement. Second, most models privilege a single level of analysis. Analytic frameworks like Cox's (1994) Interactional Model and Nishii et al.'s (2018) multi-level process theory map cross-level relationships, yet they fall short of orchestrating macro (regulatory), meso (organizational), and micro (team) forces in a single implementation flow. Third, strategic payoff is addressed only indirectly. Compliance-centred paradigms safeguard against legal risk but provide limited guidance on converting DEI gains into measurable performance and innovation outcomes. These patterns suggest that existing tools clarify what needs attention and where an organization stands. Yet, they fail to integrate diagnosis, theory, and learning cycles into a dynamic, fully systemic, performance-linked roadmap. This gap is especially problematic in today's volatile policy landscape, where firms must adjust DEI practice in real-time while still demonstrating tangible value to investors, regulators, and employees.

1.4 Toward an Ecological DEI Roadmap: Introducing Bronfenbrenner's Lens

Building on these gaps, the upcoming framework proposed through this review offers a seven-step, feedback-rich roadmap anchored in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. It starts with macro-level legal alignment, setting the regulatory foundations that initiate DEI activity. Then, it converts strategic intent into action by channeling it through meso-level functions, industry standards, and cross-functional teams. At the micro level, cultural normalization mechanisms and policies embed inclusive behaviours into daily routines. The process concludes with formal evaluation checkpoints that feed performance data into the next planning cycle, thereby maintaining adaptability. By combining the diagnostic accuracy of benchmarking tools, the explanatory power of multi-level theory, and the reflexivity of educational learning cycles, this approach redefines DEI as a core operational capability rather than a periodic initiative. Effective DEI integration moves beyond mere compliance (or whitewashing). Most academic work in this area has not paid sufficient attention to practical guidance for example evaluation the impact of implementation efforts. (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Tong and An, 2024).

1.5 Literature Review Synopsis

Across both management and education literature, the most well-known DEI frameworks share three persistent blind spots. First, they are episodic, focusing on a single snapshot, rather than an iterative process incorporating an ongoing plan-do-check-act cycle. Second, the models emphasise analysis – largely theoretical perspectives, with insufficient attention on implementing macro-regulations, meso-structures, and micro-behaviours. Third, the persistent challenge, demonstrating correlation between DEI investment and business outcomes. At best research in the consultancy field has shown causation in certain areas of performance, but this is also challenged as the data is not support by academic rigour. The result is widespread decoupling: organisations promote diversity goals but lack the feedback loops needed to turn signals into lasting change.

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To bridge these gaps, this study introduces the seven-stage CADENCE model, an ecological framework that embeds iteration and aligns macro, meso, and micro levers with measurable outcomes. Guided by signaling theory, we evaluate CADENCE's external visibility through a cross-regional analysis of publicly disclosed artifacts; annual report metrics, gender targets with deadlines, and third-party diversity awards. These verifiable signals provide a consistent perspective for assessing whether firms remain in a compliance mode or are advancing towards the ongoing, multi-level capabilities that CADENCE advocates.

2. Conceptual Framework: The CADENCE Model

To close the gaps identified above, we advance the CADENCE model, a seven-step roadmap, that enables global firms to translate DEI intent into sustained, multi-level impact. We propose the CADENCE model as a framework to address the complexity global organizations face when they set out to deploy DEI strategies across the business pipeline. This 7-step framework begins with compliance, an obvious but not the only reason to act, and runs through alignment, deployment, evaluation, normalization, catalyzing a shift in organizational culture, and finally, to the effectiveness of positive impacts on performance.

2.1 Ecological Lens: Adapting Bronfenbrenner to DEI

Bronfenbrenner's Environmental Lifespan Theory is adapted where the focus lies on three key layers of influence impacting organizational behavior, namely the Macro, Meso, and Micro levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Tong and An, 2024)

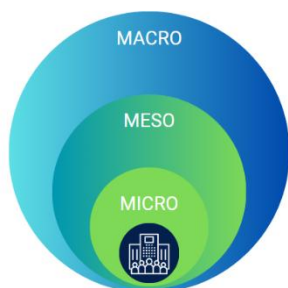


Figure 1: Organizational DEI Ecosystem (adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Environmental Lifespan Theory)

- **Macro** (this includes the Exosystem): Environmental legislation, socio-cultural norms, and the dominant media voices where the organization operates.
- **Meso**: Organisation-level culture and structures, the shared values, policies and industry-standard practices that embed the firm's "DNA" across all its global locations.
- **Micro**: Individual and team dynamics, everyday attitudes, behaviours and leader–employee interactions that shape how stakeholders experience DEI on the ground.

The multi-layered approach, encompassing macro, meso, and micro levels, provides leaders and managers with a framework for navigating complexity and, at times, the contradictory nature of applying DEI strategies in different regions. As an illustrative example, consider a global bank headquartered in the United Kingdom with branches located worldwide. The DEI global policy includes metrics on gender, race, disability, neurodivergence, and sexual orientation.

Through the Macro lens, a global bank must navigate varying legal restrictions on reporting demographic information such as race. In some countries, reporting race is legally permitted and encouraged for transparency, while in others, it is prohibited to protect individual privacy. Simultaneously, at the Meso level, such a bank must meet industry standards that include compliance targets for racial diversity across the organization. Achieving these targets requires careful adjustment and implementation strategies that respect both the legislative frameworks of the countries where they

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operate and the expectations set by the industry. The culture in the workplace is viewed through the Micro lens and influenced by both Macro and Meso factors, as well as the attitudes of leaders in that organization. In most cases, the Micro factors have the greatest impact on management and employee experiences of DEI. However, the other two levels have a strong impact even when they are not necessarily noticed.

2.2 The CADENCE Model: A Seven-Step Roadmap

We propose the CADENCE model as a valuable resource for executive leaders and DEI leaders to deploy strategic planning and implementation. The model creates a roadmap with milestones to demonstrate progress and clearly identifies interim goals to share with key stakeholders for accountability. The model integrates the Macro, Meso, and Micro elements, and streamlines the conversation to become a valuable tool for leaders and managers not directly engaged with DEI.

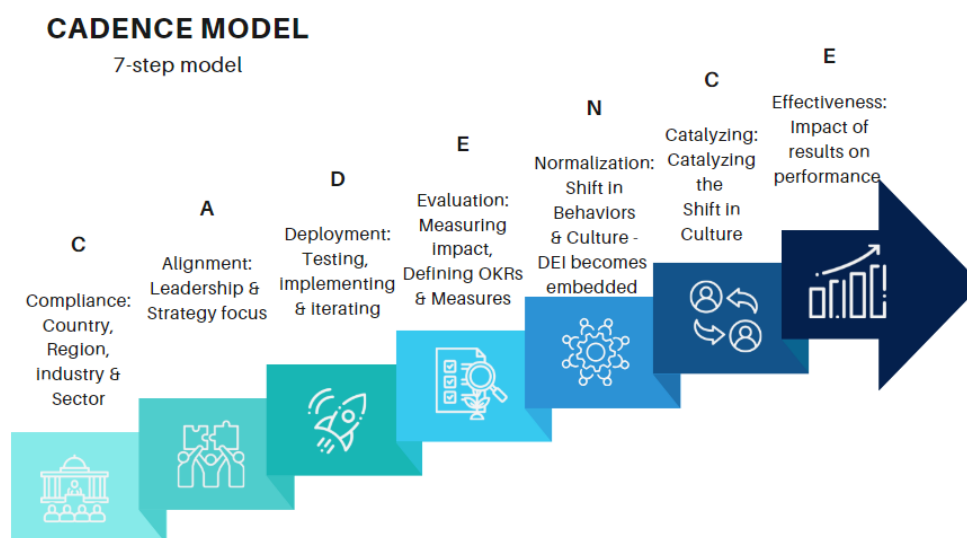


Figure 2: Proposed CADENCE DEI Model (authors, 2024)

3. Research Design and Methods

To understand how organizations demonstrate their DEI commitments, this study applies signalling theory, first introduced by Spence in 1973. Public artifacts such as annual reports, ESG/DEI disclosures, careers pages, job advertisements, and diversity awards serve as deliberate signals that firms send out to reduce information gaps and establish legitimacy with investors, regulators, and prospective employees. Although these statements might go beyond internal practices, a well-known risk of "decoupling," which is reflected in variations in their specificity (e.g., dated targets versus broad pledges), remains a valuable analytical insight (Jabbouri et al., 2019; Talpur et al., 2023). Publishing specific diversity targets and year-over-year metrics indicates a significantly higher level of DEI maturity compared to vague aspirational statements. Since these disclosures are publicly accessible in every jurisdiction, they offer a common, comparable yardstick for cross-sector analysis—something that internal data would not necessarily offer.

3.1 Signalling Theory Rationale

Signaling theory offers a theoretically congruent bridge between the structural fragmentation documented in the DEI literature and the empirical need to observe organizations' real-time

positioning. At its core, signaling rests on the premise that actors in markets with asymmetric information send costly, clear signals designed to shape how outsiders perceive the firm (Connelly et al., 2011; Karasek and Bryant, 2011; Spence, 1973). DEI disclosures meet the acknowledged criteria for effective signals: they are observable (published reports and web pages), intentional (crafted by senior leadership and investor-relations teams), and potentially costly if misaligned with subsequent scrutiny or litigation (Healy and Serafeim, 2019). Institutional-legitimacy research further shows that organisations under normative pressure adopt precisely such outward cues to maintain audience approval (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Dimaggio and Powell, 2004). In short, public DEI disclosures are more than fleeting PR items; they are strategically selected indicators of how firms wish to be perceived with respect to inclusion and fairness.

Methodologically, analysing these signals addresses two persistent gaps highlighted by scholars such as Roberson (2019) and Shore et al (2018). First, context blindness is mitigated because signaling content can be benchmarked across regions, industries and regulatory regimes, revealing how macro conditions shape the salience and specificity of DEI claims. Second, the fragility of measurement is reduced through the use of codable, externally verifiable data, for example dated gender-equality targets, board-diversity statistics, or the presence of a chief diversity officer position, that lend themselves to agreement among independent coders and, where relevant, convergent validity checks with third-party indices. Although decoupling remains a risk, the variance in signal depth itself becomes an informative dependent variable: firms that broadcast detailed metrics and time-bound goals are effectively staking more reputational capital than those offering generic statements, thereby permitting a graded assessment of DEI maturity (Boxenbaum and Arora-Jonsson, n.d.; Connelly et al., 2011; Dimaggio and Powell, 2004).

3.2 Empirical Design : Cross-Regional Signal Analysis

Guided by this logic, an exploratory cross-regional study was conducted with a specific focus on gender. Publicly listed firms in Engineering and Finance were sampled from North America, Europe, and the rapidly evolving Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. For each company, signalling documents were coded for (i) outcome indicators (board composition, pay gap disclosure, ERG budgets) and (ii) commitment signals (C-suite DEI roles, quantified 2025/2030 diversity targets). Descriptive analysis offers a baseline map of where external signals cluster along the seven stages of the proposed CADENCE framework, thus testing the framework's practical visibility and providing the first evidence base for a model that aims to marry structure with signal through continuous, multi-level, performance-linked DEI practice. Focusing on hard outcome indicators (e.g., board composition, pay gap disclosures, quantified diversity targets) rather than programme narratives allows for like-for-like comparison across these divergent environments and establishes an initial evidence base for the multi-level, continuous-improvement approach advocated in the review.

The dataset, collected between February and August 2024, incorporates three levels of publicly available information. Structural and financial data were obtained from each company's stock exchange listing and most recent annual report; covering ownership type, industry classification, 2022 market capitalisation, revenue for 2021-2022 (with year-on-year growth), global headcount, and a geographic breakdown of both revenue and workforce. Governance and DEI-specific disclosures were sourced from sustainability or dedicated DEI reports, including the presence of a chief diversity officer or dedicated DEI team, published 2025/2030 gender-balance targets, diversity awards, and explicit progress tracking against those targets. Additional fields captured women-focused leadership-development programmes, ERG portfolios, succession planning references to diversity, and alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Signal variables, designed to assess how deeply DEI is integrated into business strategy, were coded from gender-pay-gap reports and language on corporate career pages and job advertisements (e.g., references to innovation,

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entrepreneurship, or growth mindset in early-career and management vacancies). Together, these indicators enable triangulation of outcome metrics (board composition, pay-gap percentages, R&D and ERG budgets) with commitment cues (time-bound targets, diversity awards), providing a comprehensive and verifiable basis for mapping each firm onto the seven CADENCE stages.

The regions selected for the research also exhibited significant differences in their macro conditions and economic maturity, especially regarding the history and activity of the stock markets in each country. There were also notable variations in socio-cultural aspects that naturally influence workplace and organisational norms. The sampling frame was intentionally cross-regional. North America and Europe represent mature DEI markets with well-established disclosure standards. Conversely, the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) is an emerging region where diversity legislation and capital-market oversight are gaining momentum but remain inconsistent.

Engineering and Finance were chosen for three reasons. First, both sectors are economically crucial in all the regions studied. Second, they display consistently low female representation in leadership roles, making any public DEI signals highly noticeable. Third, each sector faces a unique combination of regulatory, skills pipeline, and cultural challenges, providing a rigorous test of CADENCE across macro, meso, and micro levels.

3.3 Sector Snapshots

Engineering. Engineering demonstrates significant disparity across the regions. In North America, women are significantly underrepresented in engineering (around 15-20%), and their representation in leadership roles (10-25%) is even lower. In Europe, the proportion of women in engineering is better than in North America, with 41% across engineering and science. However, there is no aggregated data for women in executive functions across the EU in the Engineering sector. The GCC bucks the trend, women constitute more than half of engineering graduates, yet conversion into professional and managerial positions remains modest. The pattern signals a broader pipeline-to-practice gap that may also affect other under-represented groups for whom data are even scarcer.

Finance. Out of the two sectors included in this research, finance has made the most progress globally. The more mature financial markets in North America and Europe have data on women in leadership roles and estimate the proportion of senior-management and board levels at 15-30% for senior management and director roles, although figures are still low for C-suite positions. Comparable leadership data for the GCC are not yet systematically published, reflecting the early stage of disclosure norms in that region. The mixed picture suggests that, even where headline progress is evident, granular metrics (e.g., intersectional or pipeline data) are still needed to track broader inclusion outcomes.

3.4 Analytical Approach

The study relies on descriptive statistics to chart a baseline landscape of public DEI signals; establishing causal links to financial performance is left to future work. Because most firms do not publish a dedicated DEI budget, *proxy indicators* were coded to capture visible commitment: (i) the formal appointment of a chief diversity officer or equivalent role, (ii) the inclusion of quantified diversity metrics in annual or sustainability reports, (iii) external recognition such as Bloomberg GEI membership, or industry-specific DEI awards, (iv) explicit references to diversity in succession-planning disclosures, and (v) “growth signals” in job advertisements; terms such as *innovation*, *entrepreneurship* or *inclusive leadership* aimed at attracting diverse talent. To review how these outward signals translate into internal practice, a Phase 2 qualitative component has been scheduled:

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thirty semi-structured interviews with DEI executives and line managers from different firms will explore the CADENCE model.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first papers to gather and present DEI data in the GCC region, and as this is an area of early-stage development, there are gaps in the data, as the findings demonstrate. Accordingly, the discussion highlights both the patterns detected and the data gaps that must be closed if researchers and practitioners are to track progress reliably over time.

4. Preliminary Findings: How Regulation and Industry Context Shape Public DEI Disclosures

The results below use gender, the only DEI dimension reported consistently across all regions, as an initial test case. We first examine disclosure rates (Section 4.1), then turn to structural signals such as DEI-officer appointments and external awards (Section 4.2).

4.1 The Influence of Industry Norms on Gender Diversity Disclosures in the Absence of Local Regulations

Initial analysis of gender diversity reporting reveals that while regulatory mandates drive higher disclosure rates in regions such as Europe (90%), the UK (89%), and the USA (83%), industry norms have also played a significant role in shaping reporting in the GCC, where regulatory norms are less prominent. 60% of listed companies in the GCC in this study reported data on gender diversity in their reports or on their websites. A key reason for reporting in the GCC is the 2021 regulation mandating that all public joint-stock companies listed on the Dubai and Abu Dhabi stock exchanges include at least one woman on their boards. The regulation was extended to private stock companies in 2024. The impact of quotas accelerates reporting, promotes greater transparency, and ultimately enhances accountability regarding progress in gender representation.

Gender quotas that are enforceable through regulations or legislation require companies to develop infrastructure to strengthen the pipeline for women advancing to leadership roles. As companies become more dedicated to gender diversity in leadership, the competition for senior leadership talent heightens. This, in turn, puts greater pressure on organizations to focus not only on promotion but also on retention efforts – effectively building a robust internal infrastructure to support gender diversity in leadership.

In this section, we discuss how the data collected across different regions demonstrates two key areas: the degree of structure of DEI leadership and the impact of signals across different organizations.

Table 2: Cross-regional data on DEI officers and commitment to goals by sector

	ENGINEERING	FINANCE
DEI OFFICER	74%	38%
DEI MEASURES ADOPTED	74%	90%

The most striking observation is the paradoxical situation of the low level of DEI officers in finance despite the high levels of DEI measures implemented. Compared to other sectors, finance has been

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particularly exposed to the DEI agenda, driven by the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent efforts to change a culture of groupthink that led to disastrous business decisions. There is a strong argument that as DEI targets become part of the strategic priorities for the business, the need for a dedicated DEI officer diminishes, since these targets are incorporated into the business performance KPIs for each function or operational leader.

4.2 Regional Patterns in Structural DEI Signals: Leadership Roles, Awards, and Fragmentation

Across the full sample, the UK is the structural front-runner: every listed firm discloses quantified DEI metrics, appoints a DEI officer, and holds at least one external diversity award—hallmarks of a mature commitment architecture. North America follows closely, with DEI officer penetration and award incidence both nearing 100 percent. Continental Europe matches those regions in disclosed metrics and “growth-signal” language (> 90 per cent in most sectors), but shows weaker formal leadership in engineering (60 per cent DEI officer presence) and finance (55 per cent).

A descriptive cross-tabulation shows how structural signals tend to cluster. Firms that appoint a DEI officer are much more likely to receive external DEI awards ($r = 0.74$); whether those officers actively seek awards or whether awards are granted based on their impact remains unclear, but either way, it boosts the same signalling effect. A moderate link between “growth-signal” language in corporate communications and award occurrence ($r = 0.59$) suggests that companies portraying themselves as innovative and inclusive are also more visible to award-granting organisations.

By contrast, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) landscape is fragmented: only 5 per cent of finance firms and 20 per cent of aviation firms report a dedicated DEI officer, and award recognition is sporadic. This patchy footing reflects the emergent status of DEI infrastructure within the region’s cultural, social and legislative context.

4.3 Limitation. Public DEI data remains patchy, especially in the GCC region, and so the findings are only a first snapshot. Regular, longitudinal data collection will be needed to confirm trends as disclosure norms mature.

5. Conclusion (and next steps)

The CADENCE model redefines DEI as a continuous, multi-level capability, rather than a one-off compliance task. Based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecology, the model addresses three long-standing gaps: static rhythm, single-level focus, and weak business connection and progressing from Compliance to Effectiveness allows analysis at each step to verifiable public signals. Our cross-regional baseline demonstrates how regulations, sector norms, and formal DEI leadership influence these signals, while also highlighting where structural commitment is still emerging. Phase 2 will deepen the analysis with 30 semi-structured interviews and annual re-evaluations of the same firms to monitor movement through CADENCE stages and examine the impact on performance. Feedback on the stage logic and practical implementation challenges is encouraged.

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