Benchmarking practical Inclusion Methods in higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Higher education learners are increasingly diverse. Applicants' different educational and cultural backgrounds are setting pressure for higher education institutions (HEI) to cater for inclusivity and for students' varying learning expectations and needs. Many HEIs have adopted proactive and anticipatory approaches to meet the demands of non-traditional students. Yet, it seems that the existing approaches or tools mostly deal with "back-end" diversity management, i.e. managing classroom diversity while many supportive and preventive actions should be taken on a systemic level.

The purpose of this article is to explore the needs of higher education decision makers and develop a more strategic and proactive approach on managing diversity. The research takes a multiple methods approach. First, earlier documented student experiences are reviewed. Secondly, educational decision-makers are interviewed for their perception about proactive inclusion actions. The first two explorative studies are conducted locally at a Finnish University of Applied Sciences. Finally, a small-scale desktop benchmark analysis is conducted for mapping out practical approaches (services, toolboxes or other resources) are already available internationally for decision-makers at HEIs to support inclusiveness in policy-making and various educational processes. Based on these findings, a proposal for a self-standing repository of tools enabling systemic and strategic diversity management and inclusivity in curriculum design, curriculum delivery, learning environments, feedback and assessment, and staff engagement is made.

1   INTRODUCTION

Social inequality has been recognized as a major threat for societal trust and order (e.g. Page 2007). As European populations are becoming more and more diversified, cross-border authorities are calling for more inclusive systems and enhancement of learning opportunities to foster social mobility (e.g. the Yerevan communiqué 2015, Paris communiqué 2018). Among other European nations, the Finnish Government is aiming to tackle the looming disintegration and to increase societal permeability by increasing the educational level and competences of all demographic groups in the context of open education and lifelong learning (Opportunities for Finland). These educational goals call for widening access, taking into consideration specific needs and improving the learning outcomes of an increasingly diverse student population.

Identity diversity (e.g. cultural background, physical or mental disability or lifestyle ideologies) often resonates with cognitive diversity (Page 2007, xiv). Human beings have a natural tendency to seek similarity in thinking, appearance or life experiences, and thus socialize with individuals considered as "in-groups" (e.g. Gudykunst 2003). This may inhibit organizations to reach their full creative and effective potential while excluding important perspectives or customer/end-user groups. Awareness building for diverse needs and for developing skills to

address diversity, including inter-cultural communication competence, is typically a medium or long term endeavor (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, p. 201-201). Taking an example of secondary level education, research indicates that even schools with many years' experience of encountering a diverse student population the levels of awareness and the knowledge among staff is relatively low and a need for strategies for responding to increasing student diversity is expressed (Acquah, Tandon, and Lempinen 2015).

1.1   Objectives for the study

As part of an Erasmus+ funded project Enhancing Inclusion and Diversity Management (IDM) in higher education the four partners universities aim to respond to these societal and organizational demands and raise awareness among HEI actors for the importance of diversity management. The objective is to develop inclusive systems and practices for enhancing educational opportunities of previously excluded or non-traditional student groups. This calls for recognizing challenges and varied but specific needs of the previously under-represented groups such as students with different national/ethnic/cultural/linguistic backgrounds, disabled students, and students with differing levels of maturity or prior work experience. The aim of the IDM project is to adopt a proactive and inclusive approach on a systemic level. Therefore, the target group of the IDM project is pedagogical and administrative decision-makers such as programme leaders, development managers, staff responsible for curriculum development and implementation.

The objectives of the study at hand is to explore student and staff perspectives on diversity needs within the Finnish project partner and to propose guidelines for producing a practical and self-standing service or "toolbox" for the partner HEI decision-makers and pedagogical and administrative staff. Later, the project outputs are made available for all interested parties.

1.2   Theoretical framework

The "HEAD Wheel" (Higher Education Awareness for Diversity, Gaisch and Aichinger 2016) serves as a theoretical framework for approaching inclusion and diversity for this study. It approaches diversity at the tertiary education level holistically, challenging to see diversity in a broad sense and including intertwined demographic (age, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental disabilities, cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, religion and ideologies) cognitive, disciplinary, functional and institutional perspectives of diversity. (Gaisch and Aichinger 2016.) Due to the available data, there is a slight focus on cultural diversity in this study at hand.

The key concepts of this study are a "non-traditional student", "diversity" and "inclusion". The term definitions vary in the literature. For example, a traditional student can be considered to have entered HEI after high school or upper secondary school graduation, is younger than 25 years of age and studies on a full-time basis (McNeil, Ohland, and Long 2016). This definition is compatible with our approach. Nevertheless, a non-traditional student can also differ from these attributes and have additional features posing challenges to studying and to the organizing HEI.

In this study, student diversity is understood in the extent of the HEAD wheel, including a range of "diversities" as listed above. However, the term is not dominant, for example, in the UK literature. Instead, "widening participation" describes efforts to increase student body diversity in various social and demographic aspects. Widening participation is intended to cover the entire student experience whereas access or widening access are more commonly used in Scotland and in the US and refer more to the point of entry to HE. In the UK student diversity

is usually being discussed in terms of the method (WP) by which it is to be achieved, rather than directly as an end in itself (Shaw 2011).

Inclusion in this context means including students of different backgrounds (diverse/non-traditional students) and taking into consideration their specific needs in various contexts and stages of educational processes.

2   RESEARCH DESIGN

The research takes a multiple method approach. First, earlier collected and documented student experiences are reviewed. Secondly, educational decision-makers are interviewed for their perception on proactive inclusion actions. The first two explorative studies are conducted locally at a Finnish University of Applied Sciences and the data are categorized based on the EECD framework by Thomas and May (2010). The third method is a desktop benchmark analysis conducted for mapping out globally what kind of practical approaches (services, toolboxes or toolkits, methods or other resources) are already available for educational decision-makers (program leaders, educational and administrative managers) to ensure inclusiveness in policy-making and various educational processes.

2.1   Collecting student experiences

Students' experiences are the primary source for generating insights in terms of detecting needs to improve inclusion and diversity management at HEIs. Many student needs and expectations are known to educational institutions in general, yet relatively few studies have been done to research HEI students' needs related to their diverse backgrounds (see Quaye and Harper 2015). No systematic study has been previously conducted from a diversity management perspective at the project partner universities.

The data were collected during the academic year 2018 during three different study units, and interviews conducted by two separate student interviewers at Laurea UAS, Finland. The participating students during the four different data collection activities were

(1) Two groups of bachelor students on two elective study units. The students (a total of 28) represented various degrees (e.g. business, healthcare, ICT, security management) and nine of them were exchange students from various institutional partner universities globally. The students were formed into four different teams and were asked to write critical incident narratives based on their own experiences at the university. The amount of incidents varied in each group.

(2) A group of Master students (14, representing various degrees) were asked to write individual narratives of critical incidents they had encountered in their current study place.

(3) Purposively selected interviewees (representing students with mental and physical disabilities or with minority sexual orientation). The four undergraduate students were interviewed by a bachelor student and four graduate students by a master student.

The three data collection methods encompassed 50 students altogether. A mixed quantitative and qualitative content analysis was conducted followed by a qualitative theming (Guest, Namey, and McQueen 2012). Relevant challenging or negative student experiences were categorized according to the EEDC framework (Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum, Thomas and May 2010). The framework has been used in the Erasmus project's other sub-projects and was thus found particularly useful for segmenting as it reflects various

decision-making points in the educational process (see categories in Table 1). After three readings of the data the authors were able to arrange the student experiences under naturally emerging subcategories (topics) and to further locate the topics under relevant areas of decision-making. Table 1 brings together only the challenging or negative student experiences. The number of positive incidents were markedly fewer and are not addressed in this study.

Table 1. Examples of students' negative or challenging experiences categorized under systemic decision-making categories, based on the EEDC framework (Thomas and May 2010).

Examples of student experiences	Topics emerging from the data	Category (EECD framework)
"No teaching of cultural competence at the beginning of studies"	Timing of curriculum content	CURRICULUM DESIGN (10) EXAMPLES - Accessibility and flexibility in learning journeys - Co-design of programmes to reflect equality and diversity - Non-discriminative competence standards - Co-create content to reflect diverse, multiple perspectives.
"Not allowed to take a course in Finnish (while studying in a program taught in English)"	Flexible and individual learning paths	
"No Finns in my group! Miss the opportunity to network with Finns"	Lack of inclusion	
"Confusion how to address my teachers, when to provide my own opinions or repeat content from the reading material."	Lack of awareness of different learning cultures	TEACHING AND LEARNING (17) EXAMPLES - Feeling of inclusion by collaborative and respectful student engagement - Range of teaching methods and learning activities - Opportunities to learn in diverse groups - Opportunities to share experiences and perspectives - Accessible materials, resources and activities that reflect diversity and cultural relativity - Teaching and sharing cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills.
"Conflicts in teams due to misunderstandings and different working styles"	Support in team work	
"Assignment briefs difficult to understand. Proper guidance and communication missing."	Intercultural communication competence	
"Diverse case studies and other practical examples needed more."	Diversity in content	
"My teacher is not able to deepen the topic due to her lacking English proficiency"	Language skills	
"Challenges in team work, I am afraid of being left out. I am struggling socially and teaming up is difficult for me."	Support in team work	
"Feedback is insufficient or addressing only processual items"	Range of assessment and feedback approaches	ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK (2) EXAMPLES - Range of assessment and feedback approaches - Involving students in planning, design of a & f practices - Co-design a & f practices and processes
"A group grade is unfair. I suffer from disengaged group members."	Involving students in planning, design of assessment and feedback practices	
"I wish all teachers would automatically use microphones, and subtitles in online teaching or videos. I have a hearing disability and am frustrated to be ask this all over again."	Lack of using appropriate technology	LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS (11) EXAMPLES

"Almost every course is implemented in different environment. I lose my passwords, time is wasted in orienting in new environment. "	Accessible virtual learning spaces	- Accessible physical and virtual learning spaces - Appropriate learning resources
"International students are facing financial difficulties: could someone offer guidance on financial planning? "	Appropriate learning resources	- Internal and external learning partners reflecting equality and diversity - Feeling of inclusion by collaborative and respectful student engagement
"There are no after school activities / clubs. It is hard to socialize with Finns. "	Inclusion	
"Frustrated with heavy toilet doors. "	Physical accessibility	
"Some staff members lack empathy and listening skills. "	Caring attitude	STAFF ENGAGEMENT (10) EXAMPLES
"The high amount of independent studies makes foreign students feel that teachers don't care. "	Understanding diverse needs	- Awareness building, tackling biased attitudes / stereotyping
"Make sure schedules are clear and easily accessible to avoid confusion and delays in returns"	Pedagogical support	- Professional development opportunities - Empowerment to develop practices - Incorporating research, scholarship and information
"I only meet Finnish lecturers"	Staff diversity, recruitment	INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT (7)
"Need to have more content in English on the website / student intranet"	Language policy	EXAMPLES
"Clearly some teachers are not competent to teach in English."	Staffing policy and practices	- Strategies, policies and standards - Recruitment, induction
"Equality or diversity policy not available on the web site. Do we have one? "	Equality policy	- Review, recognition, progression
"Hardly any mature students or with immigration background in the marketing material"	Inclusion	
"Confused about the policy of being absent or missing classes"	Equal standards	

Figures in parantheses indicate the number of all mentions in the categories.

As seen in Table 1, many of the negative student experiences are related to the Teaching and Learning category (17 mentions). This is hardly surprising since the teachers are the most usual student-facing staff. Yet, it can be discussed whether some of the items could also be categorized under institutional management. If academic staff is lacking competence in delivering lectures and learning activities in diversity respecting ways, it is also a responsibility of the management to ensure proper and continuous professional development opportunities and/or appointing only qualified and competent staff members to teach diverse student groups.

2.2   Interviewing decision-makers

While students can be considered as the "end users" of educational services, the academic and administrative staff have a dual role in the service context. The staff is the student facing "service provider" group within a HEI. A teacher is a key enabler of student success yet also bound to the institutional culture, resourcing and empowerment. They do need to follow the curricula, institutional guidelines and other policies which may not adequately take inclusiveness into account. Therefore, as part of the Toolbox development process,

pedagogical decision-makers were interviewed to examine their perceptions about inclusion and diversity management challenges.

The eight thematic interviews with development managers (2), heads of student affairs (2), degree coordinators (2) and module responsibles (2) were conducted in early 2019 by a student member of the project cohort. The interviewees were sent a list of preparatory questions to tune them in on the topic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the student member. The data analysis was conducted by the authors.

Curriculum development together with working life partners was seen as one key factor in order to promote inclusion. According to a recent survey among 18 Finnish HEIs (Toteemi) 40 % of students expressed that they have or have had mental or psychological issues, which hamper studies. Many of the interviewed staff members pondered different preventive actions. They felt that students' diverse needs should be taken into account at each stage of their study paths from access and enrollment to graduation. A model was proposed to align the practices and policies concerning diversity within the institution.

Highly heterogeneous student groups challenge lecturers to come up with various ways to deliver the topics. With students' different maturity levels, professional, academic and linguistic backgrounds lecturers have a difficult task while planning alternative implementations. Flexibility is, thus, important for both students and lecturers. This requires additional work and resources, but was mentioned to also be rewarding.

The feedback system did not get much praise, since the student feedback percentages are very low. The interviewees felt that the process of collecting feedback should be more efficient and utilized better to improve planning and teaching. The respondents also addressed the ethics of evaluation. The assessment criteria must be the same for everyone. The teachers can only support the students to reach the learning objectives, the criteria should not be lowered for non-traditional students. Holding the bar high will help the students in the long run when they pursue their careers. One respondent stated that the recent institutional guidelines for digital learning serve well also in evaluation matters in overall.

In terms of staff engagement the interviewees raised the question of how to find time and resources to develop professionally. Also, they were worried about not having the time to develop the degree in the way they wanted to. On the other hand, the academic staff was described as responsible, caring, creative, flexible and ambitious. In overall, the respondents experienced the institutional working climate as good, which in turn reflects positively on students.

Regarding the learning environments, the respondents found flexibility in both digital and physical learning spaces of utmost importance. With increasing online education, infrastructures and networks must function reliably, and many considered that too much time is used tackling technological problems. It was also found important that students and staff have motivating and accessible meeting spaces.

2.3   Benchmarking practical inclusion enhancing services

The aim of the project is to enhance programme leaders' and academic staff's inclusion and diversity management competence among the partner universities. As part of it, a practical, hands-on service is being planned, currently called an "IDM Toolbox". In order to get an overview of existing similar solutions, a desk-top scoping review and a benchmark analysis were conducted.

A google search with key words "Toolbox diversity university", "Toolkit diversity higher education" and "inclusion service tertiary level education" yielded over 7 million, 40 million and

17 million hits respectively. Thus, a purposive sampling was needed. It included five "toolboxes" from a HEI context, four from other educational contexts and six samples from other professional fields. The selection was based on previously known sources, but also randomly selected exemplars. A non-educational sampling seemed justified for reaching a broader perspective on and understanding fn the topic of "Inclusion and diversity management".

Each "Toolbox" was assessed based on its purpose and goals, target group, main content, format, strengths and weaknesses, and the development of the entity, as illustrated in Table 3. Due to limited space, only two exemplars are illustrated in the below table.

Table 2. Sample of benchmarked inclusion and diversity related „Toolboxes".

"TOOLBOXES"	PURPOSE + GOAL	TARGET GROUP	MAIN CONTENT	FORMAT	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	DEVELOPMENT
Toolbox Gender & Diversity /Freie Universität Berlin GERMANY	Gender- and diversity conscious teaching - introductory, practical advice for classroom, suggestions for further reading.	Lecturers staff members	Good practices Starter kit Guidelines Theory	Web page section (separate entity)	Open for all German + parts in English Versatile: Visual, interactive Great quizzes (based on facts) Checklists, method pools	Mostly gender and cultural diversity	Continuous updating, newsletters
http://www.genderdiversitylehre.fu-berlin.de/toolbox/index.html							
Inclusive curricula and teaching - Southern Cross University AUSTRALIA	a model and range of resources to support an inclusive approach to curricula and teaching	Lecturers staff members	Teaching methods Teacher Learn. Environment Curriculum + assessm.	Part of www-pages	Research-based model Video clips explaining the model Student voices (in postcards)	Part of www-pages, does not appear as one approachable entity No pre-info how many clips to be seen or about the content; e.g. suddenly clips on referencing	Not known Last update 2015, funding received 2014
https://www.scu.edu.au/staff/teaching-and-learning/inclusive-curricula/							

Only services available in English language were reviewed. There was a slight emphasis on services created in the USA but the selection included samples also from Germany, Italy, the UK, and Australia. A trial search in Finnish revealed that there seem not to be similar practical services available in Finnish, at least not in open source. However, this search (moninaisuus / työkalupakki) may have been affected by the fact that the vocabulary is not yet established in this area.

3   RESULTS

The analysis of the student experiences gives a first-hand indication and supports earlier research according to which diversity issues require more attention in HEIs. Despite many good actions taken, the student experiences show that student diversity is not yet fully taken into consideration at Laurea UAS. The situation is estimated to be similar in other HEIs being represented in the Erasmus+ project. Increasing heterogeneity of the student groups calls for more awareness of diverse needs, flexibility, alternative implementations and guidance.

Most critical comments came from students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For example, there were several mentions about lacking language proficiency of the lecturers.

However, this should not be seen as a fault of the individual teacher but rather as a systemic problem. The managers in charge of staffing the study implementations should make sure that the teacher is also competent linguistically. Another frequent mention was communication skills of both teachers and students. This calls for further development of intercultural communication skills for all and including non-verbal aspects.

Mature students or students with diverse religious backgrounds or sexual orientations did not mention specific challenges. Students with mental disabilities indicated a few critical needs. Mostly, they related to mindfulness in social interactions, teachers making sure that all students are included in groups, flexibility in timings and compensatory assignments while some students may be going through demanding therapies. No student addressed gender-related issues although some degrees are highly unbalanced in that respect (e.g. health care, ICT). Overall, it seems that non-traditional students are quite accommodating. They may think that curricula and implementations are designed and executed for the majority (traditional and local students) and they need to adjust accordingly.

The findings only reflect perceptions of critical incidents and do not provide solutions as such. However, many of the required improvements would benefit not just non-traditional students but increase the quality of institutional education in general.

The interviewed decision-makers were aware of the lack of a comprehensive inclusion policy in the UAS and they expressed a need for learning more about diversity. An inclusive working and studying environment is valued, but reaching that goal requires resources and a vision. Many seemed concerned about meeting the student needs. On the other hand, the UAS staff is willing and able to work with the challenges. Digital learning environments enable diverse students to participate, but a continuous development of both digital and face-to-face learning is imperative in relation to the sense of community.

The "Toolbox" benchmark included a variety of approaches. Each one was considered quite successful and appropriate in their respective contexts. Diversity definitions varied, often keeping to ethnicity, gender, age and disability. There was a slight emphasis on the teaching and classroom settings. This means that the tools were often designed to help teachers in planning, implementing and evaluating teaching. The strategic and proactive perspective was less present although it is obvious that in order to be able to design inclusive curricula and develop inclusive teaching and learning practices, the institutional support needs to be secured. The benchmark study revealed many good and bad practices and will help in creating the future IDM Toolbox user-friendly and responsive to the needs of academic and administrative staff. In hindsight, the toolbox benchmark analysis would have been more insightful had the review categories included the same EEDC criteria as used in the two other research steps. This was, however, considered problematic as the study also included other than HEI related services. Some of the existing HEI toolboxes provide useful content and ideas to be utilized for the IDM solution. The non-educational benchmarks gave a few technical or format-related insights. The format and layout, composition and categorization of informative categories need to be clear and appealing. The service should be a stand-alone entity not including external links, which get quickly outdated.

4   DISCUSSION

Based on the insights generated by this explorative study, there seems to prevail a consensus about a need for inclusive practices in HEIs. This is widely supported also by research literature. The work life related tasks and responsibilities are becoming more and more

complex, thus, few of them are tasks which can be taken care of only by individuals. On the contrary, we are facing increasingly complex and even wicked problems which demand multiple perspectives and approaches simultaneously (e.g. Page 2007). Contribution from all, i.e. diverse groups of society, becomes thus critical and can only be achieved if higher education is made accessible and inclusive for non-traditional students as well.

Powerfully designed inclusive pedagogical and administrative policies and practices benefit all individuals. Therefore, all HEIs should invest in diversity management proactively and not wait until issues emerge. The toolbox scoping review indicated that the need to address student diversity and inclusion has clearly been a topical issue in countries with historically large proportions of immigration, e.g. the USA, the UK or Australia. With increasing immigration, European countries need to be soon catching up in their institutional policies and practices. Understanding the diverse needs and providing practical and anticipatory tools and methods will make the inclusive approach in HEIs easier.

This explorative study gives limited insights on the current status of HEI inclusion due to the fact that it was conducted within one partner UAS in Finland. More research is also needed in order to gauze students' experiences equally within all diversity sectors (see the HEAD Wheel). Prioritizing the factors leading to negative experiences is also needed since it is obvious that not all issues can be tackled equally or efficiently. Student intake, an important inclusion aspect, was not included in this study and deserves to be considered more from the inclusion perspective.

5   CONCLUSION

Successful management of diversity and inclusion benefits all, including internal and external stakeholders of a HEI. Understanding the multitude of the diversity dimensions, however, requires further study and development in relation to the comparable practical inclusion methods. Good examples of functioning inclusion methods are already in use within many HEI environments around the world, but in order to really serve the increasingly diverse students and cater to their diverse needs at every stage of their learning journeys, inclusion should be more systematic, more sensitive and be actualized clearly in much more diversified ways.

6   ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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