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Diversity in Higher Education:
A Bridge Toward
Global Competency Development
on Campus

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of facilitating the development of global competencies through campus diversity, through everyday campus experiences. It is believed to be the responsibility of educators to intentionally provide stimulation that supports students in building relationships outside their homogeneous peer groups to create campus communities that are racially and ethnically diverse. Educational institutions that measure the degree of diversity, not only through statistics, but also by the amount and type of social interaction, may gain a clearer picture as to the state of diversity within their organization. Through the creation of an inclusive campus culture and continual meaningful interaction between a mix of individuals, natural exchanges occur that allow students to gain insight into other cultures. Thus, empowering students to take center stage in their learning journey, during their time at university, and through a *helping others* campus culture, global competencies and cultural intelligence are nurtured through genuine and frequent interaction. The concepts of cultural intelligence and diversity form *stepping stones* that support the global competence development of higher education institutions across Finland. This article is written in connection with a Master's thesis titled, *Diversity in Education: Investigating the Integration of Multinationals in Higher Education.*

Keywords: Diversity in learning, Cultural intelligence, Higher education, Campus culture, Global competency development, Cultural intelligence

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1   INTRODUCTION

The merits of diversity in society have been argued for centuries as seen in the writings of Aristotle and Plato. [1] The typologies that fill many of Aristotle's writings are grounded in a theory of unity based on the differences of equal citizens. While Aristotle embraced diversity and seemed to recognize the benefits of heterogeneity, Plato envisioned a place where harmony and unity were born out of a society of shared characteristics. [1,2] Questions on whether society benefits from diversity and on a nations ability to embrace differences continue to be the source debate. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), global competence can be defined, as, "the capacity to analyze global and intercultural issues critically and from multiple perspectives, to understand how differences affect perceptions, judgments, and ideas of self and others, and to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with others from different backgrounds on the basis of a shared respect for human dignity." [3] Finland supports this drive, as seen in the statement from the former Minister of Education and Culture Krista Kiuru, "it is the political will of the government to develop global competencies in Finland". [4] From an economic perspective, if it is true that the greatest natural resource that remains untapped by nations is the undeveloped skills of a population, then the recent infusion of immigrants could be seen as an avenue toward long-term economic sustainability in Finland. [5] However, inequality and segregation continue to pose significant barriers to the idea of wellbeing and quality of life for immigrants living in Finland. [6] Thus, the question of diversity and social inclusion as a means toward global competency develop lay not only in the hands of politicians and government officials but in the hearts and minds of society.

On an organizational level, strategic plans aimed at preparing professionals for a future without international boundaries, should include concrete measures to ensure global competency development. Additionally, by empowering learners to thrive in a society rich in diversity, academic institutions help ensure their own survival. [7] In some universities of applied sciences in Finland, are plans for diversity that are reflected in their organizational strategies. However, higher education institutions approach this issue differently and how they measure their efforts varies. It was reported by the Ministry of Education and Culture, during their last audit that diversity and global cooperation had not been a priority within higher education institutions resulting in an inability to attract business from abroad. This gap has, been a drain on resources and has resulted in initiatives that lack both impact and long-term sustainablility. [8]

Since the publication of the action plan from the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2012, initiatives that empower students to help themselves during their time at university have been brought to the forefront. On a grassroots level, an emphysis has been placed on student *ownership* in learning. However, curriculum changes and other initiatives aimed at equipping students to interact with others from diverse backgrounds, has yet to be fully realized on behalf of higher education institutions in Finland. [3,6,8] The gap in expectations among educators and students could lead to future conflict as students are expected to accomplish their studies expeditiously while cooperating pluralistically.

2 BACKGROUND & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Long before the most recent push toward global competence development, foundation theorists were providing strong arguments concerning the importance of bringing students from diverse backgrounds together as a medium for cognitive growth. In the 1940's and 1950's the psychologist Erik Homburger Erikson introduced the concept of identity. In his work, he argued that late adolescence through early adulthood is the unique time when an individual's social and personal identity is formed. Additionally, identity involves two elements, a persistent sameness within oneself and a persistent sharing with others. Erikson believed cognitive growth could be gained by offering a psychosocial moratorium or a time and place where people could experiment with different roles before making life-long commitments to an occupation, relationship, and social/political groups or to a philosophy of life. [9,10] In addition, research in the area of social psychology has found that a large body of learning happens passively through mindlessness, which results from previous learning so engrained it becomes common sense or routine and therefore active engagement during learning cannot be assumed. [11]

The theorist, Bargh [12] seems to agree with Gurin. [2] He states that automatic psychological process or preconscious processes take us out of effortful thinking in everyday activities like driving a car or typing but also in our emotional reactions and social behavior. Gurin continues by stating that, it is our duty as educators to recognize these automatic processes in our students and provide learning processes that facilitate active thinking and problem solving. If this reasoning is sound then, what are the conditions that encourage effortful and mindful thought? Experts contend that it is when individuals encounter new environments or situations where they have no script that they begin to think and act in new ways. [2] Thus, individuals who function in complex social environments develop a clearer sense of self and intellectual flexibility that aids them in engaging the world around them. [13] However, in a recent study conducted by Lähdeniemi [14], it was discovered that employers in Finland undervalue the global competencies of immigrants, such as, productivity, creativity and resilience.

According to the well-known theorist Gordon Allport [15] in his classic text, *The Nature of Prejudice*, only meaningful interactions of students can promote social growth and reduce racial prejudice. He goes on to explain the different ways of measuring diversity through the type of interaction. First, there is structural diversity, which measures the number of students in a group who originate from varying ethnic/cultural groups. However, this type of diversity where a mix of student's study in proximity, does not guarantee any real exchange across social boundaries. Therefore, the second form of diversity coined, informal interaction that involves both frequent and quality interaction, leads to genuine global competence development. By promoting social activities, campus events, and other informal interactions students can develop ways of working with others who are different from them, thereby, facilitating the development of cultural intelligence. The third form of diversity occurs through knowledge acquisition and through classroom experiences. Thus, it is not the mere existence of diversity alone that impacts social growth, but it is through the actual engagement with diverse peers that these types of educational outcomes can be realized. [2]

In light of these theories dealing with the development of identity construction and critical thinking, theorists have found that the gap in global competencies impacts student's ability to cope not only academically but also in working-life. [16] Supporters of diversity in higher education believe that by offering students a complex environment, young adults begin to base decisions on more complex perspectives rather than on their loyalty to social groups or commitments. [2] Also, while micromanaging students may result in decreased capacity in critical thinking and problem solving skills, students who are accustomed to close supervision may feel abandoned by educators when left to their own devices. Having said this, personal struggle and conscious thought are key to identity development. [2,11] Therefore, by creating strategies that challenge students through diversity, universities can help shape this stage of human development. [12]

3   METHOD

A scoping method was chosen for this investigation as it facilitated the dissemination of a complex set of concepts and broad topics. The information gathered was then used in mapping out and summarizing key findings and identifying gaps that could benefit from future development. [23,24].

Included in the search for literature were materials dealing with the topic of diversity in higher education institutions across Finland. These were later paralleled with foundational theoriests in the areas of social psychology, cultural psychology and transsition pedagogy. Finally, these concepts were then coupled with data sources containing legislation and government policy specific to this region. Themes uncovered and brought forward through the scoping review were derived from, government publications dealing with health, education, society and culture in Finland [6,7,8]. These, together with theorists mentioned above formed the framework for this publication. [2,9,10,19]

4   RESULTS

The results of this investigation underscore the idea that successful interaction across cultures requires cultural intelligence. It is the responsibility of educators to intentionally provide stimulation that supports student's in building relationships outside their homogeneous peer groups to create campus communities that are racially and ethically diverse. [2] Some concrete examples of cultural intelligence that are valued when working in a diverse environment include, intercultural communication, cross cultural adaptation and intercultural sensitivity. [2,17,18] Having stressed the importance of diversity in higher education, it is important also to note that how universities measure their success in meeting the needs of students does not necessarily reflect the level of diversity on their campuses. One approach focuses on the number of different ethnic groups represented on campus but it does not measure the frequency of their collaboration. Therefore, genuine cultural intelligence is gained through actions

that support cross-cultural collaboration, leading to continuous interactions among a diverse mix of persons over time. [2]

Bringing together the different theorists views with the national strategic plan, a model was created to help visualize the concept of using diversity on campus as a catalyst for the development of cultural intelligence (figure 1).
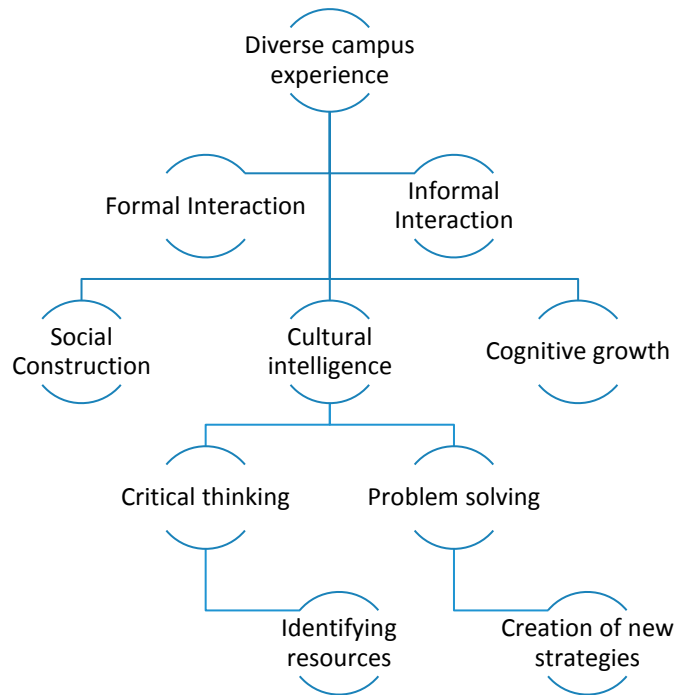
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                    Diverse campus
                      experience
                          |
        Formal Interaction        Informal
                                 Interaction
                          |
    Social           Cultural
  Construction      intelligence      Cognitive growth
                          |
      Critical thinking    Problem solving
                |                 |
           Identifying      Creation of new
            resources         strategies
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Figure 1. Model for supporting global competence development on campus

By promoting social activities, campus events, and other informal interactions, students can develop ways of working with others who are different from themselves, thereby, facilitating the development of global competencies. [2]

5   DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, though institutions may have plans for supporting students in the development of international competencies, they vary in their ability to implement their strategies. [19] One reason is due to the recent education reform in Finland. The performance indicators for universities to receive government funds are, earned credits, awarded diplomas and number of research publications. As a result, universities are pushing to position themselves within the areas that funding favors and cut others. It stands to reason, research that gains funding will drive the future selection of disciplines on offer by higher education institutions. Thus, while the new funding model emphasizes universities impact in their region through research, it may not take into account the heritage that exists around research projects nor the impact a university has on its neighborhood through informal initiatives. Though research is essential for

advancement in the different sectors, other activities surrounding university life should not be forgotten. [20]

Another dimension that could impact global competency development could be the race toward digitalization. In the future, students may never set foot on campus, but instead, participate virtually from wherever they are in the world. Not only will teachers, in Finland, have the opportunity of providing learning pathways for students from diverse backgrounds but they will increasingly be exporting their educational offerings globally. In the future, cross boarder collaboration during learning will become a natural part of each day. The teacher's role in facilitating student's competency development during cross-cultural encounters can be challenging. Triandis, [18] believes that members of diverse backgrounds will interpret their environment and the information they receive differently, thus the weight they put on their experiences may vary. In addition, individuals who know only one culture cannot help but practice ethnocentricity in their daily lives. Anything different from their version of, *normal* is interpreted as strange, immoral, aggressive, and so on. Most are unaware of their biases and therefore lack cultural sensitivity in working life. [18] Thus, these attitudes and lack of cultural intelligence, impact an individual's ability to function in the global community.

Still, the greatest threat to the advancement of diversity on university campuses across Finland may not be the lack of funding or the rapid advancement of technology but the ingrained traditions and hidden biases on campus. If theorists are correct, that new situations will fuel cognitive growth as one seeks new ways of being and doing. [2, 15] then, organizations must guard against the human condition to retreat into familiar environments and social circles. [21] Mark Twain seemed to understand the idea of demonstrating commitment through action as seen in his statement, "actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often". Therefore, an organizations level of commitment toward nurturing diversity and global competence should be evident not only in the lecture hall, but in the daily interactions and encounters that fuel campus culture and life.

6   CONCLUSION

It seems clear, the government of Finland hopes to simulate a more pleuristic society within higher education institutions by including strategies that enhance the development of global competencies in all degree program offerings. [22] Despite the economic and social pressures, educators continue to serve their local community on and off campuses across Finland. [2] However, the realization of a more integrated society in Finland will require true collaboration that extends beyond individuals, action plans and policies. [7] In an attempt to keep pace with the perceived benefits of productivity, let us not overlook the heritage that exists within the Finnish education sector. For example, if universities choose to close the English degree programs due to their inability to meet the new performance indicators set by the government, they remove a valuable avenue for students to gain insight into other cultures during their campus experience. Having said this, it is not only the existence of foreign elements inside the walls of educational institutions but the quality, continuity and longevity of their interaction that impacts the development of cultural competencies. [2] Therefore,

universities must guard against retreating into the familiar and comfortable, in the drive toward diversity on and off campus. [19] Having said this, it is the health and wellbeing of an entire society, as well as, their ability to engage in the global community that can ensure future national stability past 2020. In closing let us remember, it is not only the attitudes of nations toward diversity that helps shape the world we live in, but also how future generations are nurtured.

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