ENHANCING THE RDI COMPETENCE OF MASTER'S STUDENTS THROUGH DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the RDI (Research-Develop- Innovate) competence of students is discussed in the context of Master's education at Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, specifically when promoting diversity and inclusion in workplaces. Diversity can be seen as richness in an organization. It is a significant contributor to the creation of new knowledge. If properly designed and implemented, DM can bring about desirable improvements in workplaces.

We focus particularly on the application of a Diversity Management Measurement Tool (DiMa), Master's thesis projects, and the students' shared experiential learning developed in diversity management courses, that together produce a strong set of RDI competences.

We argue that the RDI competences students develop during their Master's programme can be applied in the workplace in multiple ways to the mutual benefit of student and their own (sponsor) organization.

These students are the key actors who design and implement an applied thesis project aimed at addressing a contemporary business challenge, and thereafter lead future challenging and complex development and change projects. Moreover, their professional personal development provides them with professional skills, competences and knowledge that enhances their career prospects and opportunities to make a meaning mark within the organization. For example, having enhanced their RDI capabilities students can actively challenge current opinion and ideas and promote understanding of diversity in workplaces and inclusive programs to achieve the benefits attached to this rising area of management.

KEYWORDS

Diversity, Diversity Management, Master's Education, Virtual Teams, RDI Competence, Standards: 5, 7, 8, 10

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the RDI (Research-Develop- Innovate) competence of students is discussed in the context of Master's education at Finnish UAS's, specifically when promoting diversity and inclusion in workplaces. We argue that Master's students can promote understanding of

diversity in workplaces and introduce and implement inclusive programs to achieve the benefits attached to this increasingly important area of management.

In describing the context and expected outcomes of undertaking a Master's degree at a Finnish UAS – in our case Helsinki Metropolia UAS (HMUAS) – firstly, we identify students' ability to Research-Develop- Innovate across a wide array of areas. Thereafter, by way of a more specific example, we illustrate RDI in the context of diversity management.

Higher education in Finland

Higher education in Finland is provided by universities and universities of applied sciences. The role of universities of applied sciences (UAS) is to give higher education qualification and practical professional skills (Ministry of Education and Culture). Master's level studies in UAS requires that the applicant has a bachelor's degree and at least three years of subsequent work experience in a relevant field (Ministry of Education and Culture). Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences offers 26 professional Master's degree programmes in the fields of Business, Culture, Technology, and Social Services and Health Care

These programmes are targeted at working life professionals aiming at certified degree for their professional career and foster personal development and life-long-learning. Studies are employer-friendly with flexible schedules allowing students to continue working and to apply their learnings to the employer's organizational context.

Master's degree students of HMUAS are often mature professionals with 10+ years of work experience.

Crucially, students are not just the recipients of teaching and learning, they also contribute to others. As we describe below, given their extensive work life experience, students are able to share these experiences that are contextual relevant to contemporary workplace challenges. We later illustrate this with particularly reference to understanding diversity and diversity management.

The studies develop practises, processes, and systems in collaboration with professionals, which supports personal growth in active learning environment (CDIO2.0 Standard 8). The final year project - Master's thesis work - is an integrated part of employer organization development.

Undertaking Master's studies

Although undertaking a master's degree clearly requires personal commitment, without the explicit support from one's workplace the undertaking would be doubly challenging. However, we view this a reciprocal arrangement; **to the mutual benefit of employer and employee.**

From the organization comes their investment by way of support for the student, which requires that their immediate supervisor explicitly provides backing in terms of allowing study time for a day-time programme.

From the student, first comes their research work. Uniquely, most students undertake a thesis project that is contextually placed within the organization; undertaking an applied solution to a current business challenge. In essence, this is frequently a change management project.

Some projects address 'hard' issues – for example …a new or improved process, measure, system or business model. Frequently this is bound up in concepts of continuous improvement, where the student's research leads the co-creation of the solution, for example, in the spirit of Action Research (e.g. Reason & Rowan, 1981). Solutions are proposed, validated, tested, implemented and evaluated – albeit that in some cases implementation and evaluation follow sometime after the thesis work has been completed. As typical examples, we might see an improved and integrated procurement process following a merger and acquisition, or the development of a new service-orientated customer value proposition.

On the other hand, some projects address what could be described as 'soft' issues – for example, relating directly to people in the workplace. Here, the same validation, testing, implementation and evaluation stages are also applicable. As an example, and in this case directly contextually relevant to workplace diversity, an approach to successfully form cross-cultural, global virtual teams. These types of projects also are implemented (or at least implementable sometime in the future) within the student's organization and therefore have to potential to make a real impact. Interestingly, both 'hard' and 'soft' business issues, are addressed by our students enrolled in Master's of Engineering programmes (and equally so in Master's of Business Administration studies).

Prior to the research project, the student first learns the research skills that provides them with the tools to engage in their thesis research. The intention is to provide the student with competences to engage in any robust, evidenced-based (e.g. Pfeffer & Sutton 2006) RDI project. Hence, the thesis project offers the organization a return on their 'investment' in permitting their employees to engage in a master's programme.

Continuing this line of thought, the second benefit of the Master's studies that the student can offer in this mutually beneficial relationship with their employer is the personal development and competences developed during the programme. In addition to knowledge acquired through study of subjects such as, Leadership, Strategy, and Finance and Accounting, additional transferable skills, for example, presentation, argumentation, evaluation, and teamwork contribute to the growing set of RDI competences (issues promoted in CDIO's vision statement).

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Diversity can be seen as richness in an organization. It is a significant contributor to the creation of new knowledge. Diversity Management (DM) includes policies and actions which create an organizational culture where justice and productivity go hand in hand. Each member of the organization can feel included and respected as an employee, colleague, team member, or in another role. If properly designed and implemented, DM can bring about desirable improvements in workplaces. Some companies seek differentiation and competitive edge, some expect diversity and inclusion policies to result in higher ROI of human capital.

In the business /organizational context (and beyond) diversity is frequently perceived as a topic that relates to addressing injustice and inequality – making good injustice (sometimes relating to historical injustices but also currently inequalities). What immediately comes to mind are issues around race and ethnicity, gender, age, religion, disability and sexual orientation; all areas that over the last five decades have been the subject of legislation to redress inequality.

But another strand to diversity relates to those who, in simple terms, can be said to think and behave differently (so-called cognitive or behavioural diversity). Organizations tend to recruit and retain workers who 'fit'. The need to fit the job (person–job fit) is easy to understand; having the competences to undertake the work. The other aspect of fit is person–organization fit. While organizations rightly need to know that employees are aligned with the organization's vision, the danger here is that this results in the eradication of difference, resulting, for example in conformity and groupthink (Janis 1972). As researchers have frequently described, this leads to inertia and stifles innovation (Van de Ven, 1986). As Meyerson and Scully (1995) have vividly articulated, organizations need to embrace difference, and permit employees to be critical of the status quo as these employees are a catalyst for change.

> *Tempered radicals, are individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with, the dominant culture of their organization.*
> (Meyerson & Scully, 1995: 586)

By embracing diversity organizations are able to release (and exploit in the most positive sense) the talents of those who have been previously held back. As Christine Largarde, ("What If Women Ruled the World?" 2013) Managing Director of IMF, states:

> *Diversity is absolutely an asset. With diversity you bring different ways of looking at the world, different ways of analyzing issues, different ways of offering solutions. The sheer fact of diversity actually increases the horizon and enriches the thinking process, which is critical.*

INTRODUCING AND IMPLEMENTING DIVERSITY PROGRAMS

In the context of diversity and students' RDI competences developed in the course of their Masters programme, we focus particularly on the development and application of an diversity assessment tool, applied thesis research that focus on diversity-related topics addressing current challenges in the workplace, and on a Diversity Management course.

Diversity Management Assessment Tool (DiMa)

Combining Diversity Management content to relevant R&D methods and tools, students are equipped to act as change agents in bringing diversity to better use in work organizations. The Diversity Management Assessment Tool (DiMa) developed in a nationwide project in 2015 serves as an easy yet valid starting point: a current state analysis can be carried out using this tool. Later, upon completion of certain diversity and inclusion programs and activities, the outcome (change) can be measured using the same tool.

An extensive review of the DiMa tool development was authored by Matinheikki-Kokko (2015). DiMa is a quantitative measurement tool for assessing the strategic approach taken and the operational practices existing in an organization in relation to Diversity Management. The focus is on both assessment and analysis on the organizational level rather than the individual level. The DiMa tool can, however, also be used for the latter, if desired.

The aim of Diversity Management in the organizational level is to create a working environment, in which people can use their competences fully to achieve the goals of the work community and organization. In the assessment, we are interested in finding out how diversity is reflected in the organization's strategies, contents and approaches, and how the strategy is linked to the operative policies and practices. (Matinheikki-Kokko 2015, 57).

From the individual perspective, one's personal growth and development can be supported with Diversity Management. Do these individuals support diversity in their own work? Quite often, the management's view is different from the views and perceptions of the personnel.

The DiMa tool is able to capture these differences in opinions and presents an interesting point for further development, if so desired. (Matinheikki-Kokko 2015, 57).

The pilot phase of the DiMa tool development took place in the context of HEIs in 2015. The DiMa tool is currently being piloted in company environments and it will be brought to wider use in Master's education in autumn 2016.

Diversity & Inclusion Projects of Master's students

Research-based development, specifically action research, is a recommended approach for Master's Theses conducted in Master's degree programs at Finnish universities of applied sciences. The Master's Thesis is the most significant single part of studies, 30 ECTS, thus counting for a half or a third of the whole degree program.

As we earlier describe, the student's thesis is a meaningful research project that aims to address a contextually relevant business challenge within the student's workplace. For example, diversity management interventions are launched for developing, testing and piloting. Some lead to remarkable results as Master's Theses, while others pave the way for policies and programmes that need more time to show measurable impact. The strength of the research project is that it establishes a key set of RDI competences that both serve to explicitly address a real business challenge and future 'in house' or consultancy improvement projects. Students do not aim to improve or contribute to theory, but engage in applied research with the aim of developing contextually relevant solutions to the issue at hand.

In preparation for the research the student first acquires research skills; as we describe above, in their own right these are crucial DRI competences that can be utilized for any 'good' piece of internal project work that aims at change management or continuous improvement within the workplace.

In terms of process, having identified a general business challenge (usually in conjunction with their manager) most frequently a student engages in a current state analysis (CSA) in order to gain in-depth knowledge of the issue. Here, if appropriate, we might expect the DiMa tool to be employed as it can help in identifying the focus areas for DM development. From here they can then engage with relevant theory – or as we prefer to call it existing knowledge (capturing theory, contemporary ideas, and best practice) – which brought together offer a conceptual framework that serves to create the solution. This approach helps to ensure that the proposed solution has relevance to the specific issue within the firm rather than a generalizable solution that is more appropriate to theoretic explanation.

In case of Diversity Management topic area, Master's Thesis projects can also be conducted for partner organizations other than for students' own employers. The project may rely on development needs recognized by HR professionals or managers of a company.

"What can be achieved?" Changes in the way of thinking and in skills of perceiving diversity can most likely be seen. The potential ways of inclusion that are appropriate in the organization as a result of agile pilot projects in specified HR or other areas are expected to

lead to rapid improvements. More profound changes in the operative level, let alone changes in the organizational culture - e.g. a proactive strategic approach - requires a longer time. This is where one of the benefits of this particular student group comes into play: Master's students who study alongside their work can keep on working and promoting Diversity Management also after they graduate! The impact of the RDI work done during the studies ideally continues and contributes to the goals of the organization also in the future. (Turunen 2015)

Developing Diversity & Inclusion Knowledge in Master's Students

Students enrolled on HMUAS Master's programmes come from diverse work organizations and are themselves internationally diverse. In addition to their core learning courses students may enrol on a Diversity Management course, and many chose this option in attaining their overall required ETCS credits.

An interesting facet of this course is that it recognises that the diverse group have much to 'bring to the table'. As Collins (2015) observes, "…*most of them are 'mature students' with considerable work and life experience – [they have] an opportunity not only to study the subject [….], but also to actively engage in the various topics and contribute by recounting their own experiences of working in Finnish and global organizations. Indeed, opening up their experience is crucial to the success of the course because it provides diverse real and relevant context.*"

This means that not only do students receive traditional lecture-based learning of 'theory' – in other words, well-known key academic ideas/ concepts and recent research/ contemporary thinking – the course explicitly gives space for the life experience of students, that is, it hears the students' voices. Their experience and the real 'struggles' around diversity that they meet in their personal and work lives are more contextually relevant than teacher-selected case examples

Knowledge then emerges from co-created learning that blends theory, and the experiential learning (e.g. Kolb 1984) that students bring, reflect upon, and share with their cohort. It is in reflective practice (e.g. Schon 1983) that theory, context, and experience are drawn together, and which brings about learning that is relevant, practical and provides meaning to students and helps them make sense of issues of diversity in their workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we examine and discuss the RDI competence of students in the context of Master's education at Finnish UAS's. We first examine the issue in the general context of the Master's undertaking (at HMUAS) and then more specifically when promoting diversity and inclusion in workplaces. We describe how students develop a set of competences that

enhance RDI which are not only at the heart of any successful change project in an organization but also central to the kind of personal development that has in impact on their organization. This provides them with a set of transferable skills that enhances their career opportunities and opportunities to make a meaning mark within the organization.

In this regard, we illustrate that students can promote understanding of diversity in workplaces through the introduction and implementation of diversity tools, diversity-directed applied research projects, and diversity learning programs to achieve the benefits attached to this increasingly important area of
management.

As Timonen and Turunen (2015) describe:

> *There is so much unused or unrecognized human potential which Diversity and Inclusion Management can bring to the surface. When understood, recognized, appreciated, and, finally, utilized for the benefit of an individual, a team, as well as the whole organization, a favourable flow of development can be seen.*

Nurminen et al., (2015) divide the innovation competence of a student into four parts: creative problem-solving; communication and networking across professional groups; multidisciplinary analysis, as well as goal-orientation. In projects where Master's students are key actors of Diversity Management, all of these competence areas are developed.

These competences nicely match three (of five) of the fundamental education objectives set out in the CDIO vision, namely:

- Rich with student design-build-test projects
- Integrating learning of professional skills such as teamwork and communication
- Featuring active and experiential learning

Moreover, they are aligned with CDIO's stated '*premise that engineering graduates should be able to: Conceive – Design — Implement — Operate complex value-added engineering systems in a modern team-based engineering environment to create systems and products*'.

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