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# A qualitative inquiry of the pedagogical tolerance qualities of heads in higher education institutions

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## ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the pedagogical tolerance qualities of heads in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. The qualitative research design, grounded in the interpretative paradigm, was adopted for this study, utilising a case study approach for data collection from a small sample consisting of three Vice Rectors Academic, three Deans of Faculties and three Heads of Departments from three universities. The social cognitive behavior theory serves as the theoretical framework. The study's results reveal that heads of higher education institutions are aware of and possess some elements of pedagogical qualities. However, there is a deficiency in core pedagogical tolerance qualities. Participants also disclosed that education for tolerance has not been effectively implemented in higher education institutions, as there is no specific mechanism within the curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote tolerance. Based on the outcomes of this study, the need for heads of higher education institutions to take proactive measures in implementing and promoting tolerance education within the higher educational space was suggested.

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## Introduction

Quality education is central to realising the objectives of the Sustainable Development Agenda set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, with 2030 as the proposed year of achievement for all member states (Mngomezulu et al., 2021). The primary goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to transform our world by meeting the present generation's needs without compromising the ability of future generations while fostering universal tolerance, acceptance and appreciation for our collective rich diversity as expressions of humanity. Importantly, the SDGs comprise 17 goals that can be summarised into four categories, including improving well-being, economic development, ecological preservation and peace and social justice (Ashida, 2022). Higher education institutions (HEIs), as the primary actors in societal transformation, play a critical role in achieving the SDGs. They are tasked with the responsibility of facilitating human capital development and the diffusion of long-lasting ideas (Nogueiro et al., 2022). Given these responsibilities, universities face the challenge of incorporating the 17 SDGs into a wide range of their training programmes. They are expected to contribute knowledge and innovation to address individual, societal, economic and environmental challenges by developing curricula and pedagogical practices directed toward the attainment of these goals (Chaleta et al., 2021; Nogueiro et al., 2022).

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In higher education, institutional leaders serve as the drivers and developers of curricula and pedagogical best practices (Müller et al., 2018; Sakallı et al., 2021). They are expected to possess adequate knowledge of both curriculum and pedagogical content, as well as demonstrate pedagogical tolerance qualities (Petersen & Henning, 2018). This quality enables them to effectively direct, develop and demonstrate curricula and pedagogical principles that would be void of intolerant practices including bullying, harassment, prejudice, scapegoating, expulsion, extortion, discrimination, ostracism, desecration and effacement, racism and repression for the benefit of the common future (UNESCO, 1994). Generically, universal tolerance is made possible through quality education that promotes sufficient knowledge, openness to ideas, effective communication, and the freedom of thought, conscience and belief (Guțu & Boghian, 2019). The origin of tolerance is traceable to the Latin word 'tolerantia,' meaning 'to endure,' 'to bear' or 'to overcome'. As a positive trait, tolerance is a virtue, skill, quality and attitude inherent in being human, involving the valuing and respecting of other people's views, beliefs, rights and practices despite any disagreements (Mohanta, 2019).

Although difficult to define due its complex and multidimensional nature, tolerance could be perceived as individual internal resources, reflecting the willingness and ability to positively and efficiently meet the challenges of interacting with oneself and the 'other' who is different in appearance, thoughts, feelings, values and behaviour (Shyryn et al., 2013). This includes both the 'I' and others within me. It also signifies an individual's attribute demonstrated in resisting provoking environmental factors and a willingness to respond positively and productively to solve complex social interaction problems. According to the UNESCO Declaration of Principles of Tolerance in 1995, tolerance is granting others the right to have their persons and identities respected. It stands not only as a moral obligation but also as a foundation for maintaining social order. This virtue, essential for fostering peace, plays a key role in transitioning from a culture of war to a culture of peace. Given the UNESCO (1994) definition of education of tolerance, which is the process of equipping young generations with skills for critical thinking, values of respecting other's beliefs and practices, independent judgment and ethical reasoning, tolerance can be said to enable people to adopt a compassionate attitude across nations, genders, beliefs and generations for managing diversities (Sakallı et al., 2021). Thus, leaders or heads of higher universities have the responsibility of developing and demonstrating pedagogical tolerance qualities that would contribute to the delivery of quality education.

Pedagogical tolerance is considered one of the fundamental values of education (Boghian, 2016, 2017, 2018), involving the recognition and respect for the dignity and integrity of all human beings (Cristea, 2004). This concept plays a crucial role in fostering positive relationships, ethical maturity and social responsibility, guiding individuals to make decisions that contribute to social development (Guțu, 2013). Consequently, pedagogical tolerance is expected to enhance active tolerance attitudes in students by instilling tolerant consciousness and affective competencies. These qualities reflect social culture, fostering loyalty, social tolerance, a sense of responsibility, creativity, innovation and contributing to socio-economic development (Guțu & Boghian, 2019). Yousuf et al. (2019) allude that a culture of compassion, peace and respect can be possibly transferred by educating citizens through education and religion. Therefore, the presence of tolerance qualities in university teachers is bedrock for developing a socially tolerant future society. In this study, pedagogical tolerance is conceptualised as the conscious ability of higher education leaders to personally commit to the principles of respect, fostering harmony amid diversity, accurate understanding individual differences and embracing cultural diversity within teaching and learning spaces. This ability is seen as instrumental in the cultivation of socially responsible citizens. Regrettably, not all leaders and heads in HEIs, who bear the responsibility of imparting knowledge and equipping students (potential social change agents) with social and moral values, possess pedagogical tolerance qualities (Luckett & Shay, 2017). This deficiency can lead to social injustice, oppression, intolerance, wars, increased criminality and poor-quality education. Given this evidence gap, this study deems it appropriate to evaluate the pedagogical tolerance qualities of heads in HEIs toward achieving a sustainable future aligned with our collective dreams.

## Literature review

Despite the importance of the pedagogy of tolerance in achieving socially just, peaceful co-existence and a common identity free of bigotry and toward sustaining the future (Brookfield, 2017), to the best

knowledge of the authors, not many researchers have focused on the pedagogical tolerance qualities of heads in HEIs as the major players, leaving a significant gap in the literature. However, a plethora of evidence conducted in relation to tolerance of education is limited in scope, focusing only on issues related to building tolerance in students and the necessity of incorporating tolerance into school curricula (Sakallı et al., 2021). For instance, Langmann (2013) examined instructional approaches and materials to ascertain the degree of tolerance exhibited by educators and learners in resolving real-world issues. The fields and practices of multiculturalism, educational management in relation to education policy, teacher education, and teachers' work are taken into consideration for diversity in this study. A related study by Bleasdale (2014) examined the experiences and roles of school leaders in advancing social equity in the transition from tolerance to participation. The result of the study established the need for school leaders, educators and parents to participate in inclusive education and educate students on the principle of fairness. Osieja (2015) opined that teachers are of great importance in fostering tolerance in students, given the advancement in technology, which is accompanied by a leap in tolerance, leading to a world that is gradually becoming fragmented.

Additionally, Boghian (2016) evaluated the degree of teachers' understanding of tolerance education, and the study's outcome revealed that establishing a tolerant education methodology in schools is challenging. The study further stressed the need to integrate cultural and intercultural education while promoting tolerance. Aubakirova (2016) examined tolerance as an ethical indicator of Kazakh mentality and as the traditional culture of the people. The study emphasised specific social parameters of tolerant behavior in society. The degree of tolerance in the society was determined, based on which social groups of tolerance were identified. A qualitative study was conducted by Juwita et al. (2018) on the differences between male and female students' tolerance levels in a religion-based school in Bandung, Indonesia. Findings indicated distinct tolerance behaviour with the female students demonstrating more sensitivity towards the diversity in their environment than their male counterparts. Another study by Yanusova and Lautkina (2019) investigated the relationship between the development of teachers' communication skills and their level of tolerance in communication. The outcome of the study emphasised the importance of tolerance education in communication. Čučković and Ohnjec (2020) investigated the significance of values, states of mind and aptitudes in physical instruction. Findings revealed that educational modules arranged in educational practice play a significant role in the development of resilience and human values.

More recently, a quantitative study was carried out by Lyzhin et al. (2021) on the process of identifying the Index of pedagogical tolerance among students. The outcome of the study revealed that the surveyed students showed a low level of tolerance. The results testify to the high intolerance of individuals and the presence of pronounced intolerant attitudes in relation to the world around them and people. Stoykov (2022) conducted research to reveal the potential of the formation of tolerance as a must-have job-related personal quality in students from pedagogical specialties, as it is a mandatory precondition for their successful careers. The findings of the study revealed that for the formation of a high level of tolerance, the psychological climate and the educational impacts on the students in Bulgaria are of significance. Akmagambetova et al. (2023) investigated the problem of developing tolerance in adolescents in an educational environment using a pragmatic approach. Adolescence is favourable for the formation of tolerance since, at this age, the worldview and attitude towards oneself and the world develop. To this end, it is clear from literature that the pedagogical tolerance qualities among heads/leaders in HEIs lack research attention. This is the gap that this study seeks to bridge.

## Theoretical perspectives

To position this study accurately, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) by Bandura (2009) was adopted to gain insight into the probability of heads in HEIs possessing tolerance qualities. SCT emphasises the role of observational learning, suggesting that individuals learn by observing others. In the context of pedagogical tolerance, leaders serve as models for their teachers and students. If heads of education institutions consistently demonstrate tolerant behavior, teachers and students are likely to observe and learn these behaviors.

The basic assumption of SCT rests on the principles of modeling, vicarious reinforcement, cognitive processes and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2009, 2003; Devi et al., 2022). Social Cognitivists, such as Devi et al. (2017), acknowledge the fact that acquired behavior demonstrated in one's environment has a significant impact on a person's moral development. The choice of this theory lies in its strength, attributing social behaviours to cognitive processes, modeling, vicarious reinforcement and self-efficacy. This implies that leaders in HEIs who model tolerance in their interactions with teachers, students, colleagues and diverse perspectives create a social environment that fosters the development of pedagogical tolerance. Therefore, teachers and students may also learn to adopt similar tolerant attitudes and behaviours through the mechanism of observation (Bandura, 2009; Devi et al., 2017).

SCT also maintains that individuals are more likely to adopt behaviours that they see being rewarded; this is referred to as vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 2009). In an educational context, if tolerance is positively reinforced, such as through praise or acknowledgment, students and educators may be more motivated to exhibit and adopt pedagogical tolerance. Similarly, the theory highlights the importance of cognitive processes, including attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (Bandura, 2003). Educators can intentionally draw attention to instances of tolerance in various educational contexts, ensuring that students remember and retain these examples. Encouraging students to reproduce tolerant behaviours and motivating them to internalise and apply pedagogical tolerance in their own institutional and teaching practices. SCT avers an individual's belief in their ability to perform a particular behaviour; the process is known as self-efficacy, which is relevant to pedagogical tolerance. Thus, heads of HEIs with a high sense of self-efficacy, who promote tolerance, are more likely to engage in activities and behaviours that contribute to a tolerant and inclusive educational environment. Therefore, heads in HEIs play a crucial role as models and influencers, shaping the development of tolerance in the next generation capable of promoting collective peace and harmony and also considering tolerance as part of the educational process.

## Objective and research questions

The primary focus of this study was to assess the presence of pedagogical tolerance qualities among heads of HEIs. Specifically, the study aimed to address the following research questions:

- What are the pedagogical tolerance qualities possessed by heads of HEIs?
- To what extent do heads in HEIs promote education of tolerance in curriculum and pedagogical implementation?

## Method

To gain institutional perspectives through the personal viewpoints of leaders in universities, the study was premised within the interpretative paradigm (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), which involved a qualitative research design adopted for this study. This design was considered appropriate, given its nature, relying on the case study approach for data collection from a small sample size (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The population consisted of all heads of HEIs in Astana, Kazakhstan. Three national universities with a Department of Pedagogy were purposively selected to participate in the study. The sample size comprised a total of nine university leaders, consisting of three Vice Rectors Academic, three Deans of Faculties, and three Heads of Departments in the three universities. A semi-structured, in-depth interview technique was scheduled and used to gather information that addressed the question of 'what' from the participants. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Responses were analysed to identify pedagogical tolerance qualities and their implementation among the heads of HEIs.

## Ethics consideration

Ethics is the morality of any research. The study adhered to the international ethics of research by ensuring confidentiality and respecting the voluntary nature of the participants' participation. The authors assured the participants that the information gathered would be used for research purposes only.

## Findings and discussion

The findings of the study are presented, followed by discussions of each result based on the responses of the nine participants as derived from the two research questions raised in this study. The respondents, who were members of the universities, were presented with these codes: VR for Vice Rectors, DN for Deans of the Faculty, HD for Heads of the Department and HI 1, 2 & 3 for universities.

### Research question one

The first research question of the study was formulated as follows: 'What are the pedagogical tolerance qualities possessed by heads of HEIs?' According to the SCT, which serves as the theoretical lens for the study, the role of observational learning, modeling, vicarious reinforcement and cognitive processes was emphasised (Bandura, 2009). This suggests that individuals learn by observing others, acquired behaviour demonstrated in one's environment, rewarded behaviours serve as positive reinforcement and cognitive processing includes attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (Bandura, 2003; Devi et al., 2022). Thus, leaders who possess tolerance qualities such as respect for human freedom, harmony amid diversity, embracing cultural diversity within teaching and learning spaces, effective communication, empathy, social equity, emotional intelligence, critical thinking and honesty, among others, serve as models for their teachers and students. If heads of HEI consistently demonstrate tolerant behaviour, teachers and students are likely to observe and learn these behaviours.

It should be noted that before developing pedagogical tolerance among students, it is crucial for the heads of HEIs to mirror these pedagogical qualities to their teachers as well as the students regardless of their ideologies and epistemologies. Responses from the participants indicated that most heads in HEIs do not possess adequate core pedagogical tolerance qualities such as openness to ideas, freedom of thought, fairness, self-worth, respect for human freedom, harmony amid diversity, social justice, inclusivity, effective communication, empathy, unprejudiced, social values, integrity, emotional intelligence, critical thinking and honesty. In the words of the participants:

HD, HI 1: Intelligence, respect, ability to listen to other, take responsibilities.

DN, HI 1: Effective communicate, empathy, integrity, critical thinking.

VR, HI 1: Respect for human right, honesty, teamwork, critical thinking, fairness.

HD, HI 2: Emotional Intelligence, respect for other, listening ability, self-responsibility.

DN, HI 2: Critical thinking, cultural behaviour, integrity.

VR, HI 2: Strategic thinking, honesty, teamwork, honesty.

HD, HI 3: Intelligence, respect, ability to listen, take responsibilities.

DN, HI 3: Versatile qualities to communicate with all participants of educational process.

VR, HI 3: Social justice, honesty, teamwork, critical thinking.

Although each of the respondents possessed some tolerance qualities, however, qualities such as respect for human freedom, compassion, unbiasedness, harmony amid diversity, and social equity were missing. This outcome may be because awareness of pedagogical tolerance qualities is low, making it difficult to internalise. Although there are no direct previous studies to support these findings, similar studies can provide empirical support. For instance, Guinot et al. (2021) suggested in their study that tolerance education can only be effective when school managers and inspectors demonstrate tolerance qualities and become connected with the education process. They further suggested that a culture of tolerance can only be established in schools with active demonstration and participation of the management and leaders. Thus, pedagogical tolerance qualities demonstrated by heads and educational leadership play a key role in the education system. Likewise, the present findings align with studies by Buella et al. (2021); Edenheim (2020); Paliy and Pronchenko (2019), who have submitted that to achieve sustainable educational goals, educational managers and leaders must reflect diversities, social justice and equity qualities and values, which are necessary for peaceful existence in society.



## Research question two

The second research question starts: *To what extent do leaders in higher education promote the education of tolerance in curriculum and pedagogical implementation?* In accordance with the 1995 UNESCO United Nations' Declaration of Tolerance, titled 'The Threshold of Peace, a teaching/learning guide for peace, human rights, and democracy', educational institutions at all levels are anticipated to advocate and integrate tolerance into the educational curriculum and pedagogical content (Boghian, 2016; Johnson & Christensen, 2019). The findings of this study indicate that the only mechanism within the curricula and pedagogical contents that actively fosters the education of tolerance is the application of principles related to equity, diversity and inclusiveness. While this is a positive development, the incorporation of core tolerance values such as peaceful co-existence, empathy, harmony, respect for others' beliefs and practices, independent judgment and ethical reasoning through seminars, course work and lectures have not been realised in higher education curriculums and pedagogical practices. Despite the pressing need for higher education to overhaul its curriculum and pedagogy towards instilling a tolerance consciousness in the next generation, as opposed to merely imparting marketable skills that may result in highly skilled automatons and cultured sociopaths, the necessary changes have not been implemented.

The following insights were derived from the expressions of the participants:

To be honest, the major focus has been on achieving equity, diversity, and inclusion, which my institution believes are part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, no special seminars or workshops have been organized on tolerance education. I must also mention that there is no such course or module on educational tolerance that I know of (**Vice Rector, HI 3**).

Yes, tolerance is certainly a necessary and important quality for all leaders in educational institutions at all levels. The situation in our country does not allow any higher education head to implement any programs that are not approved by the Ministry of Science and Education. Since they are responsible for creating an inclusive and supportive environment for students, staff, and the community (**Vice Rector, HI 1**).

In my opinion, the existing curriculum and pedagogical content allow the head of the education institution to embrace diversity, promote equal opportunities, and ensure a respectful and non-discriminatory atmosphere, which I think covers the best ways to promote tolerance education. However, there are no special seminars or workshops organized to create awareness about tolerance (**Vice Rector, HI 2**).

I think everyone understands the importance of tolerance, as it enables individuals, especially leaders, to understand and appreciate people's unique beliefs and cultural diversity, fostering an environment that encourages dialogue, collaboration, and personal growth during teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, we do not have any general courses or modules at the faculty level on tolerance education (**Dean, HI 1**).

Actually, tolerance is important in addressing all kinds of violence in society and in ensuring a harmonious social environment. The three pillars of the SDGs, which are the economy, social aspects, and the environment, can only be achieved when peaceful existence is achieved. Be that as it may, I am not aware of any educational program that is primarily designed to promote tolerance within this university. This is because it is the Ministry of Science and Education that approves the curriculum (**HOD HI 3**).

From the narratives provided by the participants, it is evident that education for tolerance has not been extensively implemented by the heads/leaders of the selected HEIs since there is no specific mechanism within the curriculum and pedagogical practices that promotes tolerance. Education of tolerance, through pedagogical practices, is expected to mirror equality, fairness, impartiality and harmony and exhibit social awareness, self-worth, recognition of students' true potential and their rich capital in a more respectful manner, which is crucial for social justice as well as self-responsibility to all students regardless of their ideologies and epistemologies (Lawrence & Maphalala, 2021; Ntshoe, 2020; Pillay et al., 2018). This outcome corroborates the study of Boghian (2016) who found that establishing a tolerant education methodology in schools is challenging and difficult to implement. This concludes by stressing the need to integrate cultural and intercultural for adequate implementation of tolerance education.

Other previous studies have also pointed to the platforms for the implementation of tolerance education and its importance in the future careers of students. For instance, Akmagambetova et al. (2023); Čučković and Ohnjec (2020); Stoykov (2022) studies indicated that educational modules arranged in educational practice play a significant role in the development of resilience and human values, the

formation of tolerance as a must-have job-related personal quality in students from pedagogical specialties, as it is a mandatory precondition for their successful career. The findings of the study revealed that for the formation of a high level of tolerance, the psychological climate and the educational impacts on the students in Bulgaria are of significance.

## Conclusion

The achievement of a society characterised by peace, harmony, and freedom from prejudice and discrimination hinges crucially on the ability of heads of HEIs to demonstrate tolerance in their pedagogical practices. This quality is essential for producing students who are not only skilled but also capable of becoming responsible and tolerant citizens in a diverse democratic society. This study evaluates the pedagogical tolerance qualities of heads in HEIs, recognising their pivotal role as models and influencers in shaping the development of social tolerance in the next generation—a key aspect of achieving SDGs through holistic quality education delivery.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in social cognitive behaviour, emphasising the significance of modeling, vicarious reinforcement, cognitive processes and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2003; Devi et al., 2022) as mediums for transferring desirable behaviours. Heads in HEIs who model tolerance in pedagogical methods and styles create an environment conducive to the development of such qualities in teachers and students.

The study's results reveal that heads of HEIs are aware of and possess some elements of pedagogical qualities. However, there is a deficiency in core pedagogical tolerance qualities. Participants also disclosed that education for tolerance has not been effectively implemented in HEIs, as there is no specific mechanism within the curriculum and pedagogical practices that promote tolerance. In conclusion, this study underscores the need for heads of HEIs to take proactive measures in implementing and promoting tolerance education within the higher educational space. They must demonstrate these qualities to achieve a sustainable future aligned with our collective dreams, free from war, injustice, bullying, and harassment.

## Implications

The implications of these findings extend to heads of HEIs and all higher education stakeholders, tasked with the responsibility of developing curriculum and pedagogy. It is essential to redesign higher education curricula and pedagogical practices to incorporate tolerance education, creating opportunities for the next generation to acquire and cultivate tolerance qualities. In light of the study's outcomes, it is recommended that heads of HEIs should possess and demonstrate tolerance qualities in their pedagogical approaches. Additionally, organising periodic seminars, workshops, conferences, and awareness programs is suggested to shape and sensitise students, the university community, and society at large about the importance of tolerance. This proactive approach aims to foster an environment where peace, unity, and justice prevail.

## Limitations

The present study employed a qualitative approach to obtain in-depth and insightful opinions on the pedagogical tolerance qualities of heads of HEIs in Kazakhstan. Despite the strength of this design, which adheres to the core principles of a case study, providing contextual understanding and in-depth insight into the social phenomenon, the study has its shortcomings. One of these shortcomings is its small sample size, thus limiting the generalisation of the outcomes to other settings. Additionally, while the present study primarily focused on leaders in educational institutions, other stakeholders such as teachers and students were excluded, introducing a potential bias. Future studies should consider exploring pedagogical tolerance among teachers who have direct contact with students. In contrast to the current study, which focused solely on a qualitative approach, a mixed design incorporating triangulation could have been more advantageous. Despite these shortcomings, the study's findings can serve as a foundation for future research on pedagogical tolerance qualities.



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