



# **Efficient hiring processes and the impact on school culture**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This thesis examined how an efficient hiring process can have a positive impact on school culture in an international school in Amsterdam. Through a qualitative, action-based research method incorporating observations, interviews and document analysis it was found that streamlining the recruitment process while including more stakeholders, not only provides a positive candidate experience but equally leads to stronger cultural alignment between the new hires, the teams and the school overall.

The findings reveal key themes, including the necessity for streamlined processes with clear role definitions, the importance of diverse stakeholder participation, the impact of professional development in hiring, and the balance between efficiency and cultural fit. The research highlights that inclusive, transparent, and well-structured hiring processes are crucial for fostering a positive, collaborative, and diverse school culture. More specifically, practices such as relinquishing some control over the hiring process to the subject area coordinators, including teachers in the process, while co-creating predetermined interview questions and rubrics, as well as developing clearer communication channels were shown to support the hiring of better-qualified candidates.

By offering practical recommendations for improvement this research contributes to the academic discourse on efficient hiring and the cultural impacts this can have. Though the scope of the research is limited to the Amsterdam International Community School, the insights provided can serve as a valuable resource for other educational institutions hoping to align their hiring practices with their cultural goals.

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Keywords: action research, culture, hiring, process, practices, recruitment

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## **GLOSSARY**

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AICS	Amsterdam International Community School
CP	Career-Related Programme
DP	Diploma Programme
DHOC	Deputy Head of Campus
HOC	Head of Campus
IB	International Baccalaureat
MYP	Middle Years Programme
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PYP	Primary Years Programme
SACO	Subject-Area Coordinator
TAMK	Tampere University of Applied Sciences

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background and Context

The oft-cited Peter Drucker notably mentioned that '*culture eats strategy for breakfast*', "as culture is the secret sauce that keeps employees motivated and clients happy" (Engel, 2018). No matter how well your strategic plan is developed, or how strong the system that underlies an organisation is, it will stand or fall depending on the organisational or school culture. School culture, "the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school" (Education World, n.d.), is critically important, as it shapes the environment and experiences of students, teachers, and the wider school community (MacNeil et al., 2009).

However, amidst the modern-day challenges of teacher shortages, increased teacher attrition (Brok et al., 2017) and what some have aptly named "the great resignation" (Breitling et al., 2021), many schools are struggling to establish and maintain positive, sustainable and forward-looking cultures. Added to that the digitalisation of many jobs, as well as the latest developments in Artificial Intelligence, have only added more stress on schools, their teachers and the culture as the pace of change is relentless. While the latter certainly offer benefits, the need for quick implementation and usage often outpaces adequate change management, leaving staff overwhelmed and school culture impacted. This phenomenon has been called the *Acceleration Trap* (Bruch & Menges, 2010), sometimes also referred to as change fatigue. These trends only aggravate organisational cultural issues making it imperative for schools to intentionally and proactively cultivate an inclusive, open-minded and adaptive culture.

One way of positively influencing school culture is through the hiring process and optimising hiring practices, as new staff brought into the school can actively influence its cultural fabric. An efficient hiring process can have a positive influence on school culture within international schools, by attracting and retaining talented staff members who share the school's values and vision

(Independent School Management, 2023), as well as building a diverse team and enhancing staff morale. Moreover, a strong and positive school culture, characterised by effective organisational structures, strong communal bonds, and a shared vision, is critical for creating optimal learning environments and ultimately student learning (School of Education, 2022). Additionally, a healthy and positive school culture, based on transparent communication predictability and leadership support, may have an impact on the previously mentioned teacher attrition and turnover.

As such, it is essential for international schools aiming to improve their culture and hoping to be successful to focus on designing better hiring processes, that aid in attracting candidates who are willing to positively contribute to the community, while producing excellent work and remaining at the institution in the longer term. Prioritising hiring lays the groundwork for assembling a faculty with the capacity to immediately and positively shape student learning outcomes.

This is especially true for the Amsterdam International Community School (AICS), the school that has commissioned this thesis, which serves a diverse international population and aims to provide a nurturing community for students to thrive and staff to prosper. The AICS is a Dutch international school, part of the Esprit Schools Group, that offers the full International Baccalaureate (IB) continuum from the Primary Years Programme (PYP), through the Middle Years Programme (MYP) to the Diploma Programme (DP), as well as the more vocationally-inclined, Career-Related Programme (CP). The school is underpinned by four important values, namely *diversity*, *integrity*, *inquiry* and *community* and the vision statement rings out: "*To be a community where learning is at the heart of everything we do*" (Our School - AICS, n.d.). This highlights that the school believes in diversity of thought, inquiry and making decisions in the best interest of learning, pointing to the idea that more voices in the conversation are welcome and encouraged.

However, as an international and expanding school, growing pains are only natural and are a consequence of the changes that have been made and are

continuing to take place. Since the school's inception in 2003, with 16 secondary students, it has grown into a school of over 2200 students, spread over 2 new campuses. In January 2022, the AICS moved from the old campus into a brand-new purpose-built campus on the south side of Amsterdam, and in August 2023 the AICS opened another new campus in the Southeast of the city, adding another 18 classes across primary and secondary. As classes have amplified, scheduling has become more complicated and the organisation has added layers of complexity, the school culture continues to change. International schools, by their very nature, understand that the staffing community is mobile and the AICS is no different. Though the AICS's turnover rate of around 10-15% is within the norm, with Odland & Ruzicka (2009) placing it around 14% for international schools and Bunnell & Poole (2021) mentioning that it may go up to 17%, the school welcomed around 50 new staff members for the 2023-2024 school year, which has had an impact on the aforementioned and evolving school culture. These persistent hiring needs make it difficult to establish cultural continuity.

## **1.2 Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine, collaboratively diagnose and improve the hiring practices at the Amsterdam International Community School (AICS) to positively impact the school's culture. The AICS is a diverse international school aiming to provide students with a caring, supportive community that fosters intellectual and social growth (Mission & Vision - AICS, n.d.). Specifically, the study aims to understand how elements of the hiring process can be optimised to select candidates that enhance the school's culture, amidst modern challenges such as the digitalisation of the workplace, increasing instances of burnout related to change fatigue, as well as high teacher turnover and attrition. The aforementioned complexities, in the context of a rapidly expanding school, have resulted in the AICS' hiring process not always sufficiently selecting future staff for cultural fit. The process has tended to be more reactive than proactive, resulting in rushed decisions, which may impact the communal culture being sought.

Using an action research approach, including qualitative methods such as interviews, document analysis and observation this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are AICS' current hiring practices, including strengths and weaknesses?;
2. How can AICS' hiring process be improved to select staff who positively contribute to the school's culture?;
3. How can modifying AICS's hiring process affect school culture?

The ultimate aim of this study is to critically analyse and subsequently create an efficient, context-specific hiring process to promote cultural alignment and continuity during a period of exponential growth at AICS, despite mounting internal and external pressures on schools. The findings and ensuing recommendations for an improved process may provide other international schools insight into strategic hiring for positive cultural change.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The research undertaken is highly relevant and timely, given the reoccurring and structural issues relating to teacher shortages and attrition, not only in The Netherlands but also further afield. Cooper & Alvarado (2006) define teacher attrition as "teachers who leave the profession before retirement" (Den Brok et al, 2017, p. 881) which is an ever-expanding and urgent issue around the world and is the main cause of an expanding teacher shortage in many Western countries (Den Brok et al, 2017). There is growing evidence to suggest that there are declining enrollments and fewer applicants for teaching diplomas (Goldberg, 2021), which makes training teachers, as well as subsequently hiring qualified and motivated teachers a priority for many governments, not just international schools.

As such, this study touches at the heart of the challenges faced by many international schools, given substantial hiring challenges and teacher turnover, which strain efforts to establish strong school cultures (Odland & Ruzicka, 2009; Hardman, 2001). High teacher turnover has been associated with detrimental outcomes for students, faculty, and overall school performance and reputation (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Meanwhile, positive school culture is linked to key outcomes like teacher retention, student achievement and community engagement (MacNeil et al., 2009). In essence, there is a need for research examining how strategic improvements to hiring the right staff can enhance school culture in the dynamic international school context (Mancuso et al., 2011).

This study provides an analysis of practical hiring solutions suitable to the unique needs of international schools, especially in the Netherlands, with findings directly applicable to the AICS which is seeking to establish a stronger alignment between its hiring protocols and cultural values during a crucial period of growth. The recommendations may also help inform hiring practices at other international schools striving for cultural sustainability amidst staffing fluctuations. It addresses calls for more context-specific and problem-centred research in international education (Bailey, 2015). The collaborative action research methodology used also allows direct input from international school stakeholders in shaping relevant, sustainable improvements.

Succinctly, this timely study benefits international schools, especially in the Netherlands, through applied solutions while also furthering theoretical understanding of how hiring intersects with school culture across different settings. The focus on context-specific action research ensures findings will be impactful in both practice and academia.

#### **1.4 The Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The thesis topic has taken on many iterations since it was first considered, however, one aspect that has remained constant was an emphasis on school

culture, which is essential to any healthy school organisation. It started with the broad idea of co-creating a shared and positive culture, which morphed into what impact leadership practices have on school culture, to eventually looking into which factors can directly influence school culture, which led the author to define the following thesis statement:

*An efficient hiring process can positively impact school culture in an international school in Amsterdam by ensuring that the right staff members are hired for the right positions.*

This research makes a context-specific, but generalisable, contribution to the field of recruitment in international schools by demonstrating the vital link between efficient hiring processes and positive school culture. It adds needed nuance in applying hiring best practices across diverse educational contexts and which factors most influence school culture while reviewing hiring processes and theories, to propose a hiring process which has practical application in the international school setting. The particular topic of school culture interests the researcher, as having worked in different international schools it is evident how a positive school culture can have far-reaching impacts not only on staff morale but also on the educational outcomes of students.

The research, though generalisable, is limited in scope. Firstly, the research and data gathering is limited to the secondary school at the AICS, as there are differences between the hiring processes in primary and secondary school, with the author working in the latter. Secondly, the chronicling given the action research method being used took place in the 2022-2023 academic school year, and more specifically between January and July 2023, which limits the data-gathering process. Furthermore, the researcher has only been working at the educational institution for two years, which has limited the exposure to only two hiring seasons, after a change in leadership structure. The aforesaid change in the leadership structure involved the new role taken on, of Head of Campus for the Secondary School, being an amalgamation of three distinct but interdependent roles being fused into one, which has necessitated a

recalibration of the role, which in turn has had effects on hiring responsibilities as well as the school culture and climate. The limitations mentioned are important to note, as this has affected the data-gathering process and subsequent recommendations to be made.

Discussing the limitations of the research would not be complete without articulating some more generalisable limitations of the study as well as some unavoidable biases. Due to the context-specific setting of the research, the findings may be limited by the sample size which might impact the generalisability, meaning the results may not be fully applicable to schools in other geographical locations or cultural contexts (Lohr, 2021). Equally, the study's findings might be influenced by the method used (i.e. action research) to collect data, including interviews, observations and document analysis, which may not be able to capture the full spectrum of perspectives from the stakeholders involved (Patton, 2023). Likewise, the study's short time frame of six months is not a comprehensive examination of the long-term effects of the hiring process on cultural enhancement. Nor does the study dig deep into considerations of how some external factors, such as changes in leadership, student demographics or curricular adjustments, could influence school culture, which may be of equal or even more importance than the hiring process.

Bias is inevitable in any type of research and this study is no different. It is clear that because the researcher works for the institution under review some confirmation bias, seeking to interpret information that supports the thesis, as well as publication bias, highlighting positive outcomes and downplaying negative ones, or even researcher bias, also known as experimenter bias, where the researcher is involved in the hiring process or has a vested interest in a particular outcome, may well be present and could inadvertently influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Scribbr, n.d.). Other types of biases including selection bias, of the chosen sources of literature, or sampling bias, of the selected participants to take part in the data collection, may unintentionally skew the representation of different perspectives or align with preconceived ideas about the relationship between efficient hiring processes

and school culture (Scribbr, n.d.). Pertinently, given the subject of the study, it is important to recognise the cultural biases that the researcher holds and how this might influence the perception of what constitutes a positive school culture or an effective hiring process (Meyer, 2022). To mitigate these biases and limitations as much as possible, the author must adopt a balanced and rigorous approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation, while maintaining transparency in methodology, acknowledging the abovementioned biases, and considering alternative viewpoints to enhance the credibility and validity of the study's findings.

### **1.5 The Structure of the Study**

The thesis is divided and organised into five chapters. The first chapter, which serves as an introduction sets the scene by discussing the importance of school culture and hiring, as well as introduces the commissioned school, namely the AICS. It also covers the purpose statement and puts forward three sub-questions to be discussed in the following chapters, as well as putting forward the significance, scope and limitations of the study, including possible biases encountered.

The subsequent chapter takes a deep dive into the literature to consider the different definitions of organisation and school culture, including the factors that influence it and its impact on stakeholders. The need for cultural change and adaptive cultures is touched upon, due to the increasingly volatile work environments that most employees find themselves in. This chapter concludes by delving into the research that links hiring practices with organisational culture, reviewing recruitment best practices, processes and theories to identify the factors that contribute to an efficient hiring process.

The third chapter describes the methodology used in this research, namely action research, to include qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, document analysis and observation while using thematic analysis to make sense of all of the data.

Chapter four will cover the findings and results of the data collected in a narrative form, supported by appropriate evidence, to identify key themes of efficient hiring processes and school culture.

The final chapter brings together the findings, literature review and research questions to discuss and make recommendations for a more efficient hiring process to be implemented during the next hiring season at the AICS, starting in January 2024, and the implications this may have on school culture. Moreover, it will look to summarise the study and point out how this study has conceivably contributed to the field of international school recruitment and culture building. This chapter is brought to a close by reiterating the limitations of the research and suggesting further research on the topic.

Ultimately this thesis intends to diarise the hiring process utilised by the AICS in the last academic year, as well as gather insights from participants in the hiring process, by reviewing the successes and failures of the past hiring season, to recommend and implement a clearer, more transparent and efficient hiring process that not only benefits the school long-term, but also creates a more positive and inclusive culture.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Organisational Culture and the Factors that Influence it**

Discussions around organisational culture and how it can impact businesses did not take root until the 1980s (Kotter et al., 2021) and our understanding of how school cultures develop, specifically, and how it can influence school improvement efforts has grown significantly over recent years (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Broadly speaking culture can be defined, using Geert Hofstede's definition, as the "programming of the human mind by which one group of people distinguishes itself from another group - the set of shared beliefs, values, and norms that distinguish one group of people from another" (Hofstede Insights HQ, n.d.). Moving from the macro level to a more context-specific level, UNESCO's International Bureau of Education defines school culture as the "guiding beliefs or ethos, underlying assumptions, expectations, norms and values that give a school its identity, influence the way a school operates, and affect the behaviour of principals, teachers, support staff and learners" (School Culture, 2016). It is essentially all-pervasive and guides the actions of all stakeholders associated with the school.

#### **2.1.1 Culture and Organisational Success**

The research over the past two decades is quite conclusive. Though culture is often invisible and may be hard to describe, it certainly has a large impact on the success or failure of an organisation (Fullan, 2008; Karseras, 2022; Kotter et al, 2021; MacNeil et al., 2009; Mathew et al., 2012; Meyer, 2017; Lee & Yu, 2004; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Some however, have argued that culture has a more direct and specific impact on the employees, rather than on the overall organisational performance (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005). Despite this important nuance, it is clear that culture has an impact on organisational performance, as it is after all what the organisation, or more specifically the school, is all about, what it stands for and what it aims to achieve in the long

run. The school or organisational culture is what sets it apart from others, even if they exist in a similar district, market or have similar policies and processes.

Kotter et al (2021, p. 102) summarise this point when stating that in "the last decade, the volume of conversations about culture and its impact on performance seems to have risen. Several incredibly successful technology companies have talked of their cultures as a differentiator both for attracting talent and operational performance". They are writing about *Netflix* which released its now-famous 'Culture Deck' back in 2009, establishing the norms and values expected of *Netflix* employees and setting out the cultural expectations for the company in doing so. "Netflix has a reputation for being very tough, but they are unashamed of the standards they seek and are crystal clear on the people they want to hire and keep" (Karseras, 2021, p. 145). It is apparent that *Netflix* is unapologetic about the type of people that it wants to work with, and "for all the pressure of the job, people don't want to leave... [which] seems like a very transparent deal" (Karseras, 2021, p. 147). The company's ongoing success means it is discernable that something within the corporate culture is working correctly. Reed Hastings, Co-Founder and co-CEO of *Netflix*, further set out his goals when stating that "I hoped to promote flexibility, employee freedom, and innovation, instead of error prevention and rule adherence. At the same time, I understood that as a company grows, if you don't manage it with policies or control processes, the organization is likely to descend into chaos" (Hastings & Meyer, 2020, p. xviii). It is evident from this example that creating a clear and consistent culture is an ongoing balancing act, which may need to be revisited and readjusted periodically to remain relevant and rewarding for business success.

Another widely cited example of cultural success relating to organisational performance and stakeholder happiness is *Toyota*, with its "culture of continuous improvement", which is recognised as "a process that will require continued, sustained effort forever" (Fullan, 2008, p. 78). An aspect of the culture for which it is widely applauded is its culture of distributed leadership, where they develop leaders throughout the organisation simultaneously and at different levels of the organisation, instead of relying on key individuals to drive

the company forward. "Toyota's culture is laced with leaders... [and the] fact that Toyota can succeed over decades... and that the company shows no leadership effects - or changes from succession - speaks to building a robust set of interrelated management practices and philosophies that provide advantage above and beyond the ideas or inspirations of single individuals" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 211 in Fullan, 2008, p. 109). It is understandable that this culture of continuous improvement combined with distributed leadership, or a culture of leaders, has led to sustainability and success over a long period.

These two different examples of 'strong cultures', in *Netflix* and *Toyota*, which have helped to sustain and grow these companies, while keeping their staff motivated and driven, as well as making sure that their shareholders and clients are satisfied, serve to highlight the fact that cultures play a crucial role in organisational success. However, successful corporate or organisational cultures are not built overnight (Fullan, 2008; Kotter et al, 2021), as the previous examples have demonstrated. It is a long and ongoing process, with mistakes, reviews and readjustments needed along the way.

Much like the aforementioned companies, it is suggested that schools also succeed or fail based on their culture. "Culture is key to a school's success in promoting teacher and student learning. Without addressing the culture, no reform, no new curriculum, no amount of staff development will create a high-performing school" (Wright, 2023). So appreciating the type of culture that the school has is crucial in helping to plan for the school culture the organisation may want. In simple terms, you need to understand it before you can change it.

### **2.1.2. Culture and International Schools**

Before discussing cultural change though, it is important to emphasise the particularity of this thesis and the organisation it is using for the case study, which is an international school. International schools have a unique type of

organisational culture in that they espouse international values, often but not always aligned with the IB values, including intercultural understanding and respect, while also incorporating local and national traditions and customs. As such, it is difficult to speak of an international school's culture, as it is very context-specific. The AICS, as the commissioned school, serves over 70 nationalities, while also celebrating Dutch culture, norms and values, as well as being subject to Dutch labour laws as a Dutch International School (Dutch International Schools, 2022). By its very nature, it necessitates an open-minded and adaptive culture to cater for a diverse and growing cultural mix that has developed over the years, something that does not seem to be slowing down. "In the last ten years, the number of international schools around the world has increased by 52%, from 8,700 schools in January 2013 to 13,190 schools in January 2023", which has led to "drive up admissions demand resulting in a 53% growth in student enrolment over the last ten years, from 4.2 million students attending international schools globally in 2013 to 6.5 million students attending international schools today (January 2023)" (ISC Research, 2021, p.4-6). The demand for international schools is on an upward trajectory, which means that it is ever more important to understand the school culture and the effects it has on the growth and sustainability of the school. Bellei et al. (2019), noted in their research that the sustainability of educational effectiveness is affected by external factors, such as demographics and changes in educational policies, as well as internal factors, namely school leadership and the prevailing culture.

Much has been written about the factors that influence organisational culture. One factor that is noted by many is how leadership principles and styles have a large impact on the organisational culture (Darke, 2018; Lauren, 2019; Mandal, n.d.; Stoltz, 2023). Whether leaders are autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire, it can influence the culture of an organization. Equally, the way leaders communicate, interact with employees or make decisions can shape the work environment. Likewise and related to the latter, the company values, expressed as a mission or vision and conveyed through policies and practices, provide the framework for the culture that influences the behaviour and attitudes of employees, as well as guide the overall direction of the company

(Darke, 2018; Management Study Guide, n.d.; Kangal, 2023; Lauren, 2019; Mandal, n.d.; Stoltz, 2023).

Other factors that have an impact on organisational culture, include the nature of the industry, such as if it is in the creative sector, it may have a more flexible and innovative culture than if it is in a more regulated market which may necessitate a more rigid- and rule-oriented culture (Lauren, 2019). Furthermore, the clients and stakeholders served, their expectations and demands, as well as the interactions and relationships built with the aforementioned, can impact culture hugely (Course Sidekick, n.d.; Management Study Guide., n.d.; Mandal, n.d.; Stoltz, 2023). Not to mention external and context-specific factors such as the economic, political, social and technological landscape and how ensuing policies may require organisations to adapt and change their culture to remain relevant.

Moreover, and most relevant to this research, employees or staff working in the organisation contribute and even shape the culture through their actions, attitudes, behaviours and interactions with one another. The hiring and recruitment process has a significant impact on the current and desired organisational culture. Lauren (2029) even goes so far as to state that "no factor is more important to organizational culture than recruiting and selecting the right types of employees. The type of employees hired by an organization has the largest effect on its culture – especially when a company is in high growth mode and is rapidly adding new employees" (Lauren, 2019). As noted above, MacIntosh & Doherty (2005) concluded that the organisational culture has a large impact on employees. Still, it is argued here that the inverse is equally true - that employees have as much influence on culture, as the other way around.

When looking at factors or elements that influence school culture, more specifically, these are not too dissimilar to the umbrella terms noted above. Much like organisational culture, school culture is heavily influenced by the leadership team, their values, style and priorities. Ismail et al. (2022, p.272) maintain that according to their "findings, schools with strong cultures have

leaders who establish and maintain a collaborative relationship among staff, there is cooperation among teachers, professional development is supported, teachers work towards a common mission, there is a collegial relationship among teachers, and teachers and parents share common expectations of students' achievement". They go further to claim that effective school leadership is a necessity to build a positive school culture, even going so far as to assert that "leadership and management's role was one of the most crucial factors for shaping the school culture" (Ismail et al., 2022, p.273). Leadership's role typically has an impact on the organisational structures and policies of the school, such as the decision-making processes, disciplinary procedures and resource allocation, which impact the school culture. Research agrees that transparent and fair structures promote a positive and inclusive culture (Jackson, 2020; Taajamo et al., 2023).

A closely associated element with the preceding two factors is the level of open communication within the school community which is seen as crucial for a healthy school culture. When there is effective communication between teachers, students, parents, and leadership, it promotes trust, collaboration, and a sense of belonging (Jackson, 2020).

Additional elements that have a significant impact on school culture are the teaching and learning practices employed by the school, including instructional methods, assessment strategies, curriculum design, and how these are collaboratively developed and shared amongst colleagues (Ismail et al., 2022; Jackson, 2020; Taajamo et al., 2023). Innovative and student-centred approaches can shape a culture of creativity and academic excellence. Additionally, the continued professional development of teachers and collegial support in doing so is crucial to a healthy school culture (Ismail et al., 2022; Taajamo et al., 2023).

Lastly, other factors that influence school culture are related to stakeholder engagement and attitudes. The attitudes and behaviours of teachers towards their work, students and colleagues significantly impact the school culture. Ismail et al. (2022, p. 273) contend that "having a positive school culture which

empowers all members to work towards a common goal... enables the staff to work more effectively and agreeably with the school leader, shapes the behaviours and expectations of student[s] and teachers, and contributes to the efficiency and effectiveness of the school". Bluntly put, collaborative cultures make for more pleasant work environments, meaning that teachers are likely to have more positive and supportive attitudes, which in turn contributes to a healthy and inclusive environment. Taajamo et al. (2023, p.18) extend this idea by claiming that "if collaboration and relationships between staff members are improved, then they may take more innovative actions that can subsequently positively influence student learning and academic growth". Likewise, students' attitudes toward their school, teachers and peers influence the culture. Their experiences and opinions feed directly into the existing and future overall culture and how it is perceived. Much the same, parental engagement can have a huge impact on shaping the school culture. When parents are actively engaged in the learning process of their child and take an interest in contributing to the school community, it fosters a more positive and supportive culture (Jackson, 2020).

It is important to note that these factors are interconnected and interdependent, and so can vary depending on the specific context of schools. Each school's unique combination of these factors contributes to its distinct culture (Ismail et al., 2022; Jackson, 2020; Taajamo et al., 2023). As previously noted, cultures are not static, with these factors playing a role in either maintaining or changing the culture.

## **2.2 Cultural Change**

It has been affirmed in the previous sections that culture plays an extensive role in organisational and school performance. Added to that, organisation or school cultures need occasional adjustments to stay relevant and rewarding. Adaptations or changes are becoming increasingly vital in today's rapidly changing global landscape, accelerated by the advent of the digital age, which is driven by the *Internet of Things*, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other

technological developments. Karseras (2022, p.19) has described today's world which is defined by its furious pace of change as VUCA environments, "characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity". He goes on to state that the "challenges arising from accelerating digitalization, increased virtual working, growing diversity, societal individualism, worsening mental health, and more regulation are all conspiring to make the leader's job far more complex, challenging, and stressful" (Karseras, 2022,p. 38). David Epstein develops on this point, claiming that a level of ambiguity, in this day and age, may not be a bad thing, especially in decision-making as it adds unique value to the organisational toolbox. He asserts that "the most effective leaders and organizations had range; they were, in effect, paradoxical. They could be demanding and nurturing, orderly and entrepreneurial, even hierarchical and individualistic, all at once" (Epstein, 2019, p.255).

In a world marked by increasing mental health awareness, millennials being less tolerant of role uncertainty, newer generations getting more ambitious and individualistic, as well as the need for more psychological safety at work (Karseras, 2022), added to the frightening pace of change, it is evident that organisational and school cultures need to be more adaptive and learn on-the-go. Some research has pointed to the concept of adaptive culture, which is "one that enables the organisation to adapt quickly and effectively to internal and external pressures for change" (Management Advisory Services, n.d.), but for the purpose of this research, we will focus more on learning cultures.

### **2.2.1. Learning Cultures**

Learning cultures is a term that has been discussed for some time and is gaining more traction (Chamorro-Premuzic & Bersin, 2018; CIPD, 2023; Fullan, 2008; Grant, 2021; Tenney, 2022). At its most basic level, it is about an organisation that ingrains and encourages learning in everything that they do, in a continual learning cycle, where employees feel safe and empowered to make mistakes, as it is seen as an opportunity for learning. According to the

CIPD (2020, p.2), a learning culture includes "supporting individual learning and transformation and allowing this knowledge to shape strategy and process", as well as "encouraging teams to learn and reflect on their work and proactively influence strategy and process change", while also allowing for "a willingness to learn and improve from the wider organisation and key decision-makers". The research report goes on to suggest that there is a correlation between learning culture and organisational growth and productivity, knowledge management and transfer of learning, as well as job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover (CIPD, 2020). This is corroborated by Tenney (2022), who lists the benefits of having a learning culture as leading to improved company performance, boosting employee engagement, increasing customer satisfaction, developing future leaders, facilitating innovation, as well as attracting and retaining top talent. He goes on to state that "[m]aking continuous learning a priority in your organization is not only the smart thing to do, but also necessary in a world of constant change" (Tenney, 2022).

It is discernable that learning and the culture that comes with it, has increasingly become indispensable to organisations, as it can and does lead to process and strategy change. Michael Fullan, who has over four decades of experience in leading change in education concurs that "[h]aving a learning culture and the capacity to operate effectively is much more important to organizational success than having the right strategy" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006 in Fullan, 2008, p. 89). It seems that Fullan agrees with Drucker on the importance of having the right kind of culture to lead an organisation forward. He cites Taylor and LaBarre (2006) to drive his point home by noting that "if you want great people to do their best work, the logic goes, then you've got to create the right working conditions the moment they walk through the door". And then you have to keep creating cultures of learning every day that they are on the job" (Fullan, 2008, p.89).

Another champion of change, whether personal or organisational, Adam Grant puts forward a compelling argument in his seminal book *Think Again*, that reconsidering our beliefs and ideas, by drawing on intellectual humility, mental

flexibility and curiosity is needed more than ever with the accelerating pace of change we are experiencing, which he states is more likely to happen in a culture of learning. He states that in learning cultures, people are encouraged to question existing practices and try new things, which leads to more innovation and fewer mistakes. By citing the example of NASA, he concludes that learning cultures typically thrive under a balance of psychological safety and accountability (Grant, 2021).

Change is not only unavoidable in the modern world but it is also needed, as it forces us to come up with creative solutions and drives innovation. As the saying goes, there can be no growth without change. However, change and more exactly cultural change is complex, which makes the task of leadership ever more challenging, meaning organisations that are able to adapt and learn more rapidly are likely to be more successful. This is why Fullan (2020, p. ix) advocates for a learning culture which he claims is “how to change the existing culture so that it has the capacity to manage and incorporate change on a continuous basis that serves the goals of the organization, including deliberately incorporating new goals and their implementation”.

### **2.2.2. Psychological Safety**

It is clear from the research that many authors promote the concept of a learning culture, with some even proposing ways of creating said culture. Chamorro-Premuzic & Bersin (2018) suggest that a learning culture can be created if continuous learning is rewarded, meaningful and constructive feedback is given, leaders lead by example and hire curious people. Added to that, a concept that seems to underpin a culture of learning and has flourished in research recently is psychological safety (Grant, 2021; Karseras, 2022; Kotter, 2021; Schein & Schein, 2018). Research shows that psychological safety is not about making people feel comfortable or agreeable. It is about creating a culture where people feel safe to share their ideas and concerns without fear of reprisal, which is essential for a learning culture. Grant goes on to substantiate this claim by stating that “[w]hen I was involved in a study at

Google to identify the factors that distinguish teams with high performance and well-being, the most important differentiator wasn't who was on the team or even how meaningful their work was. What mattered most was psychological safety" (Grant, 2021, p.209).

### **2.2.3. The Reality of Cultural Change**

Nevertheless, though a learning culture may be desired and even advocated by many, it is not always present. "The CIPD's Professionalising Learning and Development report found that 98% of learning and development (L&D) practitioners wish to develop a positive culture for learning, but only 36% feel like they've developed one" (CIPD, 2020, p.2). On top of that, changing a corporate culture is not only difficult to achieve, but also time-consuming. Kotter (2011) found, in his previous research on corporate culture that extensive time was required for major cultural change, anywhere between four to ten years for sizeable organisations. More recently, the same author confirmed that "in terms of a new culture that fit a new strategy, which in turn fit changed external conditions, or better yet a new adaptive culture, considerable time was required" (Kotter et al., 2021, p. 111).

Besides, there are also certain pitfalls of too much or too rapid change. Continuous and perpetual change, which is especially present in many work environments nowadays can lead to "change fatigue" (Perlman, 2011) or "change exhaustion" (Duffy & Fosslie, 2022), when a sense of indifference or passive resignation grows amongst employees who feel that change is taking place too quickly or too soon after an earlier change. Pearlman (2010) even found that in such cases, "70 percent of transformation efforts fail". Likewise, Bruch & Menges (2010) warn of the "acceleration trap", which happens in organisations that overload, multiloading or perpetually load their employees with 'needed' changes, never allowing for a regeneration phase, which leads to a "pattern [that] deprives workers of any hope of retreat for recharging their energy". Generally, organisations that suffer from the acceleration trap or have employees who suffer change fatigue "fare worse than their peers on

performance, efficiency, employee productivity, and retention, among other measures" (Bruch & Menges, 2010).

It is clear from the research that organisations hoping to remain competitive need to invest in the learning and development of their employees and the environment they work in, especially focusing on trust and psychological safety. "Creating the right sort of culture has shown to dramatically facilitate prospering within a complex and shifting context by helping execute sound strategy or by helping with adaptation in general" (Kotter et al., 2021, p. 102). By fostering a culture of learning, companies can equip their employees with the skills and competencies needed to meet new and complex challenges head-on. Creating opportunities for employees to continuously build their capabilities, and hiring the right people motivated by this opportunity, will result in a more agile, adaptable and resilient organisation, ready to thrive in an ever-changing world.

### **2.3 Hiring and recruitment practices, processes and theories**

In an educational landscape affected by teacher shortages, increasing resignation and turnover rates, lowering enrollment in teaching degrees, as well as growing mental health challenges, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with millennials less tolerant of role uncertainty and more ambitious than previous generations (Karseras, 2022, p. 28), hiring and retention have become essential to long term success. Fullan (2008), quoting Taylor & LaBarre in their research on maverick companies who value ideas with a higher calling, states that the "best-performing companies I know don't just have a strong corporate culture they have a deep-seated *recruitment* culture. They understand that recruiting is not some obscure function buried in the human resources bureaucracy. It is a prime driver of business success" (Taylor & LaBarre, 2006, p. 216 in Fullan, 2008, p. 65). Successful companies understand that you cannot leave recruitment to one department. Instead, these organisations have made human resources, and with it the hiring and retention of talented individuals, a central pillar of their corporate culture. Fuller

et al. (2023) confirm that hiring and retaining talent is one of the top three priorities for 95% of senior business leaders surveyed, as it "is critical for their organization's ability to compete, both in the next 12 to 18 months and in the next three to five years".

It is often stated that you are better off hiring people for purpose than for potential, but Fullan (2008, p. 71) argues that you "are much better off hiring for purpose and hiring for *potential*—potential to learn on the job". He affirms that building capacity in your organisation starts with hiring talented people, or people with potential, but that it all depends on how you manage that talent and that you need to nurture their potential by offering them the possibility of growing within the organisation. Once you have hired talented individuals, it is essential to focus on the retention of the hired potential, which is contingent on the continued growth and professional development of said individuals. Likewise, Fuller et al. (2023) agree that you must hire individuals who have potential, but that you need to invest in their growth. They claim that by "embracing more expansive hiring and selection processes, companies can do a better job of finding the talent that's right for them" and recommend seeking "candidates who match 70% to 80% of the most critical skills for the role — and develop learning curricula to equip them with the remainder". Success depends not just on hiring the right people, but companies must invest in continually developing the talent that makes it through the door. Evidently, recruitment and training are intrinsically linked in organisations hoping to be successful in the long term.

### **2.3.1. Human Capital Theory**

Several theories underlie such recruitment policies and what we believe about human resources. One of the most prominent, which links well with the latter points, is the Human Capital Theory, dating back a few decades (Becker, 1975; Mincer, 1958; Schultz, 1961). The aforementioned theory posits that individuals and society can achieve greater economic outcomes and productivity by investing in people's skills, knowledge, and abilities, similar to

how businesses invest in physical, or what Schultz (1961) calls nonhuman, capital, such as machinery. It states that investing in human resources and talent can lead to a competitive advantage, viewing education, training, and health as essential components of such investments, often leading to greater earnings and economic growth. Schultz (1961) emphasised the importance of investing in education and training, insinuating that underdeveloped countries can achieve rapid economic growth by diverting resources to education and other human capital investments, instead of only focusing on physical capital. He highlighted the significance of an efficient, well-funded, education system for economic development, when comparing younger workers to older labourers, and that in doing so countries would equip their workforce with the necessary skills and knowledge, leading to increased productivity and higher wages, as well as overall economic growth.

Becker (1975) expanded on the work of Schultz and the Human Capital Theory by claiming that not only education, but equally ongoing training has an impact on people's individual growth and success. He consequently assumed that individuals would make decisions about education and training based on the expected future benefit, or expected future earnings, to determine whether it would be worth it. Basically, Becker (1975) believed that people would calculate how much time and effort it would take to invest in their human capital and weigh it against the cost, before committing to it. Consequently, people will invest time and resources in their education if they believe it will lead to better job prospects and increased earnings in the future. Therefore, for an education system to be effective, it must provide skills and knowledge that are relevant to the job market.

Likewise, Mincer (1958) introduced the "Mincer earnings function", which aimed at predicting earning potential to years of education, experience and training. He suggested that on average people with more education would earn more, but that this plateaus at higher levels of education. His work has proven influential in understanding the potential benefits of education on an individual and societal level. Ideally, a successful education system would aim at maximising the potential returns, ensuring that individuals can achieve

higher earnings based on their educational investments. In essence, the Human Capital Theory as suggested by Schultz, Becker, and Mincer, emphasises the crucial role that the education system plays in enhancing an individual's economic prospects and overall economic development. They claim that by investing in human capital, especially through education, training and upskilling, societies benefit at large by having a more able and productive workforce, which promotes economic growth and success.

In the context of the thesis, this theory suggests that schools should invest in recruiting and hiring the best teachers and staff, with relevant educational qualifications and professional development experiences to build a strong human capital base, which in turn affects educational outcomes. Fullan (2008) emphasises the point of attracting talented teachers by putting forward *McKinsey & Company's* analysis of the best-performing countries on the OECD's 2003 PISA assessment, which focused on the common policies and practices that brought about their success. "McKinsey found that these systems (1) got more talented people to become teachers; (2) developed these teachers into better instructors, and for those becoming school principals, developed them into committed and talented school leaders; and (3) more effectively ensured that instructors consistently delivered the best possible instruction for every child in the system, including early and targeted intervention in the case of individual, school, or district underperformance" (Fullan, 2008, p.67). Focusing on the first of these points the report continues by stating that "top performing school systems consistently attracted stronger people into the teaching profession, leading to better student outcomes", which was achieved "by making entry into teaching training highly selective, developing effective processes for selecting the right applicants to become teachers, and paying good (but not great) starting compensation" (Fullan, 2008, p.67). A note of caution is added that "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007 in Fullan, 2008, p.67). It is evident that an efficient hiring process that identifies and secures talented teachers, as well as trains them, will help strengthen the school's human capital and contribute towards a positive school culture.

### 2.3.2. Competency-Based Theory

Another widely-known theory in the world of human resources and recruitment is the Competency-Based Theory, championed by authors such as McClelland (1973) and Lucia & Lepsinger (1999). The Competency-Based Theory focuses on evaluating individuals based on their competencies, skills or abilities to perform a job successfully, rather than merely examining intelligence or rote knowledge. This theory, which in many ways mirrors the IB's educational philosophy and current educational thinking around competency-based education, promotes a more holistic view of an individual's capabilities, integrating knowledge, skills and attitudes. McClelland (1973), in his article *'Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence"'*, emphasised the limitations of the then widely used *IQ* tests as an indicator for success, especially in the job market, preferring to underscore competencies rather than just general intelligence. He argued that a clearer focus on a more holistic view of competencies and developing those would lead to demonstrated superior performance in a job. As such, McClelland (1973) was critical of traditional education systems that emphasise standardised testing, which does not necessarily translate into real-world success, but instead endorsed the benefits of integrating competency-based assessments that gauge students' capabilities more holistically.

Lucia & Lepsinger (1999) take it a step further by creating and emphasising the importance and usefulness of competency models in making informed and effective human resource decisions, ultimately leading to organisational success. They assert that these models are tools that can be used by organisations to identify competencies (abilities, behaviours, knowledge and skills) that are essential for success in particular jobs. The intended effect of using competency models, it is argued, is that when businesses understand which competencies are needed for success in a job, they can make better decisions about recruitment, training and professional development of employees. Essentially it is about getting the right people for the job based on pre-determined success criteria. It can be reasoned that educational institutions could draw significant benefits from competency modelling by

making learning more relevant and tailored to real-world requirements, which could be achieved by collaborating more closely with industries to develop competency models for various professions. This would ensure that the education provided is aligned with what is required in the professional world.

Relating this back to Fullan (2008), McKinsey and the best-performing educational systems, they reiterate the idea that the most successful schooling systems have taken a broader look at hiring for competencies, rather than the narrower definitions of intelligence or knowledge. "All of these countries avoided the pitfalls of recruitment based solely on academic grades. They assessed and screened for *"a high overall level of literacy and numeracy, strong interpersonal and communication skills, willingness to learn, and motivation to teach"* (Barber & Mourshed, 2007 in Fullan, 2008, p.67-68). Connecting the Competency-Based Theory and Fullan to the thesis topic, this theory recommends that schools clearly define job competencies and success factors, and intentionally align the recruitment process with these. As such, an efficient recruitment process in schools should assess and prioritise candidates based on the pre-determined competencies, ensuring that the successfully hired staff have the skills required to effectively contribute to the school and its culture.

### **2.3.3. Cultural Fit Theory**

Though many more theories inform human resource and recruitment processes, such as the Resource-Based View Theory (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) and the Social Network Theory (Burt, 1995; Granovetter, 1973), this thesis will only introduce one more theory due to its clear relevance to the topic, namely the Cultural Fit Theory (Chatman, 1991; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; O'Reilly et al., 1991). As mentioned by Schneider, "[O]f all the issues in psychology that have fascinated scholars and practitioners alike, none has been more pervasive than the one concerning the fit of person and environment" (Schneider, 2001, p. 141).

Cultural Fit Theory is not new, but it is clearly relevant, as it can have a large impact on the success of an organisation and the individuals who work in it. The theory is rooted in the idea that the alignment between an individual's values, beliefs, and behaviours and those of the organisation they are a part of can have an impact on job satisfaction, commitment, retention, and performance, to name a few.

Chatman (1991) argued that cultural fit, or the congruence between individual and organisational values, is an essential aspect of the selection (recruitment) and socialisation process. In her article, she posits that organisations tend to hire people whose values and beliefs more closely align with the corporate culture and vision. Chatman (1991) goes on to contend that the process of socialisation, once the person works in the organisation, reinforces the alignment by shaping the individual's behaviours and beliefs to be more in line with the organisation's norms and values. Her three conclusions emphasise the importance of cultural fit: "First, recruits whose values, when they enter, match those of the firm adjust to it more quickly; second, those who experience the most vigorous socialization fit the firm's values better than those who do not; and third, recruits whose values most closely match the firm's feel most satisfied and intend to and actually remain with it longer" (Chatman, 1991, p.459).

Though a lot of time and energy is spent on recruitment, Chatman underlines the importance of onboarding when stating that "[s]election contributes significantly to value congruence at entry, but regardless of selection, socialization experiences contribute significantly to changes in person-organization fit over recruits' first year" (Chatman, 1991, p.476). It is clear from her analysis that cultural fit plays a positive role in job satisfaction and retention. Kristof-Brown, et al's (2005) meta-analysis is equally conclusive, that cultural fit matters. The paper extensively reviewed various aspects of cultural fit, including person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. The overall conclusion for all four sub-aspects is that higher levels of fit lead to positive outcomes like higher job satisfaction, greater commitment to the organisation, lower turnover and better job performance.

Additionally, O'Reilly et al. (1991) relayed the importance of understanding the fit between a person's preferences and the organisational culture they choose to work in, by developing the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP) instrument. The instrument involved comparing the profiles of individual and organisational values to see how closely they align and concluded that the closer the match the more likely the individual would be satisfied and committed to their job. The nuance made is that it goes both ways, not only does the individual need to seek out an organisation that matches their cultural expectations, but organisations need to actively pursue candidates who fit their beliefs (O'Reilly et al., 1991).

Contrary to the three previously mentioned pieces of research on congruence, or cultural fit, David Epstein (2019), in his book *Range*, disputes the claim that cultural fit has an impact on individual or organisational performance. "Plenty of profiles of individual businesses were written in support of congruence. However, in the first study that systematically examined a broad swath of organizations across an industry, researchers who studied cultural congruence at 334 institutions of higher education found that it had no influence on any measure of organizational success whatsoever. Administrators, department heads, and trustees in strongly congruent institutions did have an easier time classifying the culture when asked, but there was no impact at all on performance, from the academic and career development of students to the satisfaction of faculty and the financial health of the college" (Epstein, 2019, p. 255). The difference in conclusions may, however, lie in how Epstein has defined congruence, as the "cultural fit among an institution's components--values, goals, vision, self-concepts, and leadership styles" (Epstein, 2019, p. 255), while not referring to the individual-organisation fit mentioned in other research. Instead, he contends that most successful leaders and organisations showed a level of cultural ambiguity or flexibility, allowing them to learn and adapt more rapidly.

Equally, Hofmans and Judge (2019) agree that "[a]lthough most managers would agree that it is important to hire people who fit in, the idea of hiring for

culture fit has become controversial". Much like what is noted above in reference to Epstein, they acknowledge that much of the confusion may lie in how cultural fit is defined, which can lead to misconceptions around the concept. The authors define cultural fit as "how well one's values adhere to the values of the organization or team" (Hofmans and Judge, 2019). With that being established they have noted four common misconceptions that derive from a misunderstanding of the definition. The first is that some leaders believe that having a cultural fit is "nice to have but not a necessity" (Hofmans and Judge, 2019), which the authors dispute as being a fallacy, based on meta-analysis, which places cultural fit as something essential for the overall organisational functioning, employee happiness and retention. The second and third noted misconceptions centre around the idea that cultural fit harms both diversity and innovation. Yet again the authors argue that this is a flawed logic, as cultural fit is not about hiring clones of the current workforce, which could harm diversity and innovation, but it is about values match. The last misconception highlighted is that "[h]iring for culture fit is an art, not science" (Hofmans and Judge, 2019). Here again, they maintain that this is inaccurate, as research "has demonstrated that recruiters' perceptions of culture fit in an interview often reflect a '*similar-to-me*' effect rather than being indicative of the actual fit with the organization's culture" (Hofmans and Judge, 2019), which is problematic. Instead, it is argued that what is needed is a stricter and more objective definition of cultural fit, with tools to measure the value fit, rather than relying on intuition or gut feelings.

Despite the preceding dissenting voices, Fuller et al. (2023) suggest that "[c]ompanies need a compelling culture to maximize the engagement, productivity, and retention of their existing workforces. In recent years, company culture has become the most important driver of job satisfaction, with culture being 10x more predictive of employee retention than compensation". It is clear from the above that the Cultural Fit Theory highlights the importance of aligning an individual's values, behaviours, and beliefs with the organisational culture. In the context of the thesis, this theory underscores the significance of hiring candidates who resonate with the school's mission and values. An efficient hiring process should include methods to assess cultural fit, ensuring

that new hires align with the existing school culture and positively contribute to its overall atmosphere.

#### **2.3.4. Hiring Practices and Processes**

The aforementioned theories suggest that strategic, effective hiring through an efficient process can secure talent, competencies, and networks, as well as improve employee satisfaction and retention, which ultimately strengthen the school's or organisation's cultural alignment, collaboration, human capital, and overall skill set, positively benefitting the overall health of the company.

However, Tarki et al. (2022) have pointed out that a lot of companies are so wary of making bad hires that they "have designed bloated, bureaucratic hiring processes". They go on to state that "in an effort to minimize mishires, many companies have adopted extensive hiring processes, ... a bureaucratic method to hiring that we believe is as damaging a form of inefficiency as mishires themselves" (Tarki et al., 2022), and they question whether the cost of the recruitment bureaucracy is worth the benefits. These extensive hiring processes, which involve multiple rounds of interviews and lengthy background checks, have led many companies to develop "consensus-oriented hiring cultures, often rooted in the fact that colleagues don't want to hurt each other's feelings" (Tarki et al., 2022), but the authors affirm that in "reality, the bureaucratic method of hiring destroys a lot of value by missing out of stellar candidates while adding little value" (Tarki et al., 2022). They cite the example of *Google* which "discovered that they could capture 86% of the value produced by interviews in the first four interactions" (Tarki et al., 2022), and subsequently decided that the the extra cost of more interactions was not worth it. As such, the authors put forward five easy steps to help streamline the hiring process and make it more efficient and clear, namely; to reduce the number of interviewers in your process; to be explicit about whose decision the hiring is; to ask interviewers to use numerical ratings when evaluating candidates; to remove interviewers from your hiring committee who consistently turn down most candidates; and to change the

company culture to reward employees who identify great hires, rather than penalizing those who end up with an occasional poor performer.

It is becoming increasingly clear that during the "*Great Resignation*", with companies finding it ever-more difficult to attract the right talent, job seekers are in control more than ever, which is forcing companies to rethink their hiring processes. Fuller et al. (2023) have identified 40 different hiring practices "that either strengthen the hiring process or help enhance a company's offer", with the promise that by "experimenting with new innovations and putting the right feedback systems in place, you can develop a sustainable strategy that can help you create lasting talent advantage". Two of the more relevant ones, which hit on the topic of this thesis, are to "[e]mbed company purpose, strategy, and values in your operating and performance practices and feedback process, and train your leaders to become culture champions", as well as to "[d]evelop clear two-way communication channels for employee input and engagement" (Fuller et al., 2023). Essentially they are advocating for a more defined cultural-fit model, with employees playing an active role in creating these practices.

Brock & Pinchback (2018) take it a step further stating that while "well-structured interviews can be useful in assessing personality and cultural fit, we believe they are much less effective at considering qualities such as analytical skill, teaming abilities, and performance under pressure". The authors suggest that more companies should consider hiring practices utilised by Navy SEALs, NASA and the NFL, including inviting talented candidates for trials and auditions, or what they term "*datathons*", which would allow the hiring team to assess potential candidates using "observable and measurable criteria to evaluate their performance", gaining "valuable data to help hone in on top people to hire" (Brock & Pinchback, 2018). Much like the abovementioned competency models put forward by Lucia & Lepsinger (1999), Brock & Pinchback (2018) purport that more companies "must realize that all the typical interviewing and recruiting processes are ripe for improvement" and instead should "spend time up front developing programs that focus on areas where they have the greatest hiring needs and where the

right talent can have the greatest impact". It can be implied that companies, and schools, would be better off analysing the competencies needed to be successful while creating programmes and recruitment processes that best identify those, rather than just hiring a like-for-like replacement when someone leaves. Similarly, Luciano & Watson (2021) discuss the benefits of companies waiting for the right hire, rather than just hiring anybody, due to the negative consequences this can have on the team. They identified the four traits that have the biggest impact on teams, namely reliability, job-readiness, a positive attitude and good communication skills and insist that companies should test candidates on those, by including this in the hiring process.

In a similar vein, Haimann (2020), with his team at *Less Annoying CRM*, "decided to focus on optimizing [the] interview process early on as opposed to relying on outdated behavioral questions", in order to find "talented people to contribute to our culture, generate great work, and stay with us for the long term". Through trial and error they went on "to create a process that immerses job candidates in unconventional scenarios to gather the most useful insights about their critical-thinking abilities, tech savviness, and interpersonal skills" which has resulted in "improvements both in the quality of our hires and what they bring to the company" and as a result, "our retention has improved significantly" (Haimann, 2020). They redesigned their recruitment process around four pillars. Firstly, they intentionally share the interview questions ahead of time to test the candidates' ability to prepare, with many of the questions allowing the interviewees to choose topics of discussion for themselves, which in turn gives the hiring committee a sense of the candidates' passions and ability to communicate clearly about something they would hopefully know a lot about. Secondly, the recruitment process includes a section on technical skills, where the candidate gets to meet an expert in the field to determine whether there is a technical match. This is then followed by getting potential hires to complete a writing sample, as they "want to know that all of [the] hires will be able to communicate clearly in writing without extensive editing and, sometimes, under time pressure" (Haimann, 2020). Lastly, the company has the prospective employees play an interactive game with colleagues to see if they would be a good cultural fit. Though this process

seems arduous and requires regular iterations, according to the author, the results are that they have found improvements in the quality of their hires and they have a higher retention rate (Haimann, 2020).

It is increasingly evident that companies and schools must redesign their hiring processes to become more efficient if they hope to hire the right talent, "and in uncertain times, bringing on the right people is more important than ever" (Reengineering the Recruitment Process, 2021). The latter article, which leans on research done by *Gartner*, claims that "candidates are increasingly selective about whom they work for, so firms need a compelling '*employment value proposition*', which might involve anything from competitive compensation and benefits to career-development opportunities and a reputation for stellar management", as well as "freedom to work remotely and to manage one's own schedule [which] has increased employees' expectations that they can exert considerable control over the design of their jobs" (Reengineering the Recruitment Process, 2021). In this competitive landscape, the report encourages companies to focus on two key courses of action, including hiring for potential, rather than experience. This means that companies should not see hiring as a like-for-like replacement, but rather take it as an opportunity to "look beyond the immediate needs of their business units and consider what skills the larger organization must acquire to succeed in the future" (Reengineering the Recruitment Process, 2021). Secondly, the report recommends that companies focus their employee value proposition on more than Ping-Pong tables and free snacks, to include offering a better work/life balance, as prospective employees are demanding more influence over their work.

Chambers (2022) touches upon this too when he writes that "job seekers are looking for better wages, better benefits, and better remote work options", as well as "losing patience with cumbersome hiring processes". In order to make the hiring process a positive experience for the candidates and not feel like one-way communication, Chambers urges companies to ask themselves four simple questions about their process. These four questions are not only relevant to this thesis theoretically but also form part of the reflection on the

hiring process at the AICS. The questions to be considered in order to add more value to the candidates' experience are; "Is your time-to-decision fast enough?"; "Do you share information on company culture?"; "How is your correspondence?"; "Are you providing value up front?" (Chambers, 2022). It is evident that if the answers to these questions are negative, you are likely to lose out on talented and motivated future employees. This is neatly summed up by Haimann (2020) when he states that it "may be tempting for some leaders to simply accept that hiring is not a perfect science and use that as an excuse to stick with the same outdated interview process corporations have relied on for decades. But today, it's safe to say that most businesses can't afford to take a chance on bad hires".

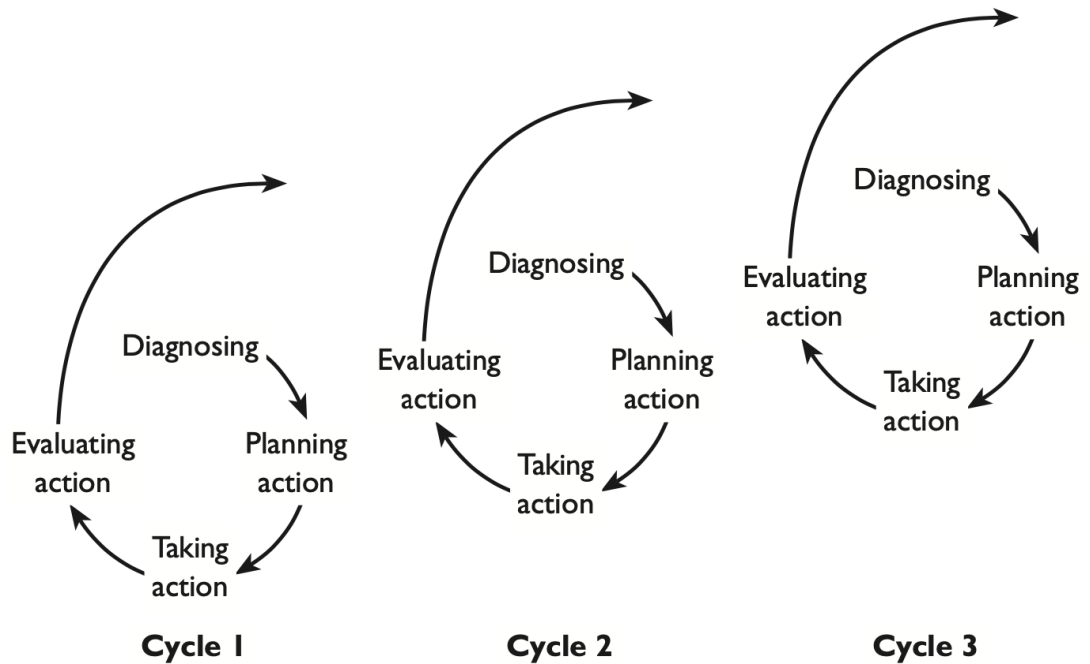
By considering and incorporating the literature on organisational culture and cultural change, as well as recruitment practices, processes and theories it is hoped that these can be used to analyse the current state of the hiring process at the Amsterdam International Community School and offer insight into developing a more efficient approach to selecting candidates who not only possess the necessary qualifications but also align with the institution's culture, ultimately enhancing the positive impact on school culture as outlined in the thesis.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

The following chapter outlines the research methods used in the study to examine the relationship between efficient hiring processes and school culture improvement at the Amsterdam International Community School (AICS). This paper used the action research approach, as it is not only well-suited to educational research (Mertler, 2011; Mertler 2019) but also allows the practitioners involved in the research to investigate and improve their own practice in a systematic way. As one of the main members of the hiring committee, this researcher is well-positioned to study this issue from an insider's perspective.

#### 3.1 The Action Research Method

Action research is described as a cyclical and iterative process that allows for investigation and reflection within the setting of the problem being studied. Put differently, it is a "systematic inquiry into one's own practice" (Mertler, 2019, p.6). Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist who is well-known for his change model, is credited with coining the term *action research*, which he described as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action" (Lewin, 1946, p. 35). Adding that "[r]esearch that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946, p.35). He goes on to claim that action research uses "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action" (Lewin, 1946, p.38). More precisely he suggested a four-step cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with Mertler (2019, p.18) even suggesting that the iterative nature of this process may mean that "there may never be a clear end to the study", which "may continue to go through subsequent cycles of planning, acting and observing, developing a new plan, and reflecting, which seemingly spiral from one year into the next". This iterative process of subsequent cycles is neatly presented in the "*Spiral of Action Research Cycles*" put forward by Coghlan and Brannick (2005, p. 24) in *Figure 1*, below.



**FIGURE 1: Spiral of Action Research Cycles**

Reason and Bradbury (2008, p.4), have equally cited the applicability of action research, stating that it "is about working toward practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless". They go on to affirm that "the process of inquiry can be as important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process" (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.5). Furthermore, the aforementioned authors make a distinction between first-, second-, and third-person research practice, in the field of action research, which they describe "as a family of approaches" (Reason and Bradbury (2008, p.7). The first practice is primarily focused on personal change in one's life or professional setting, which is considered subjective. The second-person practice usually involves a problem of mutual concern, with some form of limited participation of other members in an intersubjective process, while the third-person research is considered a more objective process that involves the participation of a wider community to be able to generalise findings for large-scale change. This study focuses on a *second-person research practice*,

as it involves a small number of people in a specific international school setting.

Moreover, there are two general approaches to performing action research, namely, participatory action research and practical action research. Mertler (2019, p.19), explains that the "purpose of participatory action research is to improve the quality of the lives of individuals who make up organizations, communities, and families. Its focus is on empowering individuals and groups to improve their lives and to bring about social change, on some level". Whereas, "practical action research focuses on addressing a specific problem or need in a classroom, school, or similar community. It is much more about the *"how-to"* of conducting action research, as opposed to the philosophical approach of participatory action research" (Mertler, 2019, p. 19). For the purpose of this study, the methodological approach chosen was that of *practical action research*, because of the researchers' commitment "to continuous professional development and school improvement through a process of critical reflection" (Mertler, 2019, p. 20).

Having established that this research is both practical in its applicability and was studied from a second-person approach, it is important to understand the rationale for choosing action research as a method. As stated by Lewin (1946), as well as Reason and Bradbury (2008), it was found that research leading to generalisable theory, not action would not serve the purpose of this paper, as the aim of the study is for change to come about. Moreover, as this thesis is being produced for the Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK), with the goal being the practical application of theory, the research method chosen intends to do exactly that. Moilanen et al. (2022, p.78) clarify the purpose of action research as "changing reality", and that it "is not interested only in how things are but in how they should be".

More specifically the method used and the findings produced aim to promote changes within the hiring practice and consequently the school culture, in its immediacy. On account of action research being participatory and reflective, it allows for the researcher to be an active participant in the hiring process, while

exploring the problem deeply in its setting, and facilitating the changes to take place, as well as the possible future implications of such changes. Added to that, it was found that this type of qualitative approach would better serve the purpose of this study, as it allows for more explanation of the complexities, intricacies and nuances of the hiring process and school culture, native to the AICS than a quantitative approach would. As there are so few people involved in the hiring process (see the following section), it would not be possible to garner enough statistically valid data to make a generalisable claim, which is another reason to have opted for a qualitative approach. Ultimately, action research "is highly adaptable, allowing researchers to mold their analysis to their individual needs and implement practical individual-level changes", as well as providing "an immediate and actionable path forward for solving entrenched issues", together with it being "very empowering" ... "allowing participants to effect that change in ways meaningful to their [setting]" (George, 2023).

### **3.2 Participants and Setting**

The setting for this study is the AICS and more specifically the Secondary School of the AICS, which accounted for 117 staff members at the start of data collection in January 2023. There are over 30 different nationalities among staff members schoolwide, who work over two campuses in the city of Amsterdam. As previously mentioned the school has seen exponential growth over the last few years and none more so than in preparation for the 2023-2024 school year, which saw 18 new classes added across primary and secondary school, which necessitated the hiring of over 50 new staff members. This study though, only focuses on the secondary school, which saw the opening of 11 new classes, from IBMYP through to IBDP, and necessitated over 30 new hires for the 2023-2024 school year. The staff in secondary are all line-managed by a Head of Campus, with the researcher being one of two Heads of Campus and they are assisted by Deputy Heads of Campus for each respective campus. All secondary staff are also subdivided into departments, or subject areas, as it is known at the AICS. All subject

areas have a lead coordinator and it is these coordinators who are participants in this research, as they were asked to take on a more proactive role in the hiring process, as part of this study. The subject-area coordinators (SACOs) were more specifically invited to take part in the interview process. These individuals provided diverse perspectives on the hiring process and its influence on school culture. Four of the eight subject-area coordinators participated in an interview, as part of this study. The reason only four were chosen to participate, is that these members were involved in more than two hires, giving them more valid experience than the other coordinators, who may have only been involved in one hiring cycle. Added to that, the Deputy Head of Campus for the South Campus was also invited to take part in the interview process, as she had recently been promoted from SACO to Deputy Head of Campus. The participants, listed in the table below, were all given a pseudonym, to keep the responses anonymous. Furthermore, four other staff members are listed in the participants' list, including the two Heads of Campus, and two Deputy Heads of Campus, as these members of staff were all involved in the recruitment process at the AICS, at some stage.

A couple of caveats must be noted at this point, as the Head of Campus for the South East Campus went on maternity leave in October 2022, meaning that she was unable to take an active part in the recruitment process. The Deputy Head of Campus for the South East campus was invited to take on the role of Interim Head of Campus, while Elena was away on maternity leave. Added to that, the Deputy Head of Campus for the South Campus, Mary equally went on maternity leave, but this was in January 2023 and this gap was temporarily covered by an Interim Deputy Head of Campus, Diane from January 2023. This all serves to explain the setting of the school and the context within which the 2023-2024 hiring process took place, which was disrupted by various staff changes.

*TABLE 1 - Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>
Linda	Head of Department/Subject-Area Coordinator for Language and Literature
Tobias	Head of Department/Subject-Area Coordinator for Individuals and Societies
Karen	Head of Department/Subject-Area Coordinator for Sciences
Jade	Head of Department/Subject-Area Coordinator for Mathematics
Elena	Head of Campus - South East Campus
Kieran	Head of Campus - South Campus
Mark	Deputy Head of Campus - South East Campus
Mary	Deputy Head of Campus - South Campus (Pre-Maternity Cover)
Diana	Interim Deputy Head of Campus - South Campus - (Post-Maternity Cover)

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

Data for the study was collected through two primary qualitative methods, namely in-depth interviews and observations. More specifically, the in-depth interviews took on a semi-structured nature, with most questions being predetermined (see Table 2), in both content and order, but allowing for extra questions or comments to be discussed, if the need arose. As mentioned in the previous section, four heads of department or subject-area coordinators were interviewed, in 30 to 45-minute in-depth interviews, between August and October 2023, which was after the hiring season took place, from January to July 2023. The reason that the subject-area coordinators were interviewed after the close of the hiring season, is because of the reflective nature of action research, allowing for the participants to take a step back and reflect on their role and participation in the recruitment process, without being distracted by the process itself.

*TABLE 2 - Interview Questions*

1a.	<i>How would you define the current hiring process and practices, including strengths and weaknesses, at the AICS?</i>
1b.	<i>What do you feel has changed, if at all, in the hiring process in the last 12 months?</i>
2a.	<i>How can AICS' hiring process be improved in selecting staff to positively contribute to school culture?</i>
2b.	<i>What, if anything, would need to change in the hiring process for this to take place?</i>
3.	<i>How can modifying AICS's hiring process affect school culture?</i>
4a.	<i>How efficient would you rate AICS's current hiring process, from 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high?</i>
4b.	<i>Can you explain your rating?</i>
5.	<i>What are the key challenges and opportunities for improving the efficiency of hiring processes in international schools (e.g. AICS)?</i>

The heads of department were initially contacted via telephone to discuss the interview and explain the rationale, which was subsequently followed up with an email and an invitation to voluntarily meet for the 30 to 45-minute in-depth interview. Consent was obtained from all participants and they were equally informed of their right to withdraw from the process at any point without repercussions. Furthermore, confidentiality was discussed and maintained by anonymising the participants' data, with the aim of all participants being as honest and transparent as possible.

The second qualitative method utilised was observation, which aimed to understand the current hiring practices and processes in real-time. Throughout the planning, action and observation phases, detailed notes were recorded in a journal, with reflective thoughts, which is comparable to a field diary. Notes were equally taken when reviewing any existing documentation related to recruitment. The reason for choosing this second method is that Moilanen et al. (2022, p.80) stated that "[o]bservation may be one of the most effective methods of data collection in action research. The research material can also include documents and other written records. Also, written diary entries of

participants can be useful because they describe events and actions in the target organization".

The rationale behind collecting the data via observation and interviews was to replicate the iterative nature of action research and collect data in different phases or cycles:

- Phase 1: Planning — identifying and observing current hiring practices, as well as document analysis, to better understand the possible inefficiencies in the process (August to December 2022);
- Phase 2: Action — implementation of changes and new hiring practices based on the findings of the planning phase — observations, diarising and reflective journaling were undertaken to gather the data (January to July 2023);
- Phase 3: Observation — monitoring and documenting the possible effects of the new hiring practices on school culture (July to September 2023)
- Phase 4: Reflection — gathering feedback, through interviews of participants, analysing the data and refining practices to implement during the new hiring season (August to October 2023).

### **3.4 Data analysis and interpretation**

Thematic analysis, an inductive process, was chosen as the primary and only method for data analysis, due to its flexibility in identifying, analysing and describing patterns, or in this case themes, within the data gathered. "An inductive approach to data coding and analysis is a 'bottom-up' approach, and is driven by what is in the data. What this means is that the codes and themes derive from the content of the data themselves – so that what is 'mapped' by the researcher during analysis closely matches the content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 3). Both the interview transcripts and detailed notes from the observations were analysed using thematic analysis to make meaning of the qualitative data.

The thematic analysis process followed various steps. At first, the researcher needed to organise and familiarise themselves with the data, which took the form of transcribing the audio files of the interviews, reading and rereading the transcribed data, as well as adding initial thoughts.

The next step required the generation of initial codes, by systematically coding the data to cluster the data pertinent to each code. This was followed by the phase of grouping codes into potential themes, by identifying common words and coupling it to all data relevant to each potential theme. The themes were then reviewed against the dataset, from both interviews and observations, to determine whether a coherent pattern materialised. As common words and themes emerged, the themes were then reviewed, revised and key themes were named, to illustrate the overall story that the data was telling.

In essence, the data was categorised and interpreted to develop meaning within the international school context, related to the hiring process and school culture. To ensure a holistic and rich understanding of the nuances of the impact of hiring practices on school culture, the interview and observation data were triangulated during the analysis. Ultimately, compelling and relevant examples were selected to highlight meaningful themes, which were related back to the research question and literature review to produce this research report.

### **3.5 Limitations, trustworthiness and ethical considerations**

The above paragraphs have detailed the benefits of using action research as a methodology, including its flexibility and adaptability. It allows "researchers to mold their analysis to their individual needs and implement practical individual-level changes", as well as providing "an immediate and actionable path forward for solving entrenched issues, rather than suggesting complicated, longer-term solutions rooted in complex data" (George, 2023).

However, it is equally important to highlight the limitations rooted in this methodology. The aforementioned flexibility, which allows for context-specific research means that it has limited applicability and generalisability to other settings, or is even difficult to replicate. This study's singular focus on AICS' hiring processes and culture, may not be representative of other international schools in Amsterdam, let alone around the world. For this reason, George (2023) states that action research is "often not considered theoretically rigorous due to the power the researcher holds in drawing conclusions". The latter point also points to the potential for researcher bias, given the immersive nature of this methodology. Action research is highly susceptible to selection and sampling bias, with this particular study inviting only subject-area coordinators involved in two or more hiring cycles, who may have felt pressured to contribute. Following on from that, this research runs the risk of social desirability bias (Scribbr, n.d.), with respondents potentially giving the researcher answers they believe the researcher would like to hear, especially considering that the participants are line-managed by the researcher. This bias is hopefully mitigated by the guarantee of anonymity, the request for consent and the right to withdraw from the process at any time. Additionally, confirmation bias which "refers to our tendency to look for evidence confirming what we already believe" (Nikolopoulou, 2023), is another risk that this researcher is aware of and has tried temper. Along with running the risk of potential biases, the influence of external factors on school culture is not properly accounted for in this study.

It is hoped that the transparent articulation of the limitations and procedures adds to the trustworthiness of the research and data analysis. Furthermore, to bolster the validity of the research findings, it was previously mentioned that the interview and observation data would be triangulated. Member checking, which involves allowing interview participants to review their transcripts and provide feedback, was also utilised, which should add to the credibility. Other verification strategies adopted to enhance the credibility of the findings, included the use of a reflective journal to address potential biases, as well as increase confirmability through critical self-reflection of observations. The researcher has also spent over two years at the AICS, building relationships,

and trust, along with gaining a comprehensive understanding of the school context and its culture, to add credibility to this study. It is assumed that, along with the aforementioned credibility strategies, a nuanced and detailed description of the context and findings will allow readers to evaluate the transferability of the insights gained at the AICS to other international school contexts.

Likewise, ethical considerations and protocols were strictly adhered to, having submitted the study proposal and its procedures for ethics approval before starting the data collection, to ensure that the confidentiality, anonymity and ethical treatment of participants were maintained. Mitigation of insider bias (Scribbr, n.d.) was also necessary due to the dual role of the researcher and Head of Campus, which was achieved by maintaining a reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis to examine the researcher's assumptions.

This chapter outlined and justified the use of the action research methodology in this study, detailing the procedures for data collection and thematic analysis. The following chapter will look into the findings derived and themes that emerged from the data analysis.

## **4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS**

Having established the context, which was set within the literature and discussed the research methods, this chapter will delve into the findings of the data collection and analysis. This will be done in a narrative form, highlighting key themes that emerged, which will be supported by appropriate evidence, in the discussion of AICS' hiring process, past and present, and how this has potentially impacted school culture. The objective was to deeply understand strengths and pain points in AICS' current hiring methods and how modifications may affect organisational culture. The section below puts forward the findings from the qualitative analysis of data collected through interviews and observations at the AICS. Analysis of the extensive interview transcripts, as well as observational notes, using an inductive thematic analysis, revealed five key themes related to the state of AICS' hiring process: (1) streamlining and standardising the hiring process; (2) involvement of diverse stakeholders; (3) cultural fit and diversity; (4) balance between efficiency and quality; and (5) professional development and bias recognition. This section synthesises the findings and evidence related to each theme. Following the action research cycle, of planning, action, observing and reflection, it is noted that the planning phase focused on what existed in terms of the hiring process at the AICS. The action phase then looked at the initial changes made to this process, and the observation phase monitored the effects of the initial changes, including on school culture, whereas the reflection phase considered the findings of the observations to offer recommendations for future changes to the recruitment process, which is mostly dealt with in the following chapter.

### **4.1 Streamlining and Standardising the Hiring Process**

This section will discuss the theme of streamlining and standardisation in the hiring process which is directly related to the overall topic of efficiency and is what this paper aims to unravel and improve. It is clear that a more efficient hiring process, which aims at getting the right candidates for the right

vacancies, in a timely manner, needs a clear, structured and standardised structure, with clearer role definitions and tasks for all stakeholders involved in recruiting.

Much of the planning phase of the action research cycle, which took place between August and December 2022, was spent identifying and observing the hiring process and practices, inherited when the researcher joined the AICS, in anticipation of their first full hiring season, to gain an understanding of the possible inefficiencies or misconceptions about the process. When this researcher was originally hired as a Head of Campus in October 2021, no clear hiring process was presented in the handover period from October 2021 to December 2021. Though involved in some interviews for staff starting in January 2022, it was unclear which steps had been taken prior to the interview and which were to be taken afterwards. The overall impression encountered was a lack of organisation or clear guidelines, feeling more like an ad hoc process, depending on the vacancy published. During the initial months of employment, no overarching documentation was presented regarding a recruitment policy. Moreover, there did not seem to be an overall vision in planning for recruitment needed in the coming school year, contrary to other international schools that the researcher had previously worked at. The reasoning put forward for a lack of forward planning was that staff members only had notice periods of three months, meaning that they would only have to tell the AICS they would be leaving by the May preceding the new school year. Thus the question begged as to why there was a lack of planning for the coming school year.

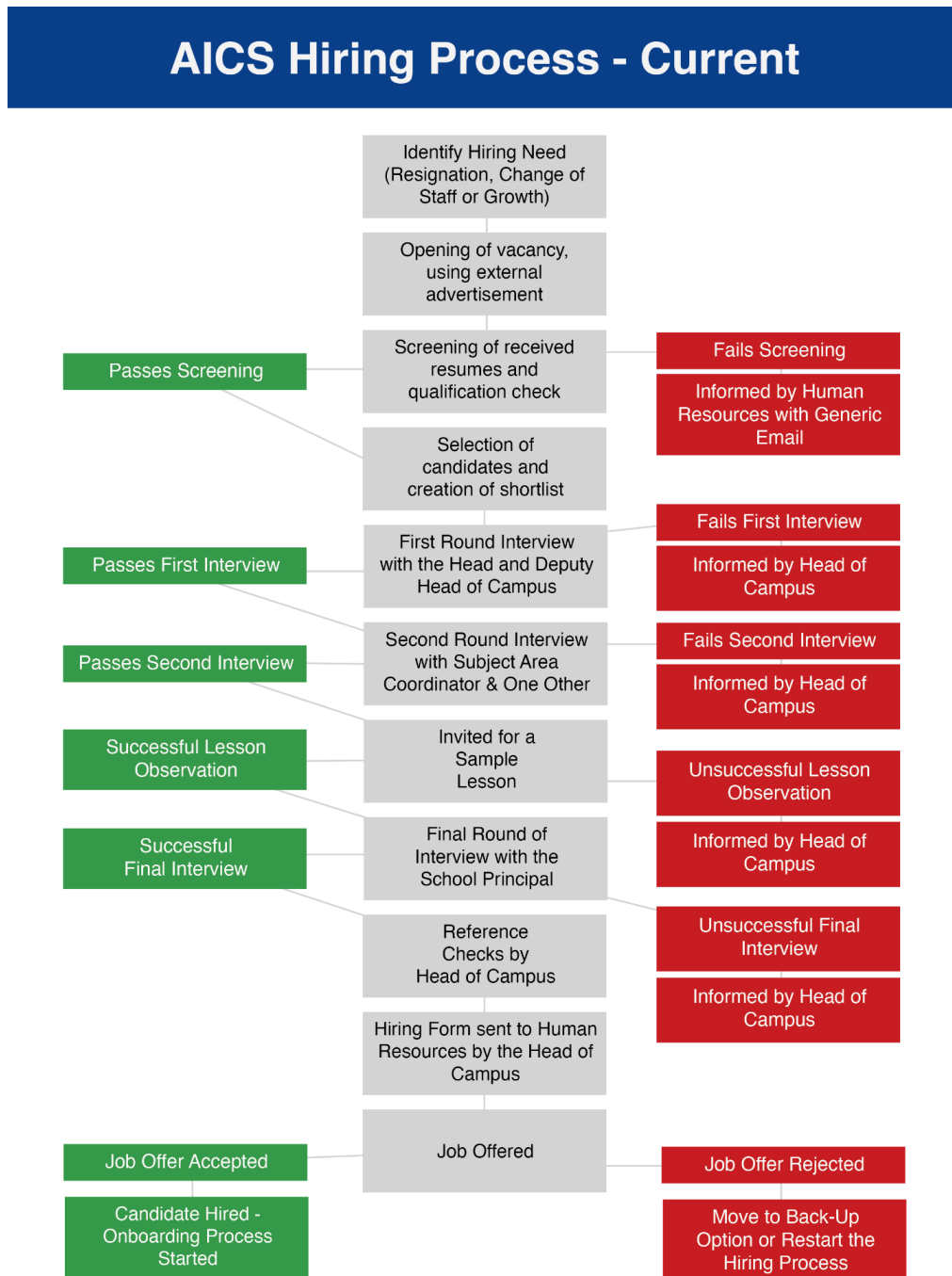
It was not until the researcher decided to do some research on the school's internal shared file storage system, Google Drive, that some semblance of a process was discovered. A file by the name of "Update Recruitment Procedure - DUO/qualification" dated November 2020 was discovered, which outlined a basic eight-step process, without more details:

1. Opening of vacancy, using external advertisement
2. Screening of received resumes, selection of candidates and shortlist
3. Qualification check (DUO - Dienst Uitvoering Overheid/ Government Implementation Service of the Ministry of Education)
4. Interviewing
5. Lesson observation
6. Job offer
7. References checked and received\*
8. Hiring forms are to be sent to Human Resources

Though this process recorded in the document did not offer more detail, it was a starting point to work from, even if the researcher was of the opinion that certain of the steps were in the wrong order. Through more research and discussions, another document was discovered in early 2022, namely the "Recruitment & Selection Protocol", written by and for the Esprit Schools Group, of which AICS is part. This document is not publicly available through the Esprit Schools Group and was found on the shared internal file storage system. This protocol affirms to "[m]ake sure the procedure is careful and clear, with the aim of appointing the right person in the right position", yet also that the "HR department designs central frameworks for recruitment and selection" (Esprit Schools, 2015, p. 4). It is made clear in this short protocol that the human resource department of each school is responsible for creating the selection protocol, as this document does not detail a clear process, beyond some ethical and legal obligations to adhere to.

The last document to be found during the initial phase of research into the topic of recruitment was the "AICS Primary School Hiring Process", which was started in February 2021 and was recently updated in November 2023, confirming it as a living document, regularly being updated. It is the most detailed of the three documents analysed, with sample email communication contact and questions offered, yet the steps to be taken are not clearly written out, such as in the form of a flowchart.

The initial document analysis, as well as the further observations leading up to the first full hiring season which took place during the planning phase, make it clear that there is no clear, standardised and streamlined recruitment process that currently exists and is to be implemented schoolwide and across both campuses. However, if we were to visualise what the current hiring process looks like, it would look like what can be seen on the next page, in *Figure 2*.



**FIGURE 2: AICS' Current Hiring Process visualised in a Flowchart**

The lack of clarity and variability that exists in the hiring process as well as between sequential interview stages is something that was clearly highlighted by the participants in the interviews for this paper. Linda, the SACO for the Language and Literature department, expressed the “redundancy between the SACO interviews and prior first round interviews by Heads of Campus” while Karen, the SACO for the sciences, described fluctuations in experiences, stating it can feel like “hit or miss... there are a lot of cogs, a lot of factors and a lot of people involved”. The need for a more streamlined process with clearer role definitions was a recurring theme. For instance, Tobias, the SACO for individuals and societies, noted the lack of clarity in role allocations, suggesting the school develop a flowchart "so that everybody knows what the next steps in the process are and to allocate not specific people but functions to the task". Similarly, Katherine expressed concerns about the lack of efficiency due to "low standardisation and the number of people involved". These reflections point towards a lack of structure and clarity.

The variability and inconsistencies that exist in the process itself and between the various interview stages, resulting from ill-defined roles and procedures as well as communication gaps between stakeholders, lead to candidates having different experiences. Jade, the SACO for mathematics, highlighted that within the “inconsistent” approach, there is often uncertainty regarding which individual should take the next step at various phases. Linda agreed that the gap in communication between the various interviews and between the Heads of Campuses and SACOs led to duplicated efforts, or even surprises when she stated "I often do not know what is discussed in first interviews, which has led to a couple of instances of me having egg on my face in the second interview, and the candidates mentioning that they have already had a similar question... which gives off the feeling to candidates that we do not have effective communication channels". This led Linda to suggest that the process would be much more efficient, with her not feeling like her time is being wasted, if there were sets of standard questions for the first and the second interview.

Lastly, Mary, who previously worked as SACO, but is currently Deputy Head of Campus described the process as "structured, yet time-consuming",

highlighting the time it takes to thoroughly review all resumes, before drafting up a shortlist to ensure the candidates do not only meet qualifications for the vacancy, but also fit culturally and have potential for growth.

Though changes were made in the hiring process during the action phase, between January and July 2023, including more proactive involvement of SACOs early in the process, the unexpected staff changes to the secondary leadership team, which disrupted the recruitment process by lowering the experience in the selection committee, as well as the sheer volume of new hires needed, it is acknowledged that the secondary hiring process was not properly recorded, merely communicated to the participants. The changes illustrate an evolving and developing approach to hiring, seeking to involve various perspectives in the decision-making process. However, one which is not yet sufficiently standardised nor streamlined, and equally needs more transparent communication. The reflection phase, which will be discussed in more depth in the conclusion chapter, will highlight the recommendations for the changes needed to the recruitment process.

## **4.2 Involvement of Diverse Stakeholders**

The second major theme identified in thematic analysis is how the involvement of diverse stakeholders, at different levels, including the increased involvement of SACOs and subject teachers, is viewed in a positive light, as they bring diverse perspectives to the table, as well as subject-specific and team-specific insights.

It was noted during the planning phase, between August and December 2022, as well as prior to that, via observation and document analysis, that there was a lack of formal structure in place at the AICS, which consequently meant that there was a lack of clarity on roles and tasks in the recruitment process. The hiring process inherited by the researcher was very centralised in the role of the Head of Campus. During the early stages of the researcher's tenure, including the handover phase, it was noted that the previous Heads of

Campus led the process in more of a top-down approach, which seemed to exclude diverse stakeholders. Prior to the planning phase, from January to July 2022, the top-down process was perceived as chaotic and ad hoc, with minimal involvement of the SACOs. This may be explained by the fact that only two hires were needed to be made in the period from January to July 2022, as well as the fact that SACO task hours equated to a total of 160 hours over the school year, or 4 hours per week, to coordinate a department, as well as potentially be involved in the hiring process. It was deemed that involving SACOs in these two hiring processes may be asking too much of them.

During the planning and action phase, from August 2022 until July 2023, it was deemed, through observation and conversations with SACOs that task hours needed to be adjusted if they were to play a more active role in the hiring of new teachers. Though this change in task hours was not implemented until August 2023, in the observation phase, the needed change was identified and conceptualised during the action phase. As such, SACO task hours were extended to a total of 280 hours over the school year or 7 hours per week, in order to give them more time to be involved in the hiring process actively.

The involvement of SACOs in the process is in line with the guidelines put forward in Esprit School's recruitment and selection protocol, which states that in "the case of a vacancy for a teaching position, the committee consists of a member of the school management or a senior teacher/team leader, a member of the department, and, on request, an HR consultant" (Esprit Schools, 2015, p. 4). The instruction is clear, that diverse stakeholders must be part of the selection committee, yet this was not formally implemented in AICS' hiring process until the action phase of this study, between January and July 2022.

A more decentralised approach was adopted for two reasons. The first reason is that it was noted, during observations, that SACOs were not structurally invited to take part in the interview process, but this was done more on an ad hoc basis. Secondly, SACOs were more proactively requested to be involved from January 2022 onwards on a needs basis. The secondary school, with 11

new classes opening up across two campuses, needed to hire 31 new teachers to cover for the expansive growth in the student body. This was noted in the interview with Linda when she stated that "it might have been because of the high volume of new hires, ...I think we interviewed around 30 or 40 people in the last like six months for the break and we hired eight new teachers in the Language and Literature team alone". She added that "it kind of felt it was like all hands on deck".

All participants touched upon the increased involvement of SACOs in the recruitment process. Linda emphasised the importance of SACOs playing a leading role, or as she stated "being leading agents", in the hiring process, as they possess a clear understanding of the team's needs. Expanding the involvement further, Linda argued, would lead to more targeted and appropriate hires, positively affecting team dynamics and school culture. Similar to Linda's emphasis on the significant role of SACOs, Jade also stressed the importance of involving SACOs earlier on in the process. This stems from her impression that SACOs often find out about vacancies and hiring decisions later than they should, which can hinder effective collaboration and decision-making. Equally, Mary noted that there had been a shift in the hiring process towards hiring earlier in the school year, with SACOs being more heavily involved, which she viewed positively due to their expertise in the subject area and their understanding of the needs of their team. Though Karen appreciated the increased involvement of SACOs in the hiring process and the recognition of their opinions, she suggested that SACOs should have a significant say in hiring decisions, even a veto, as they work more closely with new hires. Tobias took it a step further, underlying the importance of involving subject teachers, not just SACOs, in the recruitment process, as they can provide valuable insights into a candidate's suitability for the specific subject area, the team dynamics and consequently a strong cultural fit. Furthermore, Tobias highlighted the collaborative approach across both campuses and roles in the hiring process emphasising the 'one school, two campuses' mentality, underscoring the unified values-based approach which plays into developing a positive school culture.

Following on from the latter point, a number of difficulties were indicated related to the complexity of operating two separate campuses making coordination, communication and streamlined processes more difficult with more diverse viewpoints involved in decisions. Jade noted the challenges when stating that "because there are two campuses, it is a very large community, making the hiring process more lengthy and getting to a decision becomes harder". It was observed that operating two separate yet interlinked campuses has introduced obstacles related to effective communication and streamlining of one unified process. The increasing number of people involved across campus, as well as the complexity of bringing everyone together to reach hiring decisions and coordinating hiring workflows across campuses, even with advanced technology, requires much more effort relative to a single centralised location. While this is not inherently negative, the AICS' decentralised facilities do present inherent structural barriers to seamlessly supporting hiring, suggesting further potential changes may be needed to simplify coordination.

This section has established that there has been a significant shift in the involvement of diverse stakeholders, especially the SACOs, indicating a move from a top-down approach to a more inclusive, collaborative hiring practice, but one that still needs further changes. Tobias did in fact raise the point of whether the suggested changes of including more subject teachers would in fact lead to more diversity in staff recruitment.

### **4.3 Cultural fit and diversity**

Another major theme to come out of the data analysis is the concept of cultural fit. As was illustrated in the literature review, cultural fit can have an impact on the long-term success of an organisation, as well as the individuals who work in it. The suggestion is that if the alignment between an individual's values and beliefs closely aligns with the organisation's values, the employee is more likely to adapt quicker to their new environment, is more likely to stay long term and will likely show more job satisfaction and perform to a higher standard,

which consequently can have an impact on overall organisational success. As previously noted, assessing for cultural fit is an essential part of the recruitment and onboarding process. Therefore, an efficient hiring process necessitates practices to determine whether there is a cultural or values match, verifying that new hires align with the existing school culture and values, as well as positively contribute to said culture.

Before digging deeper into the results of the in-depth interviews and observations, it is important to establish which values new hires are being asked to align with. The AICS is a Dutch international school, that follows the IB curriculum, based in Amsterdam and the school's values are reflective of this context. The four underlying values that underpin the goal "which is to provide our students with the highest possible quality of teaching and learning" (Our School - AICS, n.d.) are *diversity*, *integrity*, *inquiry* and *community*. These values play a role in every policy developed and drive decisions made, but are equally part of the organisation's culture and form part of the expectation for every stakeholder who plays a role in the school. As such, the selection committee of the AICS in the recruitment process needs to assess if there is a cultural match by probing for diversity, integrity, inquiry and community.

Analysing the results of the data, the importance of cultural fit is emphasised, but there is also a call for greater diversity among staff, with the diversity to be reflected in both the hiring process and the school's broader culture. However, Tobias noted the difficulty in describing a unified school culture, suggesting that the school's mission and vision are known but not always felt uniformly across both campuses, subject areas or even between leadership and teaching teams. He affirms the need for a well-defined, shared culture, understood by all staff, as being important in the hiring process, as it affects how well new hires integrate into the school's environment and subject teams.

The findings, through observation and interviewing, reveal a complex interplay between the hiring process and the school culture at the AICS. Historically, the lack of a streamlined process with clearly defined roles seemed to have impacted the school culture, potentially leading to

inconsistencies in hiring quality and team dynamics. However, a more recent shift towards a more inclusive approach, involving diverse stakeholders, indicates a positive cultural change, felt by staff members. This change towards a more inclusive process has fostered a more collaborative and democratic school environment. Linda clearly discussed this point when arguing for a more team-centric approach to hiring, where the entire team feels involved in the process, not just the SACOs and Heads of Campus. According to Linda, having the SACO be the leading agent in the process and more actively involving subject teachers would foster better integration, socialisation and cohesion between new and existing staff. Similar to Linda, Jade believed that improvements in the hiring process would positively affect school culture by ensuring that new hires are well-suited to the existing team dynamics and school environment. More specifically, Jade discussed cultural fit in the team, beyond the overall school cultural fit, as the team is aware of the specific attributes and skillset needed in the team, and the behaviours that would match well with the current team, which in turn would positively affect team morale. Beyond a like-for-like replacement, Jade insinuated that the team, led by the SACO, could identify either missing or needed competencies or qualities that would add to the team, rather than be a burden to the team, which would positively impact the team. She suggested that certain types of candidates, who would not be a cultural or team fit, could already be eliminated using a well-defined process and pre-set questions in the hiring process.

Interestingly, both Jade and Mary mentioned that a potential method to use when looking for cultural fit is what is known as scenario-based, or reality-based, interviewing where the interviewers ask the applicant to explain how they actually reacted in a specific situation, which if matched up with the values espoused by and competencies needed in the school would lead to a better match. Mary went on to put an emphasis on the significance of including, or building in, diverse perspectives into these reality-based interviews, in order to bring in more diverse staff who in turn can help teach and develop the needed diverse perspectives mentioned.

In addition, Jade championed the need for more rigorous vetting of candidates early on in the process through thorough reference checks aligned with school values, and Mary similarly highlighted the importance of thoroughly reviewing resumes to ensure candidates not only meet the qualifications for the job but also fit culturally and have potential for growth. Both of these practices clearly need to be tightened up, as well as the potential need for a pre-screening questionnaire to prevent cultural misfits or ineffective teachers from slipping through. On the subject of ineffective teachers, Karen cited the case of a physics teacher, whose contract was not renewed after the first year, due to his negative attitude, ineffective teaching practices and general lack of motivation, which she believed could have been avoided if better feedback loops had existed between the interviews and better vetting of his references would have taken place. Jade, Mary and Karen certainly made a compelling case for better pre-screening of candidates, bemoaning the lack of robust reference checks or access to telling questionnaire answers that would reveal candidates' cultural fit beyond content mastery or skill compatibility.

A pattern that emerged from the dataset that fits this section of cultural preparedness and the need for more diversity, is a perception from SACOs, including Jade, Linda and Karen, of a sequence of hiring mismatches, where they were not always consulted on the team needs, as well as not having enough input from the start of the process on ideal candidate qualities. This pattern of misalignment between school and team needs was observed as a recurrent discrepancy between the competencies advertised in the vacancies and the actual qualities desired in the team for more harmonious assimilation and positive cultural contribution. The researcher acknowledges and has observed that the initial resume screening and primary interview are led by the Heads of Campus who mainly evaluate candidates on academic qualifications, experience, and logistical considerations, while later stages facilitated by SACOs assess subject-specific competencies. Yet, it was noted that this division of emphasis between Heads of Campus and SACOs can and has led to mixed results in hiring. Karen, among others, argued for the use of a hiring rubric

that could track the candidate throughout the process highlighting for example that they would be a good fit from a teaching and learning perspective, experience viewpoint or even personality fit, if matched up against the school values, could alleviate some of the misalignment. The reflective observation highlighted that without ongoing and deep collaboration between all participants in the recruitment process, grounded in more holistic evaluative criteria, certain hires may fail to address overall team needs.

Finally, it was observed and acknowledged by participants in the hiring process that decisions made in the recruitment process bear significant downstream consequences on school culture, team cohesion and team dynamics. Jade stated that improvements and enhanced practices can lead to positive cultural ripple effects, such as better onboarding of new hires, who smoothly assimilate and strengthen group dynamics can subsequently “trickle down to the rest of the school”. In a similar vein, Mary suggested how increased professionalism in hiring practices could boost the external reputation of the school and the applicant pool, as well as attract higher quality candidates, who drive up expectations and standards, which consequently influences school culture. Likewise, Tobias described how inviting greater staff involvement in the hiring process would nurture teachers’ sense of ownership regarding new hires and motivate earlier and more positive engagement with them. Thus, continuously perfecting hiring practices, represents a pathway to stimulating school cultural enhancements, including better team dynamics, more staff diversity, higher staff retention, more workload balance and general morale.

In summary, the nuanced understanding of cultural fit, which now includes considerations of diversity, suggests the AICS is shifting towards a more holistic and inclusive school culture, with this shift being crucial for an international school, where diversity is both a reality and an asset.

#### **4.4 Professional Development**

Though the previous three themes are seen as major or overarching themes, some other minor themes were identified, such as professional development. Both in the observations and individual accounts, the need for professional development was recognised.

Throughout and prior to the planning phase it was discovered that none of the leadership team, nor any of the participants on the secondary hiring committee, had experience teaching or even working in other international schools. This was quite evident in the early stages of the researcher's tenure, as forward planning and proactive recruitment were not observed, yet these are essential hiring practices of international schools. This was made even more obvious in conversations with the leadership team who were unaware of some of the most reputable organisations that help in the recruitment of international teachers, including International Schools Services ([www.iss.edu/](http://www.iss.edu/)), Search Associates ([www.searchassociates.com](http://www.searchassociates.com)) and The International Educator ([www.tieonline.com](http://www.tieonline.com)), to name but a few.

By their very nature, international schools are transient and the same is true for the employees who work in such institutions, so hiring needs are different to local or public schools. Unfortunately, none of the above-mentioned people had a deep understanding of common standards in recruitment in international schools around the world, such as earlier hiring seasons, and encouraging staff who plan to leave to announce this early without negative repercussions. As previously mentioned, hiring felt quite ad hoc and reactive, rather than intentional and purposeful. This gap in international experience and practices identified could be remedied by either having staff genuinely experience and work in other international schools, or attending professional development geared towards international schools and their hiring needs. Though the need was understood and acknowledged by the leadership team, only the researcher went on courses specifically focused on the needs of international schools, by taking courses offered through The Principal's Training Centre, including the 'Leadership and Team Dynamics' course, which focused on building

effective and impactful teams, as well as persuasive means of staff motivation, among other goals (The Principals' Training Center for International School Leadership, n.d.).

The call for professional development was not only observed but equally noticed by Mary, who suggested the need for professional development focusing on "effective questioning" and "hidden biases". Having attended the IB Global Conference in early October 2023, with a number of other leaders from the AICS, she identified the need for more specific professional development on diversity, which she suggested should be integrated into the current recruitment process using the aforementioned reality-based interviewing method. Jade, who also championed developing structured scenario-based interviews that align with the specific profile and needs of the school, agreed that professional development, when undertaken would be most effective if it were done as a team so that rubrics, questions and structures could be co-created, rather than imposed. Both Jade and Mary went on to mention that professional development explicitly focused on efficient and effective hiring, aimed at creating specific rubrics and structures for interviews, as well as understanding inherent biases, would enhance overall hiring practices, which in turn would ensure a more diverse and suitable selection of candidates, with a potential knock-on effect on school culture.

Likewise, Tobias and Linda highlighted the need for in-house professional development on the tools that are used throughout the hiring process, including the recruitment software, HR Office ([www.hroffice.eu](http://www.hroffice.eu)). They both stated the need for group training on this tool so that the hiring committee could be aligned on its use and expectations. With all participants properly trained on the tool, it would have a clear impact on the efficiency of the whole process.

The above insight on professional development sheds light on the growing awareness within the AICS about the subtle complexities of the hiring process, especially concerning diversity and inclusivity with such an

approach being pivotal in shaping a school culture that values diverse perspectives and equitable opportunities.

#### **4.5 Balance between efficiency and quality**

The last theme to come out of the analysis, which again is a more subtle theme, is the balance between efficiency and quality in the hiring process. While the goal of the hiring process, and this study, is for the recruitment process to be more efficient, it should not be at the cost of quality of hires. Linda noted this when she claimed that the AICS started its hiring process relatively late, in January, compared to other international schools, who start as early as October, suggesting that initiating the process earlier may make the AICS more competitive in the international market and consequently attract more qualitative talent. It was however observed by the researcher that prior to the planning period of this study, from August to December 2022, hiring was only initiated in May for the academic year starting in August. This is one of the reasons that the hiring process was brought forward to January during the action phase of the study, implementing these changes as of January 2023.

The issue of not compromising on the quality of hires was also introduced by Mary, who claimed that while striving for efficiency, this should not jeopardise the quality of candidates. Two opposing examples were brought forward. She mentioned that a thorough interview process should not mean that you need to continue interviewing someone when it is not a match, as this would be a waste of time for all involved. Conversely, she noted that if a candidate is the right match, the process should be fast-tracked with all the energy going into this particular candidate rather than also focusing on others for the sake of the process. Here again, Linda had a similar point when she declared that "it leads to a bit of frustration because it feels like my time is being wasted when I am interviewing someone who I do not see being successful within the school". On the question of interviewing, Mary

discussed the redundancy of repeating questions in multiple interviews, as it not only seems that there is a lack of communication between the participants in the process, but it is equally unnecessary and time-consuming for all involved.

On a similar yet distinct note, Karen identified the challenge of staff time availability, especially SACOs, for the hiring process which has delayed the process in the past and the need for flexibility to be built in. However, she recognised the significant opportunities in improving the process, such as faster hiring of suitable candidates and enhanced departmental confidence, if structured time would be set aside in SACO's schedules on a weekly basis to complete the process in a transparent and clearly defined manner. It was added that the efficiency of the process and quality of hires could further be enhanced if there were more specific job postings and tailored interview questions for each round, promoting better team fit. This infers that the balance between efficiency and thoroughness in the recruitment process has significant cultural implications. Efficient yet thoughtful hiring practices are crucial in building a competent and harmonious team, which in turn positively influences the overall school climate.

The importance of rigorous vetting of candidates through reference checks, alignment with school values and lesson observations was previously noted by Jade, which would help prevent hiring mishaps, yet Tobias recognised that an extensive vetting process can be very time-consuming. These complementary yet contradictory statements reflect a tension between thorough candidate assessment and the practical time constraints of the hiring process. This adds further credence to the observed misalignment between overall school and team needs. Making the process more efficient may be a good thing for the school, as a teaching vacancy is filled faster, but it may not always be a match for the team, either from a cultural or competency standpoint, if the SACOs and their teams are not as extensively involved in the vetting process. Succinctly put, it is imperative to find the right balance between an efficient recruitment process and hiring quality teachers, by involving appropriate stakeholders who contribute to a

more thorough vetting mechanism to ensure the long-term success of the school, the subject-team morale and ultimately student success.

#### **4.6 Summary of Findings**

In summary, the findings from the interviews and observations at the AICS depict an evolving hiring process, which is intimately intertwined with the school's extensive growth and cultural dynamics. The move towards more structured, inclusive and conscious hiring practices reflects a positive cultural shift within the school and the hiring committee, aligning with the values of diversity, collaboration and quality education, rooted in the school's mission. However, it has been noted that much work still needs to be done in streamlining and standardising the process, which shows inconsistencies in roles and tasks, as well as highlighting a lack of coherent and transparent communication, especially between the interview stages.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that there is currently more involvement of diverse stakeholders than in the past, especially SACOs, indicating a more inclusive recruitment process, yet the need to involve even more diversity of perspectives, including subject teachers was noted. The implication of proactively including ever more stakeholders in the process suggests that the AICS is inching towards a more holistic and inclusive school culture, with a hiring process that intentionally focuses on school and team cultural fit, while promoting the need for diversity.

Lastly, the need for professional development focused on hiring for international schools, diversity and reality-based interviewing techniques was suggested, noting that doing this as a team would encourage co-creation and boost ownership over the process. Overall the findings pointed to improvements being observed in the hiring process over the last year, but that going forward the right balance must be found between developing a more efficient hiring process while not foregoing on the quality of hires, whether from a cultural or competency fit.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

The final chapter of this study provides a synthesis of the findings, linking it to the literature review to provide recommendations to enhance AICS's hiring process and, by extension, its school culture, drawing meaningful conclusions based on the research objectives and questions. This section equally reviews the significance and limitations of the research, as well as makes suggestions for further areas of research into the topic of hiring and culture.

This research aimed to explore the existing hiring policies and practices at the Amsterdam International Community School, and its impact on school culture. The qualitative analysis, grounded in action research and derived from interviews and observations, intended to determine issues and potential modifications that could enhance process efficiency as well as have a positive cultural impact.

### **5.1 Discussion and Research Questions**

Much has been written about recruitment and corporate culture in the literature, including how a distinctive corporate culture can have a big impact on organisational success, as well as how essential hiring and retention are to long-term success, to the point that the most successful companies place recruitment and retention at the centre of their corporate strategy (Fullan, 2008). The Amsterdam International Community School is no different. As an ever-growing school community, cultural continuity has been challenging, as some of the cultural traits that still exist date back to when the school was initially established in 2003 as a small international secondary school. However, as the school has grown exponentially over the last five years, which has necessitated the recruitment of new staff, who feed into this evolving culture, it has developed into an open-minded and adaptive culture that caters for a diverse and growing cultural mix. Yet it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what defines AICS' current school culture, as

Tobias, the SACO for Individuals and Societies, stated. It is evident from the above-mentioned examples, including *Netflix* and *Toyota*, that creating a clear and sustainable culture takes time, which may need some readjustments along the way (Fullan, 2008; Karsenas, 2021).

The literature review above provided a rich background for the research into corporate culture, as well as hiring practices and theories, which helped to contextualise AICS' current hiring process and the potential impact it has on school culture. It set the scene to better understand and translate the thoughts that the participants shared, in order to answer the research questions posed at the start of this paper:

- a. What are AICS' current hiring practices, including strengths and weaknesses?;
- b. How can AICS' hiring process be improved to select staff who positively contribute to the school's culture?;
- c. How can modifying AICS's hiring process affect school culture?

Addressing the first question, it was recognised through observations and interviews that the current hiring process in the secondary school is rather protracted and inefficient. The process, which involves initial screening with an emphasis on technicalities, qualifications, and IB experience, has multiple rounds of interviews, with various stakeholders at different levels, and a lesson observation, which is quite extensive. On the one hand, this may be seen in a positive light, as it is thorough yet allows for flexibility. The involvement of multiple stakeholders ensures a diversity of perspectives, while also surveying for cultural match. The latter point, with a focus on cultural fit, allows for the selection of candidates who align with the school's values, while the use of a centralised database to receive resumes enhances the efficiency of the initial screening.

However, a lack of a streamlined and structured process understood by all participants, with confusion about role definitions and tasks has led to inefficiencies and inconsistencies, which in turn has led to the hiring of the

wrong candidate or even allowing the right candidate to slip away. The flexible steps in the process, compounded by communication gaps and unaligned criteria have led to frustration for the participants involved in the process because there is no clear ownership over each phase. One particular improvement which was highlighted is the need for more intentional involvement of the subject-area coordinators in the process.

This last point is in line with much of what the literature tells us about companies that are successful in the long term. Toyota, mentioned as the classic example, with its "culture of continuous improvement", believes in the idea of distributive leadership, where decision-making is divided amongst a group of individuals, rather than one person, on a basis of trust (Fullan, 2008). This is exactly what the highlighted improvement touches upon. The idea of giving subject-area coordinators, as middle-managers, more responsibility and leadership in the hiring process, rather than a consultative role. Moreover, successful schools tend to have collaborative rather than hierarchical cultures (Ismail et al., 2022; Taajamo et al., 2023), with staff members all seemingly working towards the same goal, meaning that they likely have more positive attitudes which feed into a healthy environment.

As such, though the hiring practices at the AICS are well-intentioned and allow for a variety of stakeholder involvement, the findings point to the fact that enhancements are needed to avoid variability in the process and a feeling of redundancy in time and effort.

Revisiting the second research question, on how the recruitment process can be improved, this will be continued in more depth in the next section on recommendations. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight a few points from the research here that relate to the findings. Tarki et al. (2022) have noted, about improving hiring processes, that many companies have designed such convoluted and bureaucratic processes out of fear of making bad hires that their processes have become inefficient, which is something that this researcher recognises about the current institution. One of the issues

encountered is that in looking to improve the process, more layers have been added, rather than streamlining and consolidating the existing practices. The same authors suggested steps to streamline the recruitment process, citing the example of *Google*, including reducing the number of interviewers and interviews in the process, being explicit about the final decision-maker, as well as having candidates numerically rated in every phase.

More concretely, and related to the commissioned school, the AICS needs to standardise procedures, questions, rubrics and communication between participants on the hiring committee for it to be more efficient. Likewise, better screening mechanisms and rigorous vetting will ensure more value and team alignment, directly contributing to team morale, cohesion and overall positive school culture.

Essential to improving the recruitment process to hire staff who positively contribute to the school culture falls under the cultural-fit theory (Chatman, 1991; Kristof-Brown, et al, 2005), with said theory stating that congruence between the company and the individual's values is not only essential to the hiring process, but equally essential to the long-term success of the organisation and the well-being of the employees within it. It is clear that an improved hiring process at the AICS would need to include mechanisms to assess for team and cultural fit, guaranteeing new employees align with existing values and positively contribute to the overall school culture.

Improvement is continuous, which is the case for AICS' recruitment processes. Though issues have been raised and recommendations will be made to further develop the hiring process, it is clear from the research that the school culture needs to be more adaptive (Karseras, 2022), or better yet, evolve into a learning culture. AICS' vision, after all, is to be a community where learning is at the centre of everything that it does. By improving the hiring process, bringing in the right people to move the school forward and giving those employees the opportunity to continuously learn

and grow within the organisation, the school will slowly but surely develop a learning culture.

Turning to the third research question of how changing the hiring process can affect school culture, the findings revealed that bringing in new staff members can add new and diverse perspectives, which affect school culture over time. A very real example of this has been observed during the reflection phase, with a distinct school culture evolving on the South East Campus of the AICS, where the majority of the new hires ended up, as 10 of the 11 new secondary classes opened up there for the 2023-2024 academic year. The discernable culture which has developed on the South East Campus is different from the school culture present on the South Campus, which is still somewhat plagued by outdated traditions and a lack of teacher turnover. With the injection of new blood on the South East Campus, the energy and new ideas are palpable.

Research has demonstrated that efficient hiring practices, which allow teams to identify and recruit highly suitable candidates who can seamlessly integrate into the team and school, have a trickle-down effect. Equally, research has identified that job readiness, reliability, a positive attitude and good communication skills are highly sought-after traits that have the biggest impact on the team's spirit (Luciano & Watson, 2021). Moreover, teachers who play an active role in the hiring process become more invested in the success of new hires and the school, leading to improved retention and morale. The theory goes that you are better off waiting for the right hire, with competencies needed by and complementary to the team, rather than rushing to fill a vacancy, due to possible negative consequences a bad hire can have on the team. As such, hiring and improvements to the hiring process remain a balancing act between efficiency and quality. However, making structural changes to the process is not only needed, but it also sends a message to the outside world that the school is willing to adapt, is professional and rigorous, and in doing so is attracting top talent who are further motivated by these assurances. Briefly put, policies that

foster a thriving and inclusive staff culture create a reinforcing positive cycle that benefits the entire school community.

More pointedly, the findings suggested that embracing more inclusive and bias-aware hiring practices can cultivate a more diverse educational setting. In addition, a hiring process that prioritises cultural fit can reinforce the school's values and culture, making them more tangible for all stakeholders. Consequently, hiring staff who positively contribute to the school's culture can enrich the learning environment, providing students with a more diverse and engaging educational experience. Furthermore, it was found that more clearly defined roles and tasks, as well as standardised procedures and transparent communication, can not only lead to the recruitment of better-suited staff but can also promote trust in school leadership, fostering overall stronger team cohesion and collaboration.

The above discussion of the research questions underscores the crucial link between hiring practices and school culture. Broadly speaking, a more transparent, inclusive and efficient hiring process not only attracts higher-quality staff but also fosters a more collaborative and diverse school environment. While the findings reveal that the AICS has made strides in involving more stakeholders, especially the SACOs, and recognising the importance of cultural fit and the need for diversity, there remains room for improvement.

## **5.2 Recommendations for the Hiring Process**

Following on from the analysis of the findings during the observation phase of the action research cycle, the reflection phase, from August to October 2023, revealed the issues in the AICS' current hiring process, with the goal of introducing tangible recommendations to make it more efficient in hiring staff to positively impact the school culture. The variability and the inconsistencies in practices were highlighted during the interviews and observed by the researcher. During these interactions, various suggestions

were also put forward to enhance the hiring process and impact the next hiring season starting in January 2024.

Accordingly, recommendations were devised, using interview data, observations and reviewing the relevant literature, which is summarised below under three headings: stakeholder involvement; professional development; and standardised structures. The recommendations served as a basis for designing an enhanced hiring process, proposed in the form of a flowchart, found under the third heading of standardised structures.

### **5.2.1 Stakeholders involvement**

One of the main recommendations to come out of the findings is that even though stakeholder involvement has gone up in recent years, with SACOs increasingly being involved in the process, expanding this further, by giving SACOs a leading role in the process, would foster more critical buy-in, a growing ownership over selection and better information sharing. As the stewards of their teams and culture, SACOs play a crucial role in helping the school move forward, from guiding their teams through curriculum development to team-building and enhancing team morale. They are more acutely aware of the teams' needs and desired qualities, whether there are gaps in subject knowledge or competencies needed that would push the team forward, the SACOs can more quickly identify that. As such, having them lead the process, by proactively defining the job requirements and screening criteria, as well as co-creating the job posting and interview rubric with the Heads of Campus would put them in the driving seat. In order to prevent variability, it is recommended that SACOs also screen the initial resumes and create a shortlist for the first round of interviews, which they would then conduct with a subject teacher. Having SACOs take the lead early on, rather than HOCs, would allow for a quicker determination of team and school cultural fit, rather than a feeling of redundancy that some of them have felt when they are asked to interview someone in the second round, whom they feel does not match with the needs of the team. What is

also noticeable and recommended is the more intentional and structural involvement of subject-area teachers, who know best what is needed to teach a particular subject, something the HOCs cannot always determine. By inverting the first and second round interviews, with SACOs taking the lead on the first one, rather than the HOCs, it will not only lead to a feeling of more ownership, but it will equally make for a more efficient hiring process, with less time spent on candidates who would ultimately not be a good match for the school.

The logistical consequence of giving SACOs an expanded role in the hiring process would entail giving them more complete access to the recruitment portal used (i.e. HR Office), which would allow them to do the initial screening and create the shortlist. This would however necessitate a clear screening rubric, which should be co-created with the HOCs and DHOCs. In addition, SACOs and HOCs should co-create interview rubrics and structured questions based on the current needs of the department and desired competencies. Granting SACOs greater authority over the process enables them to provide more informed assessments of candidates, taking into account the specific requirements of each role, as well as leading to enhanced faculty trust and purpose, which in turn is directly tied to job satisfaction and job retention for existing staff.

One element which the researcher disagrees with regarding the more active involvement of SACOs in the process was the request by some of the SACOs to have a veto or equal say in the process, which is understandable given the context of the school and that Dutch society values a culture of consensus (Trompenaars Hampden-Turner, 2022). As stated earlier by Tarki et al (2022), the most successful hiring processes are explicit about the final decision-maker and the researcher is concerned that a decision that is too consensus-oriented may lead to a slower and less efficient process, which goes against the aims of this paper. As such, though the SACOs would lead the process, the HOC would oversee the process and remain the final decision-maker.

Increasing the influence of SACOs over the process, and including more subject teachers, will ensure that the hiring committees are more diverse and include representatives from various levels within the school, which will not only provide a better assessment of candidate suitability but will also promote a culture of inclusivity and ownership.

### **5.2.2. Professional Development**

The second overall recommendation which became clear from the results is the continued need for professional development for all participants in the hiring process. More specifically, there is a need for all individuals involved to have training on effective interviewing techniques, as there is still a lot of variability observed in the interview process. From the types of questions to the order of questions, there needs to be more standardisation, which can be achieved if all members go on the same professional development.

One particular area of interest that was highlighted in this regard was the need for professional development around recognising and mitigating biases. This was highlighted after the leadership team attended the IB Global Conference in Dublin last October, with the overall theme focused on education for an inclusive future. Workshops were given on hidden and overt biases that are present in our hiring practices and how it is important to implement mechanisms to avoid hiring like-for-like replacements when someone leaves. One suggestion put forward by Fullan (2008), amongst others, is to hire for potential and purpose rather than looking for a direct replacement. Meaning that when hiring someone new it is an opportunity to re-evaluate the role and possible candidate to be hired based on the changing needs of the team or company. This is increasingly important, especially with AICS' preference for a tight cultural match, as it is easy to fall for the "similar-to-me effect" (Hofmans and Judge, 2019) during interviews rather than focus on actual team and school fit, based on needs and potential.

Following on from this, it is clear that the AICS will need to incorporate more overt mechanisms to measure for cultural fit, which as suggested, could be achieved by co-creating reality-based scenarios that integrate questions about values, as well as possible interactions with students, parents and colleagues. Attending professional development specifically focused on reality-based scenarios and actively seeking candidates who bring diverse experiences and perspectives, would align with the school's and the IB's commitment to international-mindedness and inclusivity.

Lastly, it was suggested that there is a need for internal professional development on the tools used during the hiring process, including the efficient and effective use of the recruitment portal. Having all participants in the hiring process properly trained on this tool from SACOs and teachers to Heads of Campus and the human resources department would allow for better alignment and clearer communication between the phases, which ultimately would add to the efficiency of the overall process.

It is apparent from the research and the results that the AICS' hiring process still needs some tweaking and that professional development would be a step in the right direction. It is equally and increasingly evident that participants in the recruitment process realise that hiring is everyone's responsibility and not just a function performed by the human resources department. As such, it could be stated that the AICS is creeping towards a recruitment culture (Taylor & LaBarre, 2006 in Fullan, 2008), with individuals understanding that recruitment can have a significant impact on the future success of the school.

### **5.2.3 Standardised Structures**

The last and possibly most obvious of the recommendations is the need for a more standardised and streamlined hiring process, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The renewed framework should include standardised interview protocols and questions, as well as clear and transparent communication between the hiring committee, which would

require the co-creation of screening and interview rubrics so that candidates can be objectively rated against the pre-established success criteria, which in turn would remove some of the subjectivity and variability from the process. The new and enhanced hiring process is best summarised in the flowchart below, in Figure 3.

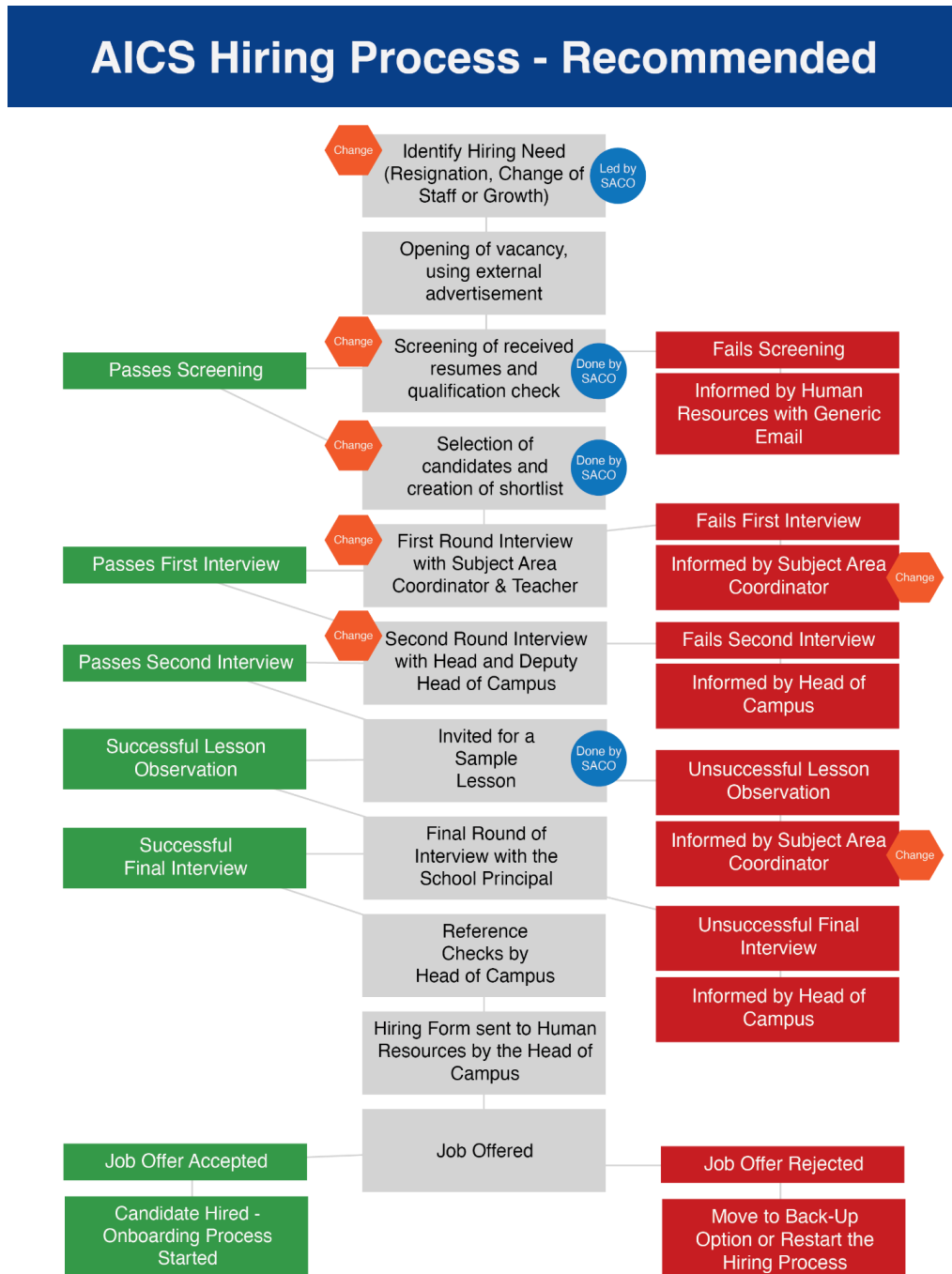


FIGURE 3: AICS' Recommended Hiring Process visualised in a Flowchart

The proposed new elements in the hiring process, specifically related to role changes, are highlighted using orange octagons, with the blue circles displaying the more active and timely role played by the SACOs. Having SACOs involved earlier on in the process, in line with the first recommendation, gives them and their teams more ownership over the process and consequently heightens the probability of a strong cultural match.

An essential suggestion that aligns with more standardised structures is that communication between the stages, especially between the interviewing phases needs to be more transparent and efficient, including clarity around decisions. Using standardised rubrics to rate candidates on success criteria, as well as developing a fixed set of questions per interview, will make for a more standardised approach to each individual hiring process. The questions, of course, should reflect the needs of the team in terms of qualities and competencies. It will also mean that preparation for and conducting each interview is standardised, which in turn will present as a more professional institution to the outside world.

An improvement highlighted by the SACOs and which fits into the overall hiring process is to enhance screening and vetting mechanisms, such as reference checks. Though this is vital in the process of hiring teachers who better fit the long-term strategy of the school, it has not been added as a forthright recommendation here, because there is a recommendation to involve SACOs and teachers earlier on in the process, with more values- and competency-driven questions. It is however noted that at a later stage, the Heads of Campus may need to review the questions being asked during reference checks to align with the co-created interview questions and rubrics.

Another fundamental recommendation to be made regarding the structure of the hiring process, which is not visible in the above-mentioned hiring process flowchart is the concept of timelines. It is essential to consider the optimal timing of job postings for international hires, as many schools start

the process in October and November. Though the AICS starts the process in January, this is significantly earlier than in past years when the process started in May, which not only meant that fewer highly qualified international teachers were available but also occasionally led to logistical issues related to acquiring visas on time to start the new academic year. This seemingly simple modification to the timeline can help in attracting higher-quality talent. Moreover and loosely related to timelines, it is also recommended that, in line with the goal of efficiency, the hiring process from start to finish should last no longer than 6 weeks, with a maximum of 4 interactions per candidate. The former point is suggested in reference to the worldwide teacher shortage, with candidates often being in the driving seat, and the latter point is in reference to the recommendation coming from Google that they learn most of what they need to about a candidate in the first 4 interactions, which as can be seen is reflected in AICS current and recommended hiring process.

Lastly, though the recommended changes may be understood as adjustments, rather than radical changes, it is believed that these modifications would substantially improve the efficiency of the AICS' hiring process and the downstream cultural impacts. Yet for the AICS' hiring process to remain current and relevant, it is also recommended that a feedback loop, post-hiring, is developed, so as to gather insights from the hiring committee members and new hires to continually refine and improve the process. Much like at Toyota, it is hoped that the AICS can develop a culture of continuous improvement.

### **5.3 Conclusions and Critical Reflections**

As has been noted a few times throughout this research, improvement is an ongoing and never-ending process. Much like international schools have the expectation that individual teachers have a growth mindset, hoping that these individuals will continually develop their skills and talents by learning more, the same is true for organisations, and in this case schools. In an era

of relentless change, especially with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence in schools, the saying goes that if you stand still, you are going backwards. Change is inevitable and making sure that the policies, processes and practices in any organisation are still pertinent is essential not only to the survival of the organisation but to its thriving. Thus, the question begs as to whether the suggested modifications to the hiring process at the AICS are enough and the answer is a resounding no. This is because improving the recruitment process at the AICS should be an iterative process and more changes, as well as more action research cycles, will be needed for the school to remain relevant.

Part of the reflection phase of the action research cycle brought the researcher back to 4 questions asked in the literature review in reference to making the hiring process a positive experience for the candidates. These questions posed by Chambers (2022) form an important part of the critical reflection, as the changes proposed focused mostly on internal changes to the hiring process and did not extensively focus on the candidate experience, which is equally important when looking at the holistic process. The questions were:

- "Is your time-to-decision fast enough?";
- "Do you share information on company culture?";
- "How is your correspondence?";
- "Are you providing value up front?"

Reviewing these questions it is clear that the time-to-decision is still too slow as the process, as it currently exists, is still too unstructured and the inconsistent communication between phases means that it is inefficient. It is hoped that the recommendations if adopted, can help speed up the process at a time when candidates are less tolerant of extensive hiring processes. Looking at the second question, here again, it is somewhat ambiguous, as there are no clear mechanisms in place to convey the culture properly other than reviewing the information on the website and the impressions that candidates get from interactions with staff members. Furthermore, it is also

clear that the correspondence with candidates could be improved, which is a direct consequence of inefficient communication between individuals on the hiring committee, as well as a lack of clear role and task definition. Likewise, the last question is a complex one to answer, as the AICS does not intentionally offer value up front, instead hoping that the promise of joining a thriving international community would suffice. Hence, it is clear much work remains to be done, however, the researcher is confident that the recommendations offered are a step in the right direction.

### **5.3.1. Research Contributions and Suggested Further Research**

Though generalisability and sample size were noted as limitations, it is believed that this study has significantly contributed to the research on hiring processes and school culture by providing a nuanced analysis of the intricate and complex relationship between recruitment practices and the downstream effect on team and school dynamics. Having used a qualitative, action-based research approach at the Amsterdam International Community School, contextualised in a comprehensive literature review, it has revealed the multifaceted nature of hiring practices, highlighting the crucial role of diverse stakeholder involvement, the necessity for clarity and standardisation in hiring protocols, and the profound impact of these elements on shaping an inclusive and collaborative school environment. The findings indicate the crucial role of efficient, transparent and culturally sensitive hiring routines in nurturing a positive school culture, as well as offering practical recommendations that can be applied to similar educational settings. As such, this study supplements the academic discourse on how international schools can better align their hiring processes with their cultural values and objectives, ultimately elevating the overall educational experience for all stakeholders.

This is by no means a comprehensive study on how hiring practices can positively influence culture in international schools, due to the nuances and complexities faced by each individual institution, as well as the nature of the

methodology used in this paper, yet it is considered a step in the right direction, with many more avenues to be explored by future research into the topic. Here below is a non-exhaustive list of suggested future research avenues that other academics might find intriguing and valuable:

- A comparative study across different educational contexts, comparing hiring practices and their cultural impacts in different educational settings, such as public versus private schools, or local versus international schools to gain an insight into best practices
- A longitudinal study on the impact of hiring decisions, tracking a cohort of candidates hired over several years and the medium-term impact these hires have had on school culture, student outcomes and possible retention rates.
- A quantitative analysis, offering broader and more generalisable results, of the correlation between specific hiring practices, like diversity, and quantifiable outcomes in student success, as well as teacher retention rates and teacher job satisfaction.
- A quantitative meta-analysis across international schools assessing the range of standardised hiring protocols, screening tools used and the influence of hierarchy on decision-making to uncover trends and identify the major challenges faced by such institutions.
- A quantitative analysis of how leadership styles and qualities influence hiring processes and as a consequence school culture, with an emphasis on how individual leaders' values can shape recruitment strategy.
- A mixed-methods study examining how schools are incorporating diversity, equity, inclusion and justice into their hiring processes, and how these efforts could impact school culture.
- An in-depth case study of schools that have incorporated Artificial Intelligence and machine learning into their hiring processes, and how integrating these technologies affects efficiency and effectiveness of hiring while taking into account diversity and cultural sensitivities, which could offer a blueprint for schools looking to rejuvenate their hiring process.

It is hoped that by exploring some of these research avenues future research can contribute to the growing body and understanding of the impact and importance of hiring processes on the future success of schools worldwide.

### **5.3.2. Limitations of the Study**

While the limitations of this study include its generalisability and the limited scope, as mentioned in the introduction, it is important to summarise these here again, as it is believed that acknowledging the limitations and biases is essential to the integrity and credibility of this research. Due to the nature of this study, it being set in a Dutch international secondary school, and the methodology utilised, of action research, it is clear that the results presented are context-specific, which may make the generalisability of the findings problematic. This is why future research must account for this and look into a wider range of schools to capture a fuller spectrum of perspectives. Equally, the results may be impacted by the short time frame of the data-gathering process, as well as the limited amount of participants in this research. Yet again, further research on a more longitudinal basis will hopefully uncover the longer-term impacts of these hiring processes on cultural aspects, which is why the researcher believes that further action research cycles must be undertaken in this commissioned school.

The research was also hampered by some unforeseen circumstances, which had a very real impact on the timing, data gathering as well as the actual hiring process. It was previously mentioned that staff changes throughout the year around maternity leave had a significant impact on the make-up and experience of the hiring committee, which may have unintentionally impacted the real-time hiring process and consequently the data gathered on these lived experiences.

Besides the more obvious limitations of the study, it is equally important to briefly reiterate the fact that biases have a significant impact on any

research conducted, with this study being no different. Various biases were uncovered and revealed, including confirmation and publication bias, with the researcher having preconceived conceptions and assumptions about the current, as well as future, hiring process at the AICS. The limited scope of participants in the study also points to sampling bias, however, this could not be circumvented as only very few people are involved in the current hiring process. Naturally researcher bias was present, as the author is part of the commissioned school and plays a leading role in the hiring process. Lastly, and most relevant to this topic of research is that cultural biases were evident, due to the fact that the researcher has worked in different institutions with very different notions around what positive or functional school cultures are.

### **5.3.3. Concluding Remarks**

This thesis has shown that the hiring process is a critical component to any school's operational strategy and future success, impacting not only its culture but also the education provided to the students. By implementing the recommended modifications it is believed that a more efficient, bias-aware and inclusive hiring process can lead to the hiring of more diverse and dynamic staff, enriching the educational experience for the students, while promoting a culture of openness, transparency and trust among staff that increases overall morale and foster a more positive work environment. The journey towards improvement is a continuous process and this paper is merely the first step in the school's commitment to bettering its hiring practices which will undoubtedly contribute to its success as a vibrant, inclusive, and high-performing international school community.

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