



Perceptions of DEI initiatives

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1 Introduction

Diversity of thought is a requirement to be able to develop either solutions or organisations, but how to bring that diversity together without creating too much unproductive friction is not a simple question. Finnish society, along with most industrialized countries, will need an inflow of people to counteract demographic changes if we want to keep our economy and society developing. This trend will require more efforts in producing adequate inclusion with the immigrants (Köllen 2021). Higher education has its part to play in training our future generations. How ready is it to handle the required added diversity and thorny issues of inclusion and equity, which it will undoubtedly bring?

The purpose of this thesis is to support the development of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives at Laurea University of Applied Sciences by exploring the awareness and perception of the DEI initiatives, related concepts and potential issues of the staff members. The research findings from this interview study can be used to develop the roll-out of new initiatives such that they meet the organizational goals and employee expectations.

Diversity results from perceived differences, where difference is a relative concept. The definition of a difference arises from a comparison of two entities, which may be people or things. The implicit norm to compare to is a white male in many situations. Differences and the resulting diversity can be seen as a resource to be valued. At one extreme, a liberal meritocratic view holds that since everyone is different in their own way, we should treat everyone equally based on their merits and there should be no favors for anybody based on their identity. This viewpoint ignores the differences between groups of people that result from socially inherited starting points of educational level or generational wealth. It is important to collectively and inclusively make sense of which distinctions and differences among people we wish to acknowledge in our organizations and societies and how we intend to help to equalize the playing field for everyone.

1.1 Background

Globalization, migration and refugees are some of the forces creating more diversity. Multinational companies, trade and easier communications have also contributed. Most developed nations are facing a demographic challenge of an aging population and a declining birthrate. An obvious solution would be to welcome new workers from abroad, which would also result in a more diverse society. However, at the same time, we are seeing a worrying rise in nationalistic sentiment. (Köllen 2021)

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives can be seen as a continuation of including and empowering more and more people to participate in society, such as women's rights, racial equality, gay rights and marriage equality. DEI initiatives are activities that aim to create diverse, equitable and inclusive environments (Ferdman & Deane 2014). Organizations need to engage with the added diversity to recruit staff and serve customers. Gradually, that diversity permeates into the organization as well. The global era means that cultural competencies are needed so that we can appreciate, understand and be sensitive towards the diversity of cultures. (Marsella 2009)

Diversity has become a regular topic of conversation in the business world as Black lives matter (BLM) and the #MeToo movements have raised awareness of various issues. Subsequently, large companies started to show their commitment to more fairness. DEI-related positions started to appear and DEI moved from an HR task to a more central role in creating value (Dong 2021). Nearly all Fortune 500 companies in 2022 had DEI statements and listed initiatives publicly. Staff is being trained and leadership bonuses have also been tied to diversity goals (Brennan 2022). Even investment companies such as BlackRock, which is the world's largest asset management company and some others started to demand the actions and information from their portfolio companies in 2021 (Segal 2021). DEI actions are based on moral choices and so are people's political beliefs on what should be the role of government, for example, so it is not surprising that there is a political connection.

DEI is getting increasing pushback and it is being used to delegitimize social justice. The anti-woke culture war is attempting to normalize discrimination. (Cammaerts 2022) Recently, the backlash has gained power and notoriety in many countries. The change in US presidency in 2025 and executive actions were seen as a worrying sign which offers companies cover to also scale down or stop their DEI activities. BlackRock can be seen scaling back its DEI targets in 2025 (Tipranks 2025).

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a multifaceted phenomenon that invites and sparks opinions from various viewpoints. Motivations to promote, ignore or resist DEI efforts can be justified based on various contradictory beliefs or philosophies. The correct or just course of action is not always clear. Additionally, people can have their own biases that may also be unconscious to them. Conflicting priorities, beliefs, goals and resistance to change make DEI initiatives inherently challenging. Most failures of DEI policies are seen to stem from upper management not integrating the change to the mission, core values and company culture (Tessema & al. 2023).

While diversity has been shown to increase performance and innovation capacity in work groups, it can also cause more conflicts and reduce team cohesion (Milliken & Martins 1996). Simply increasing diversity does not guarantee inclusion or even positive developments. A review of studies on the effects of increasing diversity on performance reveals mixed results, where most studies are inconclusive and positive and negative results seem to be equally likely (Joshi & Roh 2009).

Despite the turmoil in society, the universities need to create a supportive environment for all to learn and work and further need to find new ways to adapt, react and develop their operating culture. Educational institutions have a role in shaping society and can do their part in creating a more tolerant and compassionate citizenry. Based on a review of UK education leadership, there is a paradox of diversity and leadership that tends to be quite a homogenous group. Actions are needed both to add diversity to leadership and to educate and develop the skills of current leaders. (Bebbington & Özbilgin 2013)

Kasa, Brunila (Kasa, Brunila & Toivanen 2024) critique Finnish teacher education for an ambivalent role in Human Rights Education. They suggest that more systematic self-reflection is needed to address the structural inequalities in the Finnish education system. The reasons for this stem from teacher students not having to face issues themselves and a general belief in the quality of the Finnish education system.

DEI work is needed because employees who feel included are likely to be more motivated, productive and engaged (Beraki, Tessema, Dhumal, Ready & Kelati 2022). The feeling of inclusion is a complex, multi-level phenomenon. Equitable leadership actions and decision-making should be practiced at all levels of the organization and in all organizational activities.

1.2 Purpose, context and structure of the thesis

The commissioner for the thesis is the InCities project (<https://incities.eu/>) and more specifically the part of the project related to the development of an EDI plan. Laurea is a Finnish University of applied sciences operating in Uusimaa, Finland, with about 10 000 students and 660 staff. The largest owners of Laurea are the cities of Espoo and Vantaa. (About Laurea s.a.)

The purpose of this master's thesis study is to support the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiative at Laurea by exploring the awareness and perception of the DEI initiatives, related

concepts and issues and by gauging the attitudes towards increased DEI activities. The study will focus on staff members' perceptions.

This research can support the development of future initiatives at Laurea by gaining a better understanding of the current perceptions of staff members regarding DEI initiatives. The intended results are recommendations for further actions. The research findings can be used to develop the roll-out of EDI initiatives at Laurea such that they meet the organization's goals and fit with the expectations and culture of the employees. To satisfy this purpose the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1 How are the concepts of DEI defined and discussed in management literature?

RQ2 How are the DEI initiatives and related concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion perceived among the staff at Laurea?

RQ3 How could the DEI initiatives be enhanced and developed at Laurea with the lens of change management?

The research framework is shown in Figure 1. The study is using qualitative research methodology. Semi-structured interviews are used to collect rich, in-depth data from Laurea staff members.

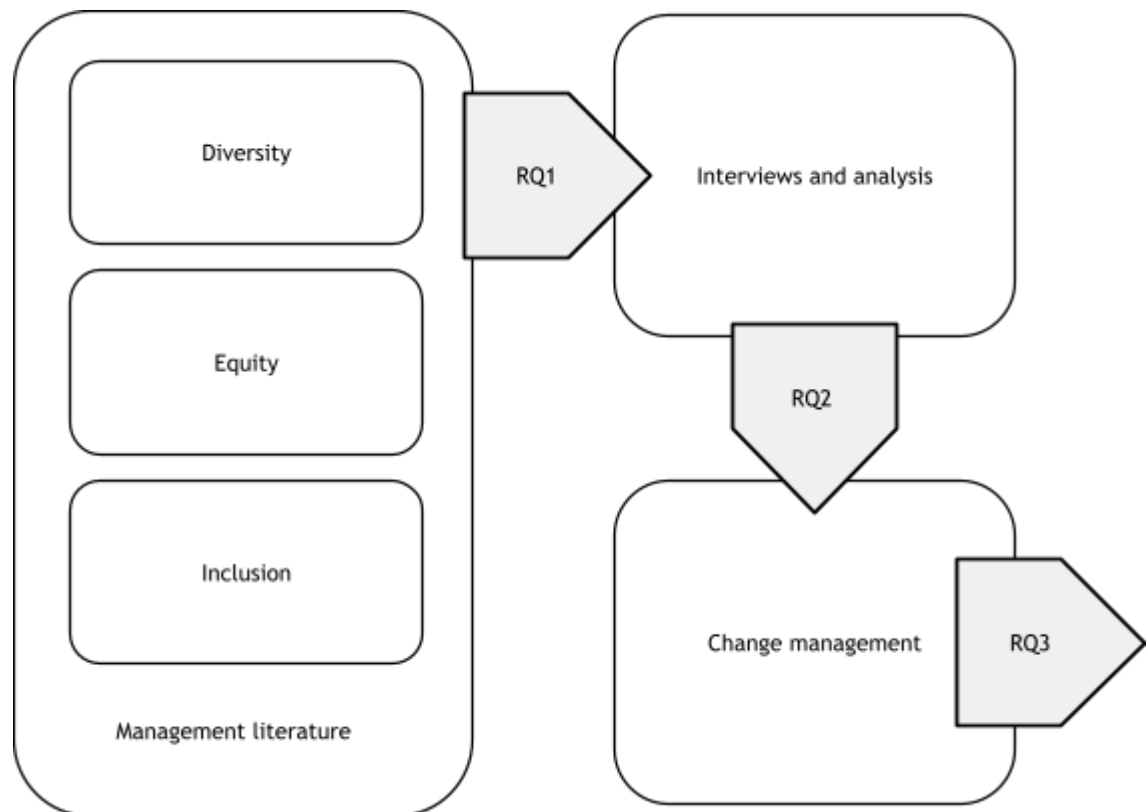


Figure 1: Research Framework

This thesis is structured in six main chapters as follows. Chapter one is the introduction which explains the background and purpose of the study and presents the research questions. The knowledge base is presented in Chapter 2 and covers the DEI topics and some ways organizations deal with DEI and some recognized problems from those approaches. The second chapter also presents approaches to understanding and managing organizational change. The third chapter covers the research methodology and considers the limitations of the study. Data analysis and findings are presented in the fourth chapter. Chapter 5 makes recommendations as the results of the study in light of the change management literature. Conclusions and discussion make up the sixth chapter.

1.3 Researcher positioning

In phenomenological research, the researcher is not assumed to be able to remove their preconceptions and identity from the topic. Therefore, it is relevant to state that the author is a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-aged, white Finnish man. Additionally, the author has been working at another Finnish university of applied sciences for over a decade. Demographic identity and history do not offer lived experience of discrimination or lack of

inclusion. Professional experience may give some shared experience with research participants of working in a comparable educational institution.

Being white and therefore a part of the advantaged group and working on the DEI mission can be seen from a few perspectives. It may help to connect with others in the majority and support in educating them and building connections. On the other hand, it may be difficult to deliver effective anti-racist education without having experienced discrimination. It is also easier to walk away or be inactive when the issues become overwhelming. (Evan, Sisco, Fashant, Nandyal & Robbins 2023)

2 Diversity, equity and inclusion

This chapter outlines the main Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) concepts in the management literature related to diversity management and organizational development. Historical background and change over time in the motivations and drivers for increased diversity will also be discussed, as well as reasons for pushback of DEI. The chapter closes with the intersection of DEI initiatives and change management models.

A note on the terminology used in this thesis. The scope of DEI literature and discussion is quite varied and wide-ranging. There are various abbreviations such as DEI, D&I or EDI. In some contexts, additional concepts of belonging and accessibility are added to the discussion and the corresponding abbreviations become DEIB and IDEA, respectively. This thesis will use the acronym DEI since it is the most common one in the management literature.

2.1 DEI initiatives and reasoning

DEI initiatives are activities that aim to create diverse, equitable and inclusive environments at work (Ferdman & Deane 2014). Overall, DEI initiatives and policies seek to improve the representation of previously underrepresented groups within the organization (Iyer 2022).

DEI initiatives are activities the organization undertakes to manage diversity, inclusion and equality. Traditionally, a focus on diversity has been in hiring practices, education, diversity training and grievance handling (Cox 1994a); (Dobbin & Kalev 2017). Organizations have introduced periodical assessments of DEI and created jobs for DEI officers (Cumming, Miller & Leshchinskaya 2023).

The rationale for increased diversity within organizations can be seen with two main types of arguments: one based on social justice and the other founded on the business case of improved performance. Social justice-based arguments are based on the understanding that in most societies some groups that are distinct by demographic or identity characteristics

have historically faced mistreatment or discrimination and that has caused a disparity and difficulty in their situation. Thus, the society and its organizations should employ actions and policies to remedy the situation. Social justice reasons are partially enshrined in laws about non-discrimination. (Brennan 2022) There is an underlying belief that investing in diversity initiatives is morally and ethically desirable (Cox 1994b).

The business and business logic-based arguments say that more diverse thinking produces better results or more innovation. Meritocratic arguments say that a wider pool of recruitment results in better applicants. Innovation and financial performance draw benefits from diversity, especially in innovation-driven sectors when the leadership is diverse as well (Lorenzo & Reeves 2018). In a literature study on the relationship of diversity and creativity, it was found that educational, ethnic and functional role diversities benefit the teams and organization with support for creativity (Hundscheil, Razinskas, Backmann & Hoegl 2022).

There is evidence that most diversity training is not effective (Dobbin & Kalev 2018). Training programs are generally too short to shift attitudes and may even activate stereotypes. Further, training may make one complacent about one's own biases. The members of the white majority can feel left out in multicultural training or dislike the feeling that they are being controlled. Despite all these problems, more than two-thirds of universities and colleges in a 2016 survey of 670 schools conducted mandatory diversity training. Dobbin and Kalev note that the key to improving training effectiveness is to include it in a more comprehensive change (2018). Kulik et. al. (Kulik, Pepper, Roberson & Parker 2007) found in their study of voluntary equal opportunity training that people with higher diversity skills were more likely to attend the training. This is due to high competence, also making them more aware of their missing skills.

DEI initiatives can sometimes be misguided. Romani et. al. (Romani, Holck & Risberg 2019) present a case study of an HR intervention that caused unintended harm by othering the marginalized group and reinforcing hierarchies. Organizations have processes and practices that produce and reinforce unequal power structures and those inequality regimes often appear normal or invisible to the organization (Acker 2006).

While diversity has been shown to increase the performance and innovation capacity in work groups, it can also cause more conflicts and reduce team cohesion (Milliken & Martins 1996). While diversity can offer benefits, those improvements are not automatic but require suitable management and leadership (Ely 2004). To be effective, diversity management efforts must be made at the strategic, managerial, and operational levels within an organization (Kramar 1998). The effect of diversity is dependent on the operational and industry context. For example, in service industries, diversity can help with servicing a diverse client base and in

high-tech, where problem solving is important a cognitive diversity can be used to support innovation (Joshi & Roh 2009).

2.2 Management approaches to diversity

The development of diversity initiatives can be traced back to women's rights movements, which advocated equal participation in society. The civil rights movement and affirmative action started to legally challenge some of the discrimination (Nkomo & Hoobler 2014). Initial organizational motivations for managing diversity have been meeting legal requirements and avoiding lawsuits (Pless & Maak 2004). The focus on diversity has moved from managing (or tolerating) diversity to valuing diversity (Wasserman 2015).

Within the business literature in the 1990s, approaches to diversity could be classified into two types according to Thomas and Ely (1996). First is called the “Discrimination and Fairness paradigm”, which focuses on increasing diversity with more representation and supports those efforts with training and mentoring programs. However, the way of working does not change or utilize the new type of human capital in the workforce; rather, this approach is assimilation and color- and gender-blind conformism. This approach is motivated by legal and conformance considerations. (Thomas & Ely 1996)

The second paradigm is called “Access and Legitimacy” which is driven by a realization that a diverse customer base can be addressed better by a diverse staff that can speak the same language both figuratively and literally. This approach results in regional or otherwise segmented parts of the organization that are purposefully different from each other for business reasons, risking internal conflicts and weaker cohesion in the overall organization. (Thomas & Ely 1996)

A novel paradigm presented by Thomas and Ely (1996) is called the “Learning and Integration paradigm” which is based on a belief that diversity in backgrounds, experiences and ways of thinking can be used as a source of insights for the benefit of the organization. To achieve this organization must make an effort to explore and recognize the varied individual resources to collectively learn from them. This learning can then be harnessed for the increased performance and efficiency of the organization. The above paradigm echoes the learning organization concept with a shared vision and team learning (Senge, Roberts, Smith, Kleiner & Ross 1999). Diversity management pursues maximizing benefits from diversity while minimizing the barriers to performance that may arise from perceived differences (Beraki & al. 2022).

The above discussion and a lot of management literature in general are very US-centered and undoubtedly rise from the history and specifically the racial history of the US society. Holvino and Kamp (Holvino & Kamp 2009) highlight that in the Scandinavian context, diversity management was initially aimed at integrating minorities into a fairly homogeneous population. It is important to remember that local and context-specific understanding is important for future research and practices so that perspectives are not based on US conceptualizations (Köllen 2021).

Educational institutions tend to be conservative and slow to change. In the US about nearly half of the incoming university students are non-white, while the faculty is still almost three-quarters white (Cavanaugh & Green 2020).

2.3 Definitions of the DEI concepts

2.3.1 Diversity

Diversity is a description of the whole of a group of people. People are different from each other in many ways and we can classify them into subgroups in a multitude of ways. Diversity needs to be examined on multiple levels. Cox (1994a) suggests three levels: individual, group/inter-group and organizational. Diversity should be understood broadly within an organization, not just being about the minority groups. Definitions of diversity are typically split into observable and unobservable characteristics. Observable, surface-level characteristics are, for example, age, gender, ethnicity, and some disabilities. The unobservable, deep-level characteristics could be one's educational background, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Harrison, Price & Bell 1998). More recently, the diversity in the workforce is also considered in terms of thinking styles, personality types and world views (Beraki & al. 2022).

Difference can be used to describe similarities and differences between members of an organization or similarities or differences and identities based on social group membership within the organization. These different dimensions and viewpoints result in different goals and strategies for managing diversity. Focusing on individual differences does away with or reduces the systemic and institutional disadvantages.

What do we specifically mean by diversity and difference? Which one of the many possible dimensions we choose to use to separate can change the resulting groupings. Also, the categorizing of people can be based on individuals or existing groups that share an identity or characteristic. Finally, we need to recognize what the difference is compared to. How we see diversity depends on how it is conceptualized. For a long time in our Western world, diversity has been and still is seen as a difference "from a white, middle-aged, able-bodied, heterosexual, man with majority religion" (Primecz & Mahadevan 2024).

Increasing diversity in society, higher awareness of differences and more voices being heard have brought more aspects of diversity into the general conversation. Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo-movement exposed various problems.

In Finland, the term intersectionality was mentioned as a leading idea of an equality program of the government (Helsingin Sanomat 2020). Intersectionality is an idea that shows that two or more diversity categories may apply in a situation and context (Crenshaw s.a.). Traditional diversity programs fail to recognize the intersecting identities and can highlight power and privilege by not removing barriers to access that intersectionality creates (Primecz & Mahadevan 2024).

2.3.2 Inclusion

In the diversity management literature, diversity and inclusion began to get distinct definitions in the 1990s. Where diversity focuses on describing the demography of the organization, inclusion focuses on the removal of obstacles to full participation and contribution to the organization (Roberson 2006). Inclusion is a complex multilevel phenomenon that has had many definitions and will evolve as our society and workplaces change. Mor-Barak and Cherin (1998) define the concept of inclusion as consisting of having access to information and resources, being involved in work groups, and having the ability to influence decision-making processes. From a psychological standpoint, humans need both to feel distinct from others and to identify as a member of a group. Inclusion could therefore be defined by the interplay between group belongingness and individuality: Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) (Shore & al. 2011) and self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci 2000).

Wasserman, Gallegos, and Ferdman (2008) define a culture of inclusion to be present when people of all social identity groups can be present, have their voices heard and appreciated, and can participate in core activities on behalf of the collective.

Inclusion is a phenomenon that is dynamic and momentary, where one can feel included in one moment and feel less included in another. Inclusion and acts of inclusion need to happen on all levels of an organization, society or community from individual interactions to group meetings to the society and societies norms at large. (Ferdman & Deane 2014; Ferdman & Deane 2013)

Inclusion is a multilevel phenomenon that has many expressions in organizations. On an individual level, inclusion can be understood as a psychological state that one feels or does not. Inclusion means full belonging and participation by all individuals without having to give up any of their differences. Inclusive groups support members to use their distinctiveness for the benefit of the collective. (Ferdman & Deane 2013) Leadership actions can foster inclusion

and create a sense of inclusion or fail to do so. Having diversity in an organization doesn't guarantee an inclusive organization. Mor-Barak (Mor Barak 2005) defined a culture of inclusion to recognize, respect and value the talents and potential of different people in the organization in concert with the goals of the organization. Inclusive culture has members' voices heard and appreciated (Mor Barak 2005).

Inclusive communities need leadership that builds inclusive cultures and sets expectations to allow everyone to be themselves. This, in turn, demands courage from individuals to be themselves. (Ferdman s.a.) Having multiple different definitions of inclusion makes sense in some contexts and may even be necessary depending on the level of analysis for the purpose. It is imperative to remember that, due to the complexity of multicultural systems, no one person should think that they understand everything, but rather need to stay humble. (Ferdman & Deane 2014)

2.3.3 Equity

Equity starts from acknowledging that there are differences in people's starting points, there are barriers to entry and there are privileges that different individuals and groups have. Equity aims to make sure that all people can contribute and develop regardless of their identity. (Tan 2019)

Equity and equality are sometimes defined similarly, but here they are defined as distinct concepts. Equality is an objective idea that allocates the same resources for all people regardless of their differences. This equality approach is color-blind and fully meritocratic and may purport to aim for equality, but can, however, end up enforcing the existing inequalities since the disadvantaged groups have less merit to show. (Kamp & Hagedorn-Rasmussen 2004) Equity, on the other hand, is a subjective term that takes into account uneven playing fields caused by the past and the starting point in the present. Equity initiatives shift the focus to outcomes and results. (Minow 2021) For example, an equality approach would provide everyone with the same bicycle regardless of their size or ability, whereas an equity approach would provide everyone with a bike that they can ride comfortably.

Equity and working with equity require an acknowledgment of differences in opportunity or differing starting points, which can be hard to define unambiguously. Holvino and Kamp (2009) note that the equality-differences conundrum results from this understanding of differences. If individuals are truly different, then true equality is not possible. Conversely, if people are universally the same, then why do we need diversity management at all

Another point of discussion is the perceived permanence of differences. Are they seen as immutable, essential, and fixed, or are they socially constructed based on personal histories?

Some categories are essential, such as biological and then others are mutable and can be acquired, such as education or geographic location or religion. Equity is a moral choice that the organization needs to make and it can be useful in creating a more harmonious work environment (Iyer 2022). In recent years, neurodiversity has been discussed more as a barrier to inclusion and as an aspect to consider as well, especially in education (Khan, Grabarski, Ali & Buckmaster 2022).

2.4 Pushback for DEI

Increasing inclusion and diversity can be challenging because it may require reevaluating current ways of working. Including new voices and viewpoints resets the previous norms. This can be uncomfortable for those who were previously in power. (Ferdman & Deane 2013)

Experiencing more control and regulation of manager behavior in the name of DEI gives rise to opposite responses. However, methods that support managers in achieving goals by influencing their motives produce positive results. (Dobbin, Schrage & Kalev 2015)

Tensions between other organizational goals or policies. Jaeck et al found that moral motivations and financial motivations were creating paradoxical tensions for the organization. (Jaeck, Marais, Joly & Preuss 2023)

Diversity and inclusion create several paradoxes for the organization. One relates to maintaining one's identity while also fitting in and conforming to norms. The second paradox occurs when the norms and boundaries of the organization need to adapt to the inclusion of new voices. The third paradox comes from distributing the discomfort of changing behaviour or norms. How strongly does the organization hold on to the old ways or is it willing to do the work to become more inclusive? (Adamson, Kelan, Lewis, Śliwa & Rumens 2021)

Aarti Iyer (2022) identifies three types of threats that the advantaged group may see or perceive and which can cause opposition towards DEI initiatives. These include resource threat, symbolic threat, and ingroup morality threat. Each threat has its source. The resource threat stems from zero-sum thinking and the fear of losing resources, opportunities, or power. The symbolic threat arises from perceived challenges to the traditional values, norms, or culture. Lastly, the members of the ingroup can become defensive when their past behaviour is seen as maintaining the inequality and even benefiting from it. These set some considerable demands for DEI initiatives. They need to aim for systems that are fair to all and align with meritocratic principles while highlighting the benefits of DEI. (Iyer 2022)

2.5 Constant effort

Diversity, inclusion and equity are deeply interconnected concepts that need to be considered together. Integrating DEI requires a holistic approach to consider all aspects of the environment (Rossi, Wyatt, Huggett & Blanco 2022).

Work on diversity, inclusion and equity must be understood as a continuous process where there are no clear goals or end points. Risberg and Corvellec (2022) state that it is futile to describe the work as succeeding or failing, but as a set of ongoing actions happening in an ever-changing world. Additionally, the practice of inclusion needs to be done on multiple levels simultaneously, both in day-to-day behavior and in organizational systems, so that the structures and processes support the goals (Ferdman & Deane 2014). Leadership skills also need to be developed to support new goals. Despite the inclusion being set as a goal, research has shown that inclusive leadership traits are not promoted to meet the goal (Mor Barak, Luria, Brimhall & Özbilgin 2024).

The organization's business or performance goals may be impacted initially by changes to the makeup of the membership. A key challenge for organizations is to simultaneously pursue the advantages of diversity and create more unity in the organization (Ferdman 2017). Individual responses to DEI initiatives can vary from supportive to resistant. Opposition to initiatives among the privileged can arise from perceived risk to existing resources or the fear of losing symbolic status or feeling morally challenged by one's position (Iyer 2022).

Steele and Derven (2015) recognize the pushback towards diversity and inclusion, but also make a case for innovation and D&I feeding each other. They suggest leadership behaviors that endorse the value of diversity, cultivate a diverse ecosystem, and include visible examples of diverse behaviors and complementary perspectives. Thus creating a positive feedback loop.

Training programs should focus on changing employees' attitudes towards diversity by covering the perception of diversity and how to appreciate diversity, rather than focusing on the appearance and cultural differences of employees with different demographic backgrounds. (Qin, Muenjohn & Chhetri 2014)

2.6 Models for organizational change

Change in organizations is a socio-constructive complex process of changing the assumptions and norms of the organization (Schein 2004). Diversity management is a very complex area and subject to many opposing forces, which result in a change process, a continuous change process (Risberg & Corvellec 2022). Successful transformations or changes in organizations

require trust and openness. Schein (2004) posits that learning is a driver of change in organizational culture.

Including a more diverse group of people in the organization will undoubtedly result in changes and that can pose a real or a perceived threat to the ones that feel they have rightfully earned their place or status in the current organization (Iyer 2022).

Organizational development can be seen as a learning process. Organizational learning is a process where the organization attempts to change its culture, structure and processes. This happens through new knowledge being embedded into the daily activities of organization members. (Gherardi 2009) Individual learning needs to be enabled by the change process in the organization. Training can produce individual learning, but without ongoing dialogue and knowledge transfer procedures, the effect on the organization can disappear. (van den Brink 2020)

The process of developing an inclusive culture cannot ignore the underlying social dynamics over the structural and policy changes. Open dialogue is needed to ensure representation and counter in-group/out-group bias (Roberson 2006). Diversity management is based on a desire to align the organization along principles that have been ascertained as important (Johns, Green & Powell 2012).

2.6.1 Kotter's model for change

Organizations need to change for many reasons, for example, to react or adapt to changes in the staff or the operating environment. Successful execution of a change process is demanding and requires an organizational change process. In his pioneering work in the 1940s, Kurt Lewin divided organizational change into three phases: unfreezing phase to prepare the organization, the implementation of the change, and the refreezing phase to make a lasting change. This model has been criticized as too simplistic and assuming that there is a stable moment to start from, however, almost all subsequent models include these ideas in them. (Burnes 2004)

Kotter's 8-step model for change management is one of the most well-known models, and it also includes the three main phases with more granular steps (Kotter 2007). Figure 2 shows the 8 steps.

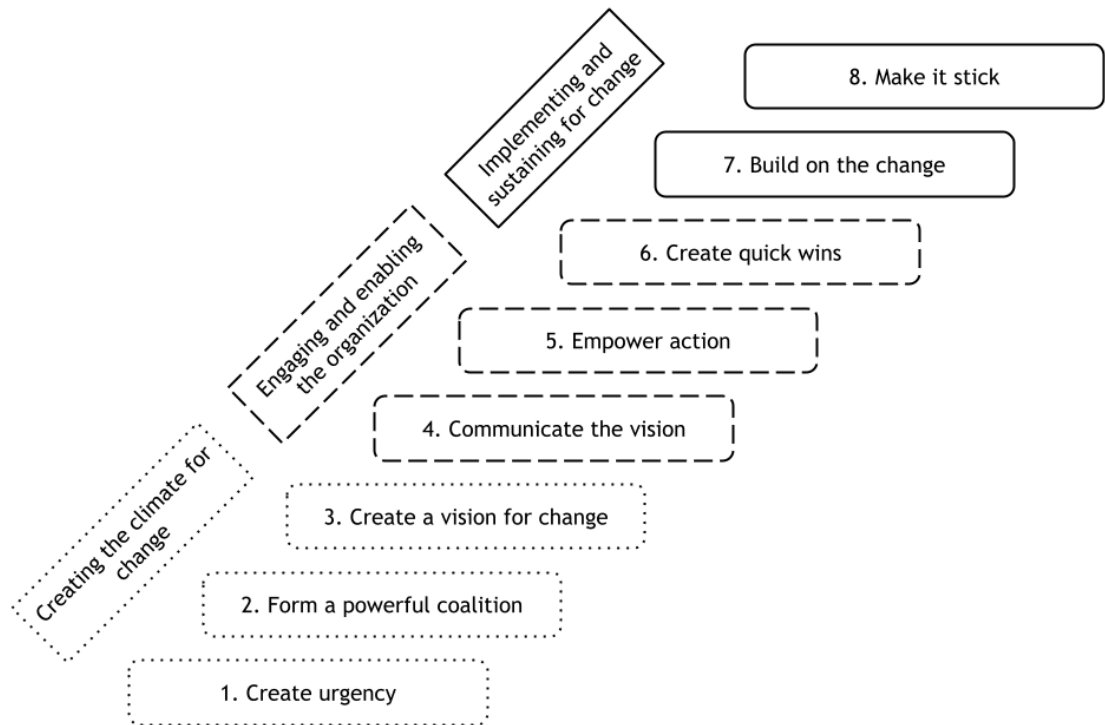


Figure 2: Kotter's 8-step model of organizational change. Illustration by the author. Modified from the original source. (Kotter 2007, 61).

The first step is about creating readiness for change and motivation in the organization. The second step recognizes that there needs to be support from within the organization. This is also an important moment to start identifying and addressing the resistance. Next steps involve creating a vision and then communicating it. These match with the unfreezing phase from Lewin.

The next three steps are about implementing the change. First, by empowering people to contribute to the change. When the desired change happens in a part of the organization, that should be highlighted and used to build momentum. Results should then be consolidated and turned into more change. The final step in Kotter's model calls for anchoring the changes in the new culture to build sustainability of the results, thus refreezing the organization.

Kotter's model is quite leadership-driven and proceeds from top down, making it also incompatible with more collaborative organizations. The linear nature of the model may not take into consideration all the complexities of DEI-related changes, which involve social, cultural and behavioral changes. The traditional discussion of the Kotter change model does not consider emotional and cultural resistance. Kotter's model may not align well with the cyclical modern continuous development practices. (Carreño 2024)

2.6.2 Building a culture of inclusion

Based on Kotter's model Pless and Maak (2004) present principles (see Figure 3) for creating a culture of inclusion. The alternative to inclusion is to ignore the differences and expect the new members to assimilate into the organization. This sets barriers for newcomers to perform at their maximum potential and advance in the organization.

An inclusive organizational environment has some requirements according to Pless and Maak (2004). The underlying principle needed for inclusion is mutual recognition that should happen on both an emotional level and in solidarity and naturally with legal and political recognition within the organization. A culture of inclusion is recognizing differences and looking for a common bond simultaneously. Reciprocal recognition is the basis of trust. Maintaining this trust requires integrity in actions. Cultures are mutually created (Schein 2004), and each part of the organization should be included in the discourse that shapes that culture.

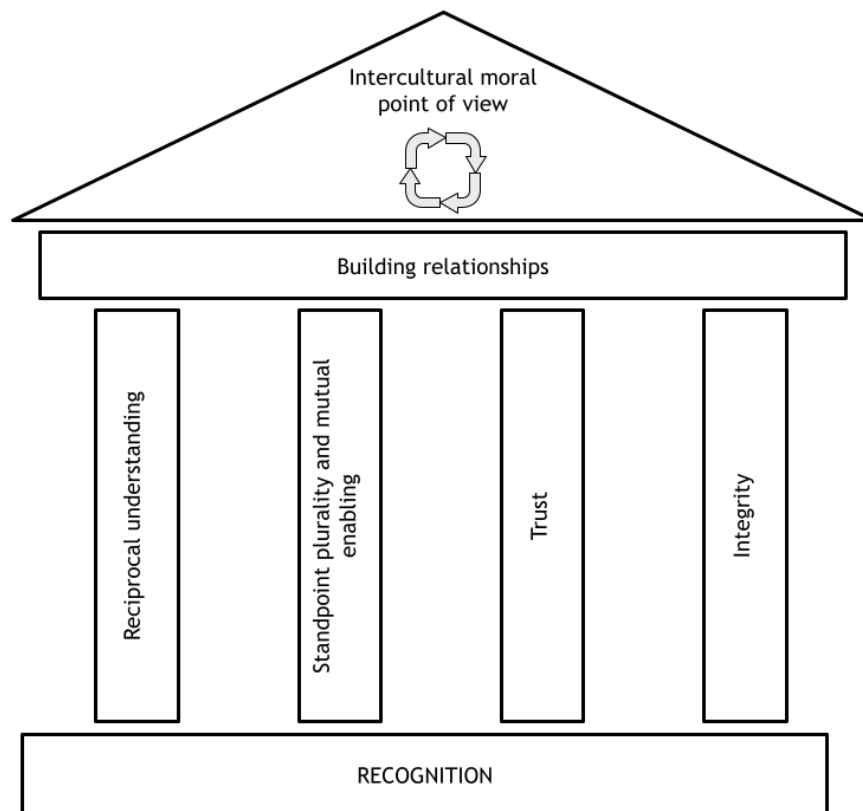


Figure 3: Building blocks of inclusive culture. Illustration by the author based on original source. (Pless & Maak 2004, 131).

According to Pless and Maak (2004) inclusion is built upon reciprocal recognition, mutual understanding, and standpoint plurality and trust and integrity that allow for integration of different and multiple voices into the organization's shared moral viewpoint. In practice, realizing an inclusive organizational environment is challenged by the dominant thinking styles and other underlying assumptions the organization holds. Pless and Maak (2004) further develop a process of four phases to bring about a transformational change as shown in Figure 4.

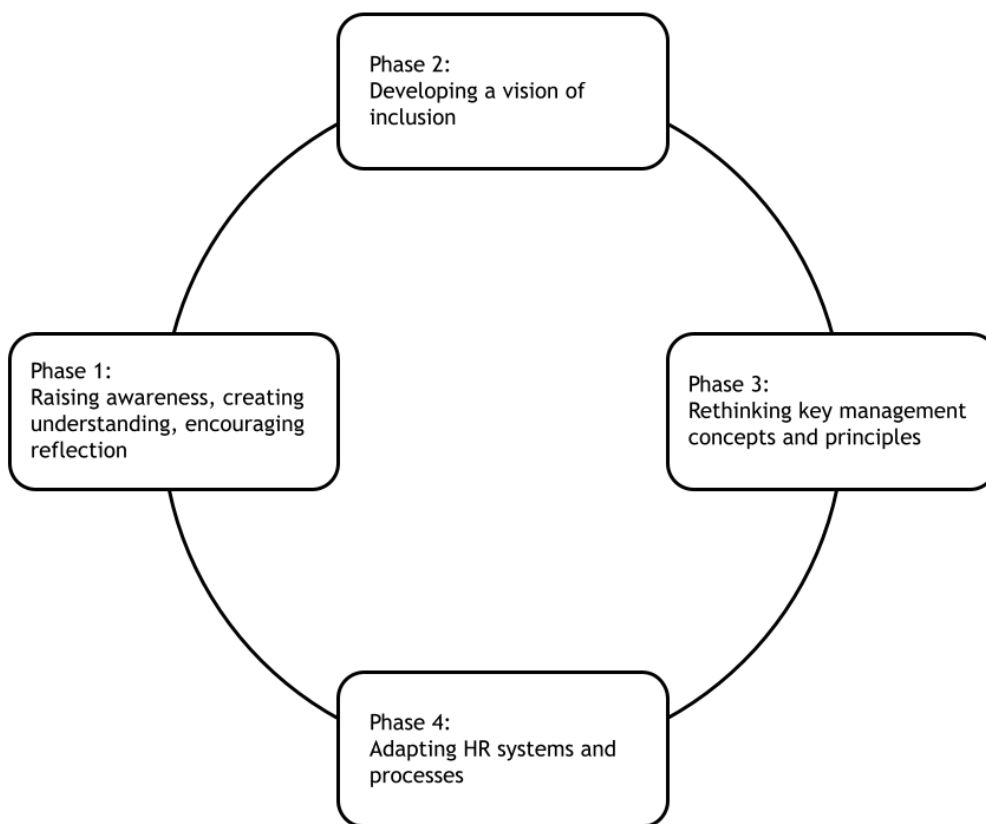


Figure 4: Phases in creating a transformational change in culture. Illustration by the author based on the original source. (Pless & Maak 2004, 136)).

Similar to Kotter's model, the initial step is to introduce the need for a change. Phase 1 is raising awareness, creating understanding, and encouraging reflection by engaging in a discursive learning process. This step is about raising awareness of people's varied perceived realities and understanding the plurality of points of view to integrate diverse voices. Laying the groundwork includes a reflection on organizational ethics and building guiding principles. Phase 2 is about developing a vision of inclusion that is relevant to the organization. Vision on

inclusion should address the acknowledged issues and be connected to the vision of the organization. A well-articulated vision makes spreading the message easier. (Pless & Maak 2004)

Phase 3 calls for re-evaluating the key management concepts and principles for integrative leadership. The aim should be to involve everybody within the company and promote participation in new ways of making decisions or having dialogue with different stakeholders. Phase 4 includes modifying the systems and processes to realize the change into actual operational behavior and culture. The systems for recruitment practices or decision-making mechanisms should make sure that treatment is equal. Importantly, effort must be made in building mechanisms that keep reflective action ongoing, because the operating environment will keep changing. (Pless & Maak 2004)

2.6.3 Holistic view of organization

It has been stated already before that DEI concepts of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are very interdependent, quite malleable and deeply contextual. Therefore, DEI-related change initiatives could benefit from a more holistic view of organizational change, such as the McKinsey 7S framework (Waterman, Peters & Phillips 1980), which considers organizations in seven interdependent elements. This model (see Figure 5) recognizes that organizational change is not just a change of structure, but to be effective, needs to be considered from different viewpoints, which are seen as parts in a system.

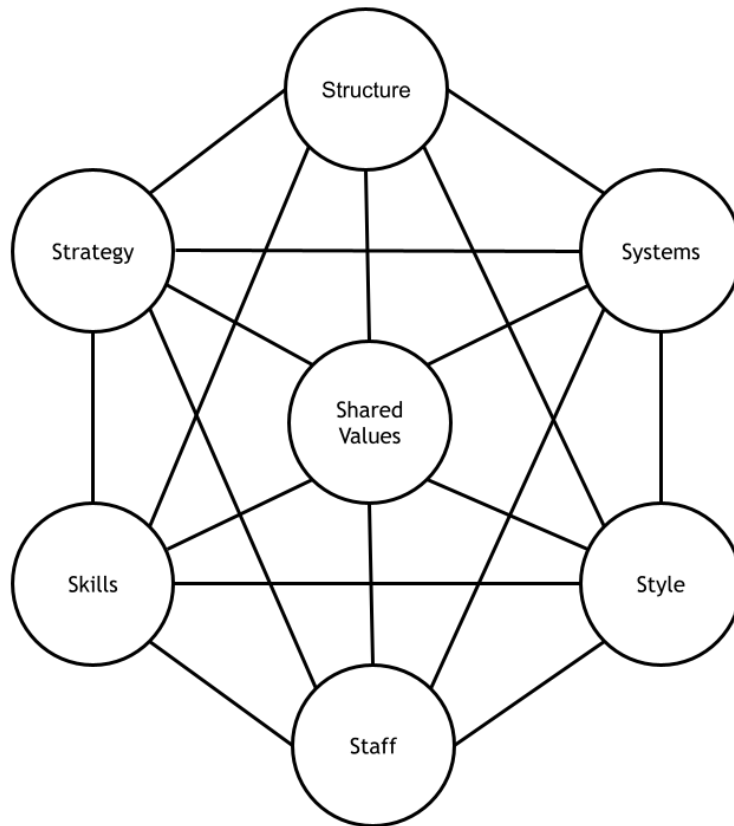


Figure 5: 7S model of interconnected aspects of an organization. Illustration by the author based on the original source. (Waterman & al. 1980, 18)

Structure represents the organizational chart dimension of how the organization is organized and who reports to whom. *Strategy* covers the actions that the organization plans to take to achieve its goals in the environment with its operations and operational environment. *Systems* cover the formal and informal ways of doing things, how to handle information, how the budgeting happens, and how people have access to information. The importance of systems, especially IT systems, has risen considerably since the creation of the model in the seventies. *Style* refers to the way leaders spend their time and how they relate to employees. *Staff* encompasses the people who make up the organization. *Skills* cover the capabilities of the organization or what it can do. *Shared values* are the ideas around which the business is built and are the underlying reason why actions are taken as they are.

The 7S model highlights the fact that changing or developing organizations need to consider the entire organization. Change in any of these parts requires an alignment in the others to keep a balance. This underscores the fact that when planning a change in an organization, you have to consider which elements also need to react if the strategy changes, perhaps new

shared values need to be created or a training program implemented to support the change with new skills.

In their integration and learning perspective, Ely & Thomas (Thomas & Ely, 1996) call for the reasoning for diversity to be enhancing work processes. This can happen by fostering the willingness to learn from cultural diversity and valuing it as a strength of the organization. The 7S model gives a framework to have discussions about the interconnections within the organization and its operations. These discussions can facilitate the organization to undergo Double-loop learning about the underlying assumptions and change their system (Argyris 1977).

The 7S model has been used to build and test operationalized tools for working with organizations. Martens and Dehaes (Martens & Dehaes 2003) created a tool and tested it with several organizations with good results. The tool aimed for three goals: opening doors for more diversity, opening practices of HR and leaders and opening the eyes of staff to create an appreciation of diversity.

3 Methodology

This chapter introduces the research design and methodology of the study. The specifics of the interview study and how the interviews were conducted will be explained. This chapter will also discuss the method used in data analysis and consider the limitations and ethical issues of the study and the research process.

The research is looking to understand the perceptions of people within an organization. A challenge in a qualitative inquiry is to approach the field with an open mind. Phenomenology recommends recognizing researchers' predispositions before the field work, interviews and the analysis to get to the true essence of the phenomena (Patton 2023, 149). Portigal (Portigal 2013) calls for "check your worldview at the door" before entering into an interview.

Qualitative research can be described as three interlocking cycles: the research design cycle, the data collection cycle and the analytic cycle. The research design cycle consists of scoping the research question, reviewing literature for a conceptual framework and choosing appropriate research methods. The data collection cycle tasks include sampling, recruitment of participants and conducting the interviews or other data collection. The analytic cycle involves familiarization with the data, coding the data, working with the data by describing, comparing, categorizing and conceptualizing it. (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2020)

3.1 Interview as a method

In-depth interviews are preferred as the qualitative research method to gather information when the aim is to gather the lived experiences, opinions, attached meanings and interpretations of the participants (Hennink & al. 2020, 117). Topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion may be sensitive or difficult to discuss, and it is hoped that the interview setting will create a relaxed environment. Portigal (2013) states that building rapport with the participant is key to a good interview. Small talk, sharing about one's self may be useful, but can also be confusing or distracting from the interview setting that is not a natural human interaction. As the researcher is also working in a University of Applied Sciences, it was deemed useful to state that in the invitation to the interviews to build a shared bond. However, there could be a case where this also hinders accessing the deeper story or details if the participant thinks, "Well, they know already".

Semi-structured interviews are very common in human sciences because they offer flexibility to explore emerging topics and probe clarifying details (Patton 2023, 374). On the other hand, they are sensitive to the researcher's own opinions or interests or positions, so they require self-reflection to recognize one's own biases. (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015)

Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2022, 43) characterize interviewing in research as pre-planned human interaction that is pre-researched, interviewer-initiated and guided. The interviewer may need to motivate the participant and encourage them to share by creating a sense of trust. There is an inherent power asymmetry in an interview where the interviewer is in control of the situation and guides the discussion. The participant has the task of learning their role and the expectations for them during the interview.

Given the potential of sensitive issues, the tendency of the respondents to look for the "right" answers may be strong. The opening question was designed to be as neutral as possible. In addition, it was considered that the vocabulary used for the phenomenon in the interview could be unfamiliar to the participant.

The interview participant has multiple challenges to relate during the interview. They must cope with the socially unnatural situation of an interview and have to consider their self-esteem or saving face in responding. On a cognitive level, they need to understand what the interview is about and construct responses in spoken language that are descriptive of complex phenomena. (Alvesson 2003)

The interview protocol was designed for semi-structured interviews with thematic areas and questions. However, the discussion could flow in different directions if there would be something interesting that comes up. The Interview protocol was planned and designed after

reviewing literature on interview methods and also after reviewing literature on the concepts of diversity management and DEI initiatives. The interview protocol is included as Appendix 1.

3.2 Conducting the interviews

Interviews are a way to generate data and control the situation to gain relevant data. Person being interviewed is aware of the study and may answer to affect results in their self-interest. When analyzing the content, the context of the data has to be considered. (Krippendorff 2004, 31). Here, all of the data has been collected in the same way and by the same researcher.

For participant recruitment, an open call on the Laurea intranet was used to cast as wide a net as possible and to be inclusive so that any interested people could volunteer. The initial posting attracted few participants. More potential participants were identified and recruited with the help of InCities project staff members via Laurea internal channels and yielded about two-thirds of the participants. Participants also encouraged other people to participate.

Participants were voluntary Laurea staff members. The interviews were conducted via video Microsoft Teams conferencing and recorded. The audio of the recording was transcribed with the MAXQDA transcription tool and manually checked for and corrected for accuracy of content. The language of the interviews was either English or Finnish. Interview content analysis was conducted in the MAXQDA program.

There were 15 interview participants. Interviews were conducted during October and November 2024 and lasted about 45 minutes each. Table 1 lists the interviews, dates, the interview language and the function where the participant works. Participants were Laurea staff members, both teaching and support staff. An attempt was made to have a purposeful diversity on different staff roles. Participants had at least 6 months of working experience at Laurea.

Table 1: Interview dates, language of the interview, and the work function

ID	Interview date	Interview language	Function
P01	2024-Oct-28	Finnish	RDI
P02	2024-Nov-01	Finnish	Teaching
P03	2024-Nov-01	Finnish	RDI
P04	2023-Nov-06	Finnish	RDI
P05	2024-Nov-14	English	RDI
P06	2024-Nov-05	Finnish	Support
P07	2024-Nov-06	Finnish	Teaching
P08	2024-Nov-06	English	Teaching
P09	2024-Nov-13	Finnish	Support
P10	2024-Nov-07	Finnish	RDI
P11	2024-Nov-12	Finnish	Teaching
P12	2024-Nov-14	English	Support
P13	2024-Nov-13	Finnish	Teaching
P14	2024-Nov-15	Finnish	Teaching
P15	2024-Nov-15	English	Teaching

3.3 Considerations and limitations

Ethical considerations for the study follow the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) (Ohjeet ja aineistot s.a.). This thesis needed a research permit from Laurea as the intent was to interview staff members. The research plan and data management plan (Marjamaa 2024) were reviewed and accepted during the thorough research permit process by Laurea. Participants who were willing to volunteer for the interview booked their times and were informed of the purpose of the study and how the data would be handled. There was no compensation for participating. A digital signature platform was used to ask explicit written consent for both participation in the study and handling their personal data.

Reliability of qualitative research is founded on the dependability and consistency of methods. Because of the need to make interpretations, another researcher might produce a different analysis. (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2022) Researcher triangulation could be used to increase validity (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2019, 299).

Credibility in qualitative research stems from whether the utterances were recorded and transcribed accurately, if the responses were interpreted correctly, and if participants understood the questions as intended. Qualitative analysis is a creative process that depends on the capabilities of the analyst. Validity and reliability of the research can be evaluated based on the reporting of the data collection method and analysis process. (Patton 1999, 1191).

Transferability of the study results is the measure of usefulness or applicability of the results in some other context. As is typical for qualitative research and especially interview studies, the sample is small. The study aims to support the target organization, but the results might support other similar organizations as well. Most Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences share similar attributes and history since they were created by government actions at the same time (Lyytinen 2014).

The interviewer researcher should be aware of the inherent power relations in interviews, which can affect the interview session. The interviewer has initiated their contact and defines the topics and the situation, which can lead to a one-directional dialogue. Where the interviewer may even intentionally influence or manipulate the interview. Ultimately, the interviewer has the monopoly on the interpretation of the results. (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015) Therefore, it is important to be as transparent as possible in analyzing the results.

3.4 Data analysis

This study can be described as a phenomenographical research that is attempting to describe participants' conceptions and ways of thinking. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022) All interviews were transcribed with MAXQDA transcription software to expedite the process. Each transcription was checked for accuracy and relevant mistakes were fixed based on memory and the recording. The analysis process is shown in Figure 6.

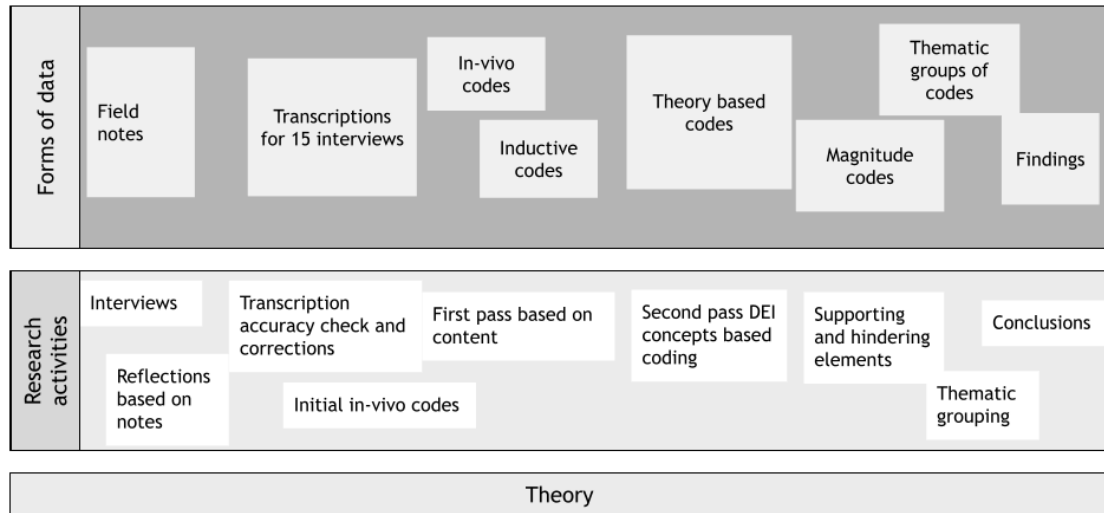


Figure 6: Data analysis process

Thematic analysis was conducted in MAXQDA with coding based on both emergent themes and research questions. Initial data coding happened during and immediately after the interview with handwritten field notes. A quick reflection of notable responses formed an initial impression. The first coding pass happened at the same time as the transcript review, with inductive open coding of the themes that emerged from interviews. During this pass some InVivo codes for possible quotes were also used to keep track of illuminating or striking responses. These first passes through the 15 interviews resulted in over 80 codes after some further review and consolidation of duplicates.

The second pass of coding was then done to group codes under more general areas guided by the DEI concepts. Analysis produces a condensation of meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015, 231) by categorizing the responses. Another pass with a classifying magnitude coding produced a determination on issues or elements that were seen as supporting DEI initiatives or seen as a hindrance (Miles & al. 2019, 80). Thematic grouping creates higher-level categories (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton 2013). The final step aims to generate meaning out of the data. The main method here was to look for similarities, themes and contradictions in the data. The findings show a mix of theory-based and emergent themes.

The goal of the analysis was to answer RQ2 and RQ3. First, to understand the perception of the current state among the staff. Secondly, to learn about their needs for improvement or strengths to be enforced in the future development of the DEI initiatives and activities at Laurea.

4 Findings

This chapter introduces the findings from the interviews about the perspectives, understanding, experiences, and expectations around the DEI issues and initiatives at Laurea among the staff members. The participants are identified by an ID to protect their identities. The interview quotes have been translated from Finnish to English by the author unless marked as “Original English”.

The general attitude towards DEI issues seemed positive. The organization is seen as aiming for an inclusivity where no one needs to be afraid. The local student union is also promoting the principles of a Safer Space to combat harassment (Laureamko’s principles of safer space 2025).

The findings suggest a staff that is willing and interested in engaging in a more thoughtful DEI work. The staff of Laurea is characterized by the participants as majority white and Finnish. The participants recognize that the amount of diversity in students is increasing and that the new strategy will increase the demands for more internationalization and, through that, will result in increasing diversity. There is hope for more discussion and sharing of expectations.

Kulik (Kulik et al. 2007) found in their study of voluntary equal opportunity training that people with higher diversity skills were more likely to attend the training. This is due to high competence, also making them more aware of their missing skills. This effect is likely present in this study, so that participants are likely to have higher than average interest and therefore skill level regarding DEI issues.

4.1 Perception of Diversity

Several types of diversity were brought up by the participants in the interviews. Figure 7 shows the types and categories that emerged in the interviews. These represent both surface-level and deep-level diversity (Harrison & al. 1998).

Reported diversity types can be grouped into a few categories, with some remaining as their own category. Gender, age, and physical disabilities are examples of observable differences that have also long been recognized in laws. Sexual orientation and recognition of pride celebrations were reported. Another category of differences could be described as a perceived difference from the Finnish norm. These include being an immigrant or a child of immigrants, being racialized, and the first language not being Finnish. Closely related and possibly overlapping with previous categories are varying cultural backgrounds and religious differences. A diversity category that is talked about more and more is related to personal capabilities or skills, which includes various learning difficulties, non-observable disabilities

and neurodivergence. Variation in teachers' pedagogical skills or level of training was also reported. One more source of diversity is the environment where people live.

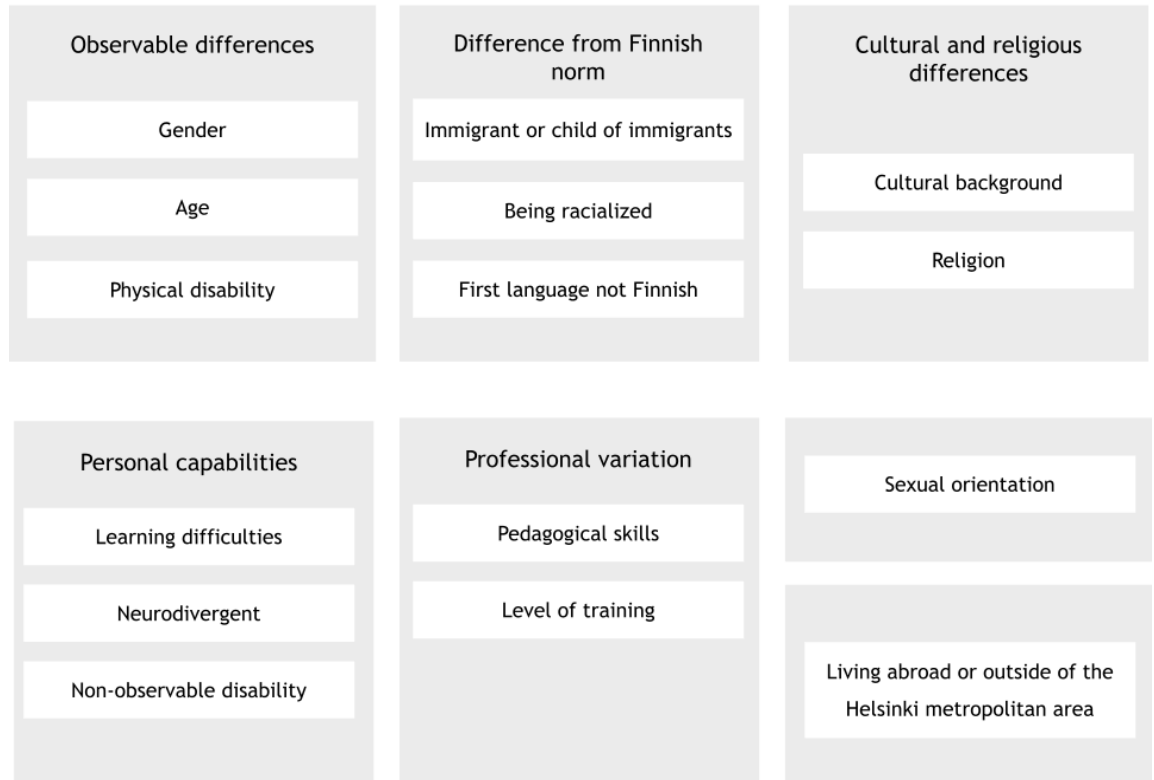


Figure 7: Types of diversity from interviews

What is notable in the types of diversity is that there was a sense of personal experience or interest that was shown in most of the mentioned diversity aspects. This suggests that there is no shared view on the most salient or relevant types of diversity at Laurea. It is natural that “Learning difficulties” and “Neurodivergent” are relevant for teachers because they affect the day-to-day work.

A lack of visibility or uncertainty on the strategy was a common point of concern among many participants when discussing diversity. This participant expressed not knowing if there are actions ongoing to increase diversity, and also was not aware if increasing diversity is even a goal for the organisation.

“... are actively doing anything. To make our working environment more diverse, if we are that is not visible to me (...) as strategy that do we even want more diversity” P01

4.2 Strong inclusion and belonging

Inclusion is a multi-level phenomenon and can also be momentary. Findings show various experiences of inclusion at different levels of the organization. Examples include individual level inclusion, team level inclusion and Laurea level inclusion.

Almost all respondents felt a strong inclusion at Laurea, with many mentioning a strong collegial bond and a Laurea spirit where staff are willing to help and support each other. The strong collegial bond and willingness to help anyone were present in many of the interviews and from various parts of the organization.

“I really have to brag a bit that at Laurea we have this community (...) that (even) visitors notice the special atmosphere” P10

On a team level, almost all participants appreciate their team leader’s work in inclusion and being open to feedback. Flexibility in work allocations and the possibility for part-time work were seen as good for inclusivity.

Some participants recognize the need for more discussion and thinking internally before any large-scale training about DEI is given, so that it is understood how it will be visible or acted on in various activities. This seemed to echo the feeling of not being included in some earlier development processes planning.

Inclusion acts from higher management were seen as performative inclusion acts. One participant with a long career stated that the gulf between top management and the rest has been widening in the last few years. It seems that different rules apply to different people. These observations are hurting the sense of inclusion.

Inclusion on a peer-to-peer level seems excellent and team leadership is appreciated. However, the top leadership is not engaging as much as the participants would like and there is a lack of trust.

4.3 Experiences of equity

Equity is not perceived as a serious problem but equity and equal treatment issues have a few areas that were present in almost all interviews. In terms of equity and equal treatment, common issues raised were access to information due to differences between Finnish and English information. Laurea is seen as a very Finnish organization and the main language of operations is Finnish. The issue of access to information in English was recognized as an issue regardless of the native language of the participant. Some recounted new tools being used at a Finnish-speaking event for automatic translations, which shows that the organization has

some awareness of this issue. Interestingly, the system was not producing accurate translations and was described as unusable by a participant.

Participants highlighted differences caused by different work contract types and varied practices among teams or departments. Variations in working conditions were raised by some participants as contributing to inequalities. One source of the difference comes from teachers' and researchers' work contract types, one has a yearly overall work time the other has a weekly work time. Variation in team practices could be harmonized by guidance from higher management. This is the same flexibility that was seen as strength for inclusivity.

An example from one interview about teaching is very illustrative of the difficulties of equitable treatment. In this online learning situation, the norm is that students should have their cameras on for the video call, but in this case, it was relayed that having the camera on violated the religious norms of the family of the student. If this one student gets an exception, it is not equal treatment towards the other students who might like to keep their cameras off as well. The interests of respecting individuals' culture and equitable treatment conflicted here.

4.4 Societal need for diversity

The purpose of higher education is to train the future workforce for the needs of the future society. Already today the society is seen as more diverse than the Laurea staff is by all of the participants. The types of diversity the society currently has and will have in the future require the students to have suitable skills and competencies to work in that environment. Some participants expressed worry about the readiness of graduating students, because the studies do not offer sufficient exposure and training in dealing with diversity in terms of cultural, language and inclusive behaviour competences.

“If we think that we need a lot of immigrants and we need diversity so that we will even manage, then whatever perspective we take, so that we would have understanding towards our future clients, for example, or who we already have as clients, for sure we should have vastly more diversity in our lecturers and teachers “ P03

“university could be a little bit more English, but then all the collaboration partners. We still have problems with partners that they are not willing to take (...) as trainees, even is they have good Finnish or even if they are Finnish speaking if they say that they study in English” P07

The data also suggested that some employers have raised concerns about the lack of cultural awareness of the graduating students. There is a discrepancy here, on the other hand some employers are asking for more cultural awareness, but are not showing willingness to engage with diverse students. There were also some mentions of students being hesitant to use English, suggesting that their language skills or confidence would need improvement as well.

4.5 Barriers for improvement at Laurea

The participants did not consider Laurea as very diverse. Their perception of Laurea is that it is primarily a white and Finnish organization. Reasons for this include Finnish being the working language, Finnish degrees and qualifications being preferred, and Laurea graduates being preferred. However, there is very little evidence of any problems with integrating minority staff members.

When discussing barriers to more diversity, Laurea is seen as favouring its own alumni in hiring new staff members.

“People at Laurea like people who graduated from here” P07

This, on the other hand, might be contributing to a sense of inclusion and belonging, which is seen as a strength of the organization.

Based on non-Finnish participants and supporting responses from Finnish participants, Laurea’s practices can be described as assimilating the diversity rather than looking to include them. Related to equity, the access to information is not equal between Finnish and English, as not everything on the intranet is available in both languages, and if it is, it's not exactly the same information.

The use of the English language was a common theme in the interviews. It was noted that there are practical reasons why teams might not want English-speaking staff members. Adding one would mean changing the working language to English and that might be too much of a change for the manager. Within recruitment, barely any job postings are in English, and one of the problems is that there is not enough teaching or speaking work to include many English-only speaking staff.

When discussing the possibilities of hiring more non-Finnish speaking staff.

“... then what is the willingness in the management for real. And where the willingness comes from is of course from their knowledge and consciousness (is the issue), whatever that consciousness then might be” P06

The requirement to be fluent in Finnish was seen as a strong factor in many instances. Sometimes it is an explicit requirement for an open position and other times it is thought to be an implicit requirement of convenience to keep the working language as Finnish in the team. Preference on Finnish qualifications is seen as contributing to this as well.

A participant was talking about the internationalization of education and the very few numbers of international colleagues. The main working language is Finnish and there has not been a lot of need to adapt so far.

“we have not been able to adapt our operation model in such a way, that this bilingual (organization) would be possible” P04

Here, the organization needs to decide how much effort it is prepared to put in preparing for more diverse future employees. Based on the interviews participants were not seeing much effort or willingness currently to include more diversity.

Resistance and rising pushback for DEI initiatives were recognised as a factor in society but was not seen to be an issue at Laurea. This might not mean that there isn't resistance but only that there has not been significant actions to resist yet. Some recounted that there were some signs of some colleagues feeling threatened or worried about losing something or annoyed about having to have “special” treatment.

4.6 Perception of the strategy

The new strategy is seen as very ambitious, with a lot of internationalization and international cooperation in it. However, there are doubts whether it will have enough resources to achieve its goals. There is a tension between the ambitious words and statements of the new strategy regarding international work and the lack of investment in internationalization.

The worry about Laurea being out of step with society was also mentioned while discussing the strategy. Here, it is coupled with the tension between staff representations and the student population and their future work-life. Concerns about the skills and attitudes of graduating students about working in an international context were also raised.

“I think we don't visibly cherish anything multicultural, even though it is in the strategy. And the students need to grow up and get used to that (multicultural) world. (...) That is something we should improve.”

P01

Some participants brought up the need for skill development, but had concerns if Laurea is working on building that understanding. On the other hand, the new skills and needed

competences could be acquired by recruiting new staff members. However, there was also a concern about whether the missing piece is understood in the organization.

“Why are we not defining more clearly what are the skills that more international education calls for?” P04

On the whole, the strategy is seen to promote international cooperation, but the resourcing is not seen to support that.

“We’re told that we should be international, but it’s not being kind of supported in our own development” P08 (Original English)

Additionally, tensions exist regarding flexibility in work culture expectations and the balance between becoming more international while retaining Finnish as the main communication language.

Education export activities are seen as acting too fast and not considering the ethical issues, equality, and inclusion aspects. The business side of education export causes worries of contributing to or causing exploitative practices.

“education export related ethical questions (...) what is the underlying ethics and will there be equality and equity and respect (...) or is it just all with money first” P03

There have been some experiences of being listened to about education export-related concerns but after all those did not seem to have any effect, thus creating a feeling of fake inclusion acts.

4.7 Hopes and wishes

Overall, the staff seems interested and willing to work on DEI issues. Most respondents evaluated that Laurea has had little internal discussion on how to deal with these issues or challenge possible biases that staff may have. It is not clear where or how the organization wants to develop.

“I believe that all diversity gives more space for other kinds of diversity” P06

There is a wish for more bravery from management to boldly express the goals and be willing to stand by them regardless of the inevitable pushback or critical discussions.

*“But I don’t know if we have the fortitude and will to weather the sh*tstorm (...) and to say we are committed to this change” P07*

Talking about ways forward and how to develop the Laurea organization, the wish for more discussion and space for thinking was mentioned. The participants were conscious of the potential of being biased and were hoping for training that induces reflection on a personal level.

“I somehow think that inevitably the awareness - personal awareness improvement leads to some kind of an understanding about how to act with other people (...) I don't believe in lectures about this” P02

Participants expressed a need for more discussion on ethics and conceptualization of DEI at an organizational level to be able to bring the strategy to practical actions.

“I wish for more discussion as a collective on what this diversity and (...) equity means for us at Laurea and what are the concrete ways we could - for example in teaching or students interactions and guidance - do to further it” P14

This also illustrates a common view on DEI statements in general, where they are seen as broad proclamations that need to be interpreted together for consistent activities. While staff members are looking for more discussion and training, they also recognize that it takes resources. DEI competences are seen as relating to all areas and should be present in all thinking, actions, and structures. It is the ability to act in an international context with diverse people and being able to get your point across.

4.8 Key Findings

The findings suggest a staff that is willing and interested in engaging in more thoughtful DEI work. Key findings are collected in Table 2. The staff recognizes that diversity is increasing, and the new strategy will increase demands for internationalization and diversity. However, the strategic goals for DEI issues remain unclear. They also feel that the organization is not working to make itself more inclusive. There could be more done to prepare for the skills and competencies that will be needed.

Integrating a set of diverse people, sometime in the future, into an organizational structure and culture that is defined by the white Finnish-speaking and Finnish-educated majority will be a challenge. At the moment, Laurea doesn't seem to be actively looking to leverage the potential of diversity in terms of developing the organization or using it to learn. However, it is also not experiencing any major problems with the current diversity based on the findings.

Table 2: Key findings of factors hindering or supporting Diversity, Inclusion and Equity.

Hindering	Supporting	Hopes and wishes
Lacking understanding of the strategy	Diversity is seen as something that is needed	More discussion on ethics and competencies
No shared view on the most salient types of diversity for Laurea	Inclusion on a collegial level is very strong and most teams feel inclusive	More systematic processes and harmonization
Inclusion of non-Finnish speakers	Worry about the cultural readiness of students	More bravery
Diversity is being assimilated into the Finnish way of working		More inclusion in decision-making from top management
Tension felt between the strategic goals and the given resources		
Variation of working practices		

Based on the findings, issues hindering the development of diversity, inclusion and equity within the organization include a lack of understanding of what the strategy is and where the organization wants to go. Currently, there is no shared understanding of the most important aspects of diversity to manage or prioritize. Those who have a sense of organizational goals feel that the resourcing is not supporting the goals. Leading to wonder if it is just talk. At present, there are only a few non-Finnish speaking staff members and they are not used as a source of diversity but are rather being assimilated into the Finnish way of working.

Despite these challenges, some findings support a stronger emphasis on DEI issues. The findings suggest that diversity is seen as necessary in the current working environment and in the future. There are also concerns about the cultural skills and readiness of students to meet these needs in the workplace, which are strong drivers to incorporate more diversity-conscious learning. The strength of Laurea staff is a strong collegial inclusion, which could be leveraged to also include a more diverse group of new colleagues.

There are hopes for more harmonization and standardization of processes to address unequal work practices or variations between teams. To increase diversity, there are hopes for

management to show more bravery and make bold decisions, as well as for more discussion and inclusion in decision-making. The research findings suggest that the staff is ready and willing for more diversity, but it is also concerned about the fairness and ethics of the methods for adding more diversity.

5 Results

Based on the findings, the organization is not widely developing DEI issues, but has a staff that is aware of the need for a more diverse and inclusive workplace.

A key for creating an effective change process is making a concerted effort to build a shared understanding of the current situation and an appreciation of the need for the change. This is the vision-building phase of Kotter's model. The challenge for an organization such as Laurea is to find the resources to engage in a potentially time-consuming internal discussion. Additionally, research shows that DEI initiatives should not be seen as a separate activities but as an integral part of every structure and every decision-making process. However, to reach that point, a process of learning supported by discussion and training is needed.

Laurea has an organizational strength in a strong sense of belonging among the staff members. This is a valuable asset that should be understood more explicitly and the process that created it should be recognized. It would be important to be able to maintain it when the organization starts to include significant amounts of diversity. This shows the importance of the need to reflect on the existing and underlying assumptions and practices to be able to develop and progress. Otherwise, the homogenous majority will unintentionally overpower the minority.

In terms of the building blocks of inclusive culture, there is an effort needed in building and enabling more of a plurality point of view. Clarifying the goals of the strategy and harmonizing team processes would improve the trust and integrity of the organization. To build reciprocal understanding, more sharing and discussions on ethical and moral issues of diversity would be useful. More interaction fosters stronger relationships that are an important part of an inclusive culture as defined by Pless and Maak (2004).

Martens and Dehaes (Martens & Dehaes 2003) have shown good results with a diversity management tool that is based on the 7S model for small and large change processes. The holistic nature of the 7S model can support discussions about the implications of certain DEI initiatives. Based on the interviews, some relationships in the 7S model need attention. Staff and strategy in terms of internationalization are not in alignment. There are variations in the leadership style between teams, which creates friction in the structure. The recognition of

competences or previous experience by the system in the form of working contracts does not treat every staff member equitably.

Change means reallocating resources and requires that leadership is seen as committing to the change. One way is to acknowledge the discomfort and distribute it openly and fairly (Adamson & al. 2021). Based on the findings, Laurea could make significant progress if the top management decision-making was more inclusive and set braver goals. The day-to-day work would benefit from the harmonization of work conditions, which could eliminate issues of equity.

6 Conclusions and reflections

This study aimed to explore organization members' perceptions towards DEI issues. The interconnectedness of the world surfaces more diversity in many human interactions and organizations need to actively consider how to manage those issues. This study is connected to the InCities project at Laurea, which is, among other things, developing an EDI plan and developing the working culture at Laurea. The results of this thesis will support planning and selecting focus areas for future efforts.

6.1 Conclusions

Three research questions were formulated to answer the research aim of this study.

Research Question 1: How are the concepts of DEI defined and discussed in management literature?

The management literature discusses diversity, equity and inclusion either as a positive opportunity or a potential issue. DEI can be an opportunity for organizational growth, creativity, innovation, learning and increased resiliency. Conversely, DEI is a potential issue that needs to be managed so that it doesn't risk the business or operational goals. It remains an open question whether added diversity is positive for organizational performance or not. The answer depends on organizational values, organizational context and personal values of the organization members. DEI issues need active leadership to make progress or rein in potential problems from misunderstanding and conflict. Inclusive organizations need to practice inclusive actions on all levels of the organization.

Research Question 2: How are the DEI initiatives and related concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion perceived among the staff at Laurea?

Based on the collected data, the DEI concepts are mostly familiar to Laurea staff members, but most recognize that the organization hasn't put in the required effort to deeply understand how to relate to them in the context of Laurea. There is a significant tension between the understanding of the strategic goals and the experience of the seeming lack of resources and actions to realize that strategy.

Some past issues also raise concerns among the staff members and are seen as evidence of not truly considering DEI issues. The potential benefits are not being leveraged and the potential downsides are not considered either. The organization is seen as inclusive by its members, but at the same time, it is also seen as fairly homogeneous. Therefore, it has not had to grapple with issues of inclusion yet.

Research Question 3: How could the DEI initiatives be enhanced and developed at Laurea with the lens of change management?

The change management literature shows the need to bring everybody along for the change and to make arguments why the changes are needed. The changes towards more diversity and inclusion in this case need strong argumentation for creating a sense of shared values. Organizational culture is made up of interconnected aspects of the organization, and awareness of this systemic view is required for the development of DEI policies. Leadership should actively develop the capacity to utilize the existing diversity to benefit the organization and create stronger inclusion.

Although inclusion is strong on a team level and between colleagues, it seems that having more opportunities for employees to voice their opinions and concerns to feel heard by the upper management would create a stronger feeling of perceived fairness and inclusion (Jiang, DeHart-Davis & Borry 2022). This would work towards alleviating the perceived tension between strategic aims and actions in practice.

Building a working DEI strategy needs to have the backing of the management but it also needs to allow for employee voice to be heard in designing it. Naturally, the organizational systems and structure need to be aligned with the DEI goals because the process is continuous. The significance of DEI is in the act of *trying* to become better (Risberg & Corvellec 2022).

6.2 Value of this research

The study was commissioned by the InCities project at Laurea and was intended to support the development of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives at Laurea. Study results provide a picture of the current state by exploring the awareness and perception of

the DEI concepts and issues. Results show strengths that can be leveraged and also highlight some areas where development is needed.

The results may prove useful for other Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences and other similar organizations as well. Most Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences share similar attributes and history since they were created by government actions at the same time (Lyytinen 2014). These results may spark a discussion at other institutions and a need to study their organization.

6.3 Future research

Conducting this study uncovered new research opportunities that could make the picture richer and more useful for Laurea. This study focused on only the perception of the staff members, but naturally, the main beneficiaries at any Higher Education Institute are the students and their experience should be studied as well. The student population is more diverse than the staff and the effect of this difference could be studied more.

Another avenue would be to study with a focus on a certain group of a certain type of diversity, which could create a more actionable picture of that specific group of staff members. Another natural continuation of this line of research would be to develop new practices or methods and study the efficacy of those practices. To support the continuous improvement of inclusion, the suitability of some measurement methods could be studied.

6.4 Reflections

This thesis work has taken a quite narrow view of a topic that has many levels and viewpoints and is strongly contextually bound. Reflecting on the research design, there would have been benefits to methodological triangulation with a survey before interviewing. For the interviews, an even narrower focus might have given deeper information, but the lack of organizational visibility made it hard to choose a more specific topic for the interviews. As with any qualitative study, a different researcher might have drawn different conclusions.

This research was focused on diversity, inclusion, and equity issues in the organization and did not consider what other development needs the organization might have. Therefore, the research does not reveal anything about the relative importance of DEI compared to other organizational issues. It is possible that participants might prioritize resources for other issues rather than focusing on DEI.

The topic of DEI initiatives touches beliefs and values that are close to discrimination, racism, fear, and hate. While writing this thesis, the world has seemed to change and DEI has become a weaponized part of politics. I wanted to work on this topic because it felt difficult to study

and it has proven that. However, it feels more important than ever to learn about inclusive behaviors.

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ChatGPT by OpenAI and Grammarly have been used for editing and improving the readability and clarity of the text in this thesis.

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APPENDIX 1:

Interview guide Janne Karjalainen Perceptions on DEI initiatives**Preparation**

Join Teams call

Introduction of Janne and research

Confirm consent has been signed

Confirm consent for recording and transcribing

Start recording and transcribing

Introduction

Restate consent for recording.

I am doing this thesis related interview in relation to the InCities project. I am interested in your own experiences and opinions. There are no wrong or right answers. I will be the only one looking at the recordings and transcriptions. If the thesis includes any direct quotes they will not be identified.

We have reserved 45 minutes for this interview. If you want to leave at any time that is ok and it is also ok to say I do not want to answer a question. Any questions or doubts at this time?

I am interested in leadership, staff and work community mostly.

DEI eli Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Main body

Can you tell something about your current role at Laurea? Long have you been at Laurea?

What springs to mind about DEI issues. How familiar are you with DEI discussion

General DEI impression

What kind of DEI issues or discussion have been (if any) visible to you?

What have you noticed in the media?

At Laurea?

Can you tell me more about X

At Laurea: Perceptions on different organization levels: Leadership, team, student work/teaching

Laurea need for improvement problems / issues

Inclusion

How do you personally feel included in your working community

Is the inclusion meeting you expectations

Would you describe the level of inclusion?

How do you think others feel?

Any examples of

Where would you like to see changes?

Equity

How do you personally feel about opportunities at Laurea

Are you aware of problems, if yes what kind?

Any examples of

How do you think this affects the overall workplace? Who do you see having privilege?

Diversity

How would you describe the representation of diversity at Laurea

How do you personally feel about the diversity at Laurea

Should there be more?

Are you aware of problems, if yes what kind?

How do think others feel

Any examples of

What is your impression of Laurea in terms of DEI ? How about in comparison to other organizations?

What is your impression of the state currently? What kinds of activities have you seen or heard of?

How do you feel Laurea has been handling Diversity related issues?

How would you, which criteria would you use for evaluating the outcomes?

How are issues around diversity in your opinion handled at Laurea?

What is your impression of Laurea's initiatives to improve the situation

Is Laurea meeting your expectations?

Closing

We are reaching the end of our time. Thank you for your time.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Or any questions for me?

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions.