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FROM THE “HIGH GROUND” OF POLICY TO “THE SWAMP” OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: the challenge of diversity in teaching labour studies

By Dr Philip Frame and Jennifer O'Connor

ABSTRACT

This case study examines the development the diversity management skills of Higher Education students, in the context of the authors' motivation for exploring diversity and an examination of material developed by academics and practitioners from both the United Kingdom and USA. Four elements of the focus course are then presented: student development, learning methods, assessment and student performance. Data from student questionnaires and quotations from students' reflections on their learning are then analysed. This demonstrates that they can operate with a dual perspective, by both "dissolving differences" and "valuing differences" as an effective means of managing diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The paraphrase of Schon (1983) in our title encapsulates the aim of the paper, which is to move from he terms the “high ground” of academia, with its focus on neat theories, into what he terms the “swamp” of professional practice, or dealing with messy reality. We do this by providing a case example of how diversity can be incorporated into a learning environment. By providing real life experience of managing diversity, we enable learners to improve their capability in this area. We believe this model can be transferred to other educational settings, and indeed, the world of work.

Whilst reviewing the diversity literature of academics and practitioners we soon became aware of two issues: firstly, there appeared to be a lack of reported work relating to diversity policy in practice within organisations and more specifically in higher education institutions (HEIs). Secondly, the available material was primarily related to employee policies as opposed to the practice of managing diversity experience. This applied both to members of organisations and students within the learning environment. On the whole there appeared to be much rhetoric of policy which was not often matched by action.

Against this background our paper presents a case study of a course offered at the Middlesex University Business School. We believe it provides a practical example of how an Equal Opportunities Policy such as that adopted by Middlesex University (2001) can be integrated effectively into the learning environment of undergraduate students and then applied elsewhere. More specifically, the paper sets out to achieve the following objectives:

- Outline the sources of the authors motivation for exploring diversity
- Examine diversity material developed by academics and practitioners from both the United Kingdom and USA.
- Present a case study which describes four elements of the focus course, from a staff perspective:
 - Student development
 - Learning methods
 - Modes of assessment
 - Student performance
- Report on the analysis of the data collected from student questionnaires and students' reflections at the end of a twelve-week period on the course. In addition, highlight the added value of providing students and staff with the opportunity to incorporate diversity within the learning experience, as opposed to ignoring or suppressing it.
- Identify areas for future development.

AUTHORS INTEREST IN DIVERSITY

Philip Frame

There are three reasons why I, as a white male with a working class background am actively committed to encouraging the recognition and utilisation of diversity to enhance the student experience in Higher Education.

Firstly, I myself benefited from the recognition of diversity when applying for my undergraduate course at the University of Sussex in the mid-sixties. At that time all those who wished to become undergraduates were required to possess a foreign language. As someone who had failed their 11+ examination, I attended a Secondary Modern School and was unable to attain this qualification. Sussex however had a dispensation for students such as myself: no foreign language was required. I thus obtained a university place on the basis of Sussex recognising the potential of students who had a non-traditional background, and their attempts to achieve a more diverse student intake. Secondly, my undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology taught me, via the study of non-western societies, to recognise, understand and value different practices and beliefs and become less Euro-centric in my views. Finally, I worked for the Race Relations Board in the seventies. This was a government department attached to the Home Office, which was charged with seeking compliance with the 1968 Race Relations Act. The Act outlawed discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, ethnic or national origins. My job was to encourage organisations such as the Post Office, British Gas, and the TUC to develop and monitor equal opportunities policies. In effect this was an attempt to help employers to recognise and manage the requirements of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Jennifer O' Connor

There are a number of reasons why I have developed an interest in diversity. Firstly, I'm a black, British middle class woman who lived in the Home Counties for twenty years. During my secondary education I attended a comprehensive school where I was the only black pupil in the year. Secondly, I believed there were weaknesses inherent within the Equal Opportunities philosophy. Anecdotally, I knew people who refused to apply for jobs which included an Equal Opportunities statement as they didn't want to be hired as a 'token' or that being black was their only valued characteristic. Thirdly, equal opportunities suggested targeting groups that were classified as 'disadvantaged'. Being classed as such felt offensive. In addition, it appeared to absolved organisations and educational institutions from taking responsibility for recognising, valuing and managing the diverse characteristics of an individual at all stages of the employment relationship. Fourthly, as a mature undergraduate with a hidden disability, my individual needs were not always adequately addressed within a system geared towards traditional undergraduate (McNay, 1994). Finally, since becoming a lecturer on the Executive MBA programme it is increasingly apparent that the diverse student population presents opportunities to enhance teaching, learning and assessment practice by exploring the impact of diversity on learning and of learning about diversity.

DIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES

The primary aim of this section is to examine the current literature produced by academics and practitioners in the field of diversity management. Overall the literature has primarily evolved from the USA, however within the United Kingdom the literature has largely developed within the discipline of Human Resource Management. Nevertheless, there appears to be little work that is specifically related to the Higher Education experience. Against this background, the section will address three key issues: firstly, against this background examine the meaning of the term diversity, note the business case argument for adopting the approach and the strategies identified. Secondly, to examine the relationship between Equal Opportunities and Diversity as this will impact not only on the development of policy but also practice. Thirdly, explore the management of diversity within the HE sector from the US and UK perspective.

Why Diversity Management?

Anti-discrimination legislation (sex, race and disability) has played a part in focusing attention on the practice of equal opportunities and diversity, although Ross & Schnieder (1992) suggest that the impact of the law has been minimal, despite, in the case of sex and race, being on the statute books for over two decades. However, there appears to be general agreement that organisations have become more interested in diversity management as a response to increased diversity apparent in both their markets, be they clients or customers, and the labour pool of potential and actual employees. At the common sense level, the concept of diversity may be equated with difference, or indeed a distinguishing characteristic, such as colour. As a result diversity management represents an approach whereby individual differences are recognised rather than ignored.

The “business case” for espousing diversity management has been presented by academics (for example: Foster and Newell, 2001; Liff, 1997, 1999; Schneider, 2001; Ward, 2001;) and practitioners (for example: Johnson and Redmond, 2000; Elmes, 2001; Bain, 2001) as well as professional bodies such as the CIPD. Essentially it is argued that organisations will only survive and prosper in today’s environment if they respond positively to the increased heterogeneity of their markets, customers and employees. In effect, diversity management provides a competitive advantage. In addition, differences are evaluated as a positive source of innovation and improved organisational practice by, for example, utilising multiple perspectives rather than a unitary view. Robinson and Dechant (1997), though, raise a note of caution: they point out that the business case remains to be measured and documented.

The importance of managing diversity has been also been recognised by professional organisations, such as that for HRM practitioners, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). The institute has included managing diversity and equal opportunities in its new professional standards (CIPD, 2001). In addition, the CIPD has appointed an adviser for equality and diversity, and is currently taking forward a number of initiatives in this area (Worman, 2001).

Diversity Strategies

There is as yet little or no advice on how the utilisation of diversity can be achieved. Thus Schneider (2001), who is fairly representative of the field, refers broadly to culture change via management development, change management and “specific diversity awareness-raising and skills-building workshops”(p 30).

What these strategies and tactics would involve in detail remain to be elaborated. Similarly, Worman (2001) revealed that there were as yet few examples of turning diversity policy into practice. It may be that the absence of practice results from the significant resource implications of such activities, which the subjects of Foster and Newell’s research (2001) anticipated. What development opportunities are offered, in-company or by professional trainers often use an exclusive approach, rather than an inclusive approach. Thus, for example, STEPS (2001) offer scenarios on gender or race that are acted out by professionals: trainees are invited to suggest what to do next as the scene unfolds. The focus, though, is a particular theme, such as gender, or race, to the exclusion of other diversity areas and sometimes to the exclusion of those who are not members of the focus group. Thus diversity is developed by exclusion rather than inclusion.

Diversity Management versus Equal Opportunities

Whilst diversity management and equal opportunities are often used interchangeably in the HRM field, some authors have attempted to draw distinctions between them. For example, Kandola & Fullerton (1994) as cited in Goldring (1998):

“equal opportunities were concerned with the assimilation and integration of minority groups, whereas diversity recognises that harnessing people’s differences will create a productive environment in which everyone feels valued and where their talents are being fully utilised” (Goldring, p 166).

Conversely, Liff (1999) argues for the need to offer both equal opportunities and diversity initiatives, and suggests that the former, which she terms “dissolving differences”, is probably a prerequisite for the later, that is, “valuing differences”.

In summary, diversity has become an increasingly important issue for organisations to manage. The significance of diversity appears to be related to diverse markets and labour pools as opposed to the impact of legislation. It is suggested that organisations will become more effective if they pay attention to and utilise the different personal characteristics amongst their employees.

Tension exists in the relationship between diversity management and equal opportunities and this has the potential to have an impact on strategies. Diversity moves the focus beyond assimilation into an organisation, or indeed a university, to a recognition that differences can provide an opportunity for employers, educators and learners.

In the following section we refer to the experience from the Higher Education sector in the US and UK.

The USA Experience of Diversity

Interestingly, the models provided for diversity learning (Diversity Digest, 2001) indicate that diversity issues are addressed in stand-alone modules, rather than permeating the curriculum as a whole. Thus the State University of New York, Buffalo, offers a one-semester course; LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, offers two courses, and St. Edward’s University, Austin, offers four courses. All these models have a focus on content; there is little information on the process of developing diversity management capabilities in the students though Hurtado (1999) refers to an identified need for conflict management and human relations skills.

In contrast, the Californian Department of Education (2000) identifies the process of “co-operative learning” as a means of effectively developing diversity practice. This involves “small, heterogeneous teams” working on a group task. The interdependence that this creates is said to transcend gender, racial, cultural and other differences and to develop the skill of working with different people. In fact, this experience is supported by the work of the Sherifs (1953), who researched ways of resolving inter-group conflict. They discovered that the creation of “super-ordinate goals” or achieving a common objective significantly reduced conflict. The case reported below is an example of co-operative learning, and as such, provides students with the opportunity to develop their abilities to work with diversity.

A review of web-based material suggests that a focus on diversity has had a positive effect on student learning outcomes. In her review of research into the impact of an inclusive approach, Hurtado (1999) reports an improvement in students’ abilities to understand the reality of multiple perspectives, which in turn improves their decision making. It also leads to improvements in the general learning environment, by reducing racial tension and creating a more student-centred environment.

The UK Experience of Diversity

In Higher Education, the move towards an increasingly diverse student population has been recognised for some time. McNay (1994) noted that the commitment to widen access had resulted in a more heterogeneous intake.

This development has been accelerated by the policy of successive governments aimed at increasing student numbers and widening participation, by European Union initiatives such as Erasmus, which encouraged inter-country study, and by student recruitment from the developing world. As a result, and in addition to an increase in overall numbers, there is a reduction in the proportion of traditional students, who McNay (1994) characterises as white, male, middle-class school leavers on undergraduate degree courses living away from home. Modern universities now have a greater gender and racial mix, with students from a range of social classes and with a range of qualifications. European and international students are much more in evidence, whilst patterns of study and domestic arrangements are increasingly varied. As a result, the proportion of non-traditional entrants has increased

Consequently HE can no longer rely on "taken for granted" similarities as the basis for establishing and maintaining a community which provides effective learning opportunities for a diverse range of learners. There is evidence that institutions are responding with a range of strategies and practices. In some instances, induction programmes explicitly address both equal opportunities and student diversity by providing a forum where these issues can be discussed (Frame, 1997). An increase in introductory modules that address study skills or, more generally, personal development is also apparent. "Self Development for Business" is an example of the latter offered by the Business School in 1998. Subsequently, a skills module has become compulsory for all Level One undergraduates attending the University. The development of comprehensive student support systems has also been recommended (HEQC, 1995) and examples of good practice published (HEQC, 1997). Finally, the practice of autonomous learning (DfEE, 1997) and IT based instruction are being developed. In the main, though, these responses attempt to manage diversity via a process of socialisation into the HE system: every one is treated in the same way with the aim of developing all students to a similar level. If we apply the Kandola and Fullerton (1994) model (see above) these strategies represent an "equal opportunities" response. The module described below uses diversity as a positive element of the learning process.

DIVERSITY IN PRACTICE – MUBS CASESTUDY (1999)

The scope of the diversity field is indicated by equal opportunity policy statements such as that of Middlesex University (2001), where the following characteristics are identified: age, ethnic origin, family responsibility, marital status, race, colour, nationality, gender, disability, socio-economic status, religion and sexual orientation. Equality is usually espoused both in how organisations treat their employees and how they provide goods and services. Thus the Middlesex statement also appears in the "Student Guide and Regulations" (1999).

The primary aim of this section is present the diversity factors considered when designing the Organisational Consultancy module from the tutors' perspective. More specifically, it will consider the module in relation to student development, teaching

methods, the assessment process and student performance. Secondly, and in light of the diversity amongst the student group, the students' perspective of diversity will be analysed. The data was collected from student questionnaires and reflections during the 1999 module run.

Managing Diversity – The Tutors Perspective

"Organisational Consultancy" aims to provide student with "real life" experience by engaging them directly as consultants with organisations and the issues those organisations have identified as significant. On organisational premises, and in collaboration with the internal personnel there, a small team of students elaborates the action issue with their client. Information is then collected, using a variety of research methods, and analysed in the light of both academic theory and the specific organisational context. Recommendations for action, both orally and in writing, are made to the client. As well as the reality of the organisation they also experience the reality of working with a team of their peers to produce credible outcomes.

Initially, four developmental workshops are provided: these cover team building, consulting, organisational culture and client contact. Four feedback sessions are organised during the subsequent consultancy phase of the module. The parameters within which the module operates are defined within the programme handbook, but within these parameters students are expected to take responsibility for their own work and that of their team.

This is a Level Two module of eleven weeks, normally undertaken by undergraduates in their second year. It carries the same credit award as any other module and is an elective rather than a compulsory module. Numbers are restricted to 100 students per cohort and attendance at workshops and lectures is compulsory. Feedback from students, from organisational clients and from a number of external examiners over the ten years the module has been in operation has been extremely positive.

Student Development.

The student group thus involves a mix of ages, gender, ethnic backgrounds, religions and experience. The tutor team harnesses this diversity in two specific ways: by focusing on the process of team building and maintenance, and by awareness raising in respect of the different cultural differences between organisations.

Students are allocated to teams on a numeric basis: our aim is to ensure a mix of experience and background. We dissuade people from "working with their friends".

We strongly recommend that no single gender or overseas nationality teams are formed, as these tend to limit the experience of those involved.

At their first workshop the topic of teamwork is addressed. Students are actively encouraged to reflect on and share their own experience, both generally in respect of their strengths and weaknesses, and specifically with regard to team work: what went well, what did not and how they would want to operate in the future.

Some academic input on roles in teams is provided, not as a prescriptive device but rather to help the reflective process. Tutors also shared their own experience of

working in teams. In this way the diversity of team members is actively exposed. It is also utilised as the basis for the team's written contract, which specifies how they will operate and the sanctions for non-participation. Thus the process of teamwork is directly addressed, not "taken for granted". It is done in a way that utilises the diversity within each team. Importantly, it requires each team to reach agreement on how it will manage the diversity that has been exposed.

But what constitutes diversity in approaches to teamwork? And can one generalise on the basis of nationality, as an example of the diversity issues we are examining? One year our cohort included Portuguese, French and of course British students. Our informal enquiries of each nationality group revealed the following self-perceptions:

- The British divided the work between them, operated independently and met up to share results.
- The French preferred not to rely on others; therefore all group members did all the work
- The Portuguese liked working together: every one did the work but as a group.

Whilst in no way conclusive, this suggests that there are perceived differences of approach to group work, not least between national groups: only by some form of discussion can this difference be made explicit and in some way accommodated. How students from different national groups perceive the activity known as "team work" would bear further investigation, as would their various definitions of other elements of the pedagogical process, such as lectures.

We also raise awareness of diversity via a role play exercise which aims to sensitise students to their own preconceptions. In this instance, one group can only achieve their aim if they identify and operate within the cultural mores of the other group. These mores reverse traditional gender roles. For example, males are submissive and silent; female have the power and only they can negotiate. By extrapolation, students learn that not all clients are the same: they are diverse. When they go into their client organisation they must be alive to the cultural clues available to them and operate in tune with these if they are to be effective.

Teaching Methods

As with the students, the tutor team represents a mixture of genders, cultural backgrounds and experiences. One is a male French-Canadian; three of the remainder are female British born, but with either an Afro-Caribbean or Polish parental background. The final two are British born (one male and one female) with a British parental background. It is not our purpose here to explore the effects on teaching style of these various backgrounds, though it would be an interesting area for further study. Rather it is to indicate how this diversity can be utilised because of the way in which the module is structured: we demonstrate by our interactions that a diverse course team can work together effectively.

The module provides the parameters within which the tutor operates. These include workshop topics and activities, and some indicative timings. Beyond that each tutor

can craft their face-to-face contact with students as they see fit. In fact they are actively encouraged to "put something of themselves" into their performance, to illuminate the teaching with the light of their own experience. Thus staff are encouraged to utilise their particular perspectives, rather than "all sing the same song". This helps them to take ownership of the process and enhances the students' learning experience. The only given in respect of how they manage their student contact is that they should facilitate and help, rather than lecture and direct. With this style of learning, it is impossible to prescribe in detail "the rules": all tutors are required to "play it by ear". They respond to diverse situations as they arise. Because diversity within the staff team is recognised and valued, it provides a form of behaviour modelling for students.

The module co-ordinator provides the quality control and all the team are involved in quality enhancement.

The Assessment Process

Four modes of assessment are employed and they reflect the aims of the module and also provide a diversity of methods, which is thought to reflect the diverse strengths and weaknesses of the student group. All students are required to attempt, though not pass, all four of the elements: a written report and oral presentation to their respective clients, a team peer-assessment exercise and an individual learning report. The learning report requires students, on an individual basis, to identify and review their learning from both their experience of the module and with specific reference to their client contacts. The areas addressed are knowledge, skills, attitudes and emotions. It is this last requirement that has provided a rich source of data on diversity management in practice, and this is reported below.

With each element of the assessment process, it is up to the students, with help from their tutor, to interpret the guidance on these four elements, although we do insist that the peer assessment follows the three-stage process that we have identified.

Even here students have a degree of latitude: what they chose to assess (what criteria and how many), and the manner in which they do this (together for the whole process or only to give feedback) are their responsibility. It is this responsibility that allows students to introduce a degree of diversity into that most significant of all HE activities. By providing guidance and support, and not presenting the group with the "one right answer" or "one right way" we encourage variety. By encouraging this variety we underline the value of diversity.

Student Performance

The students achieved higher than average grades on this module in comparison to other modules. Thus in 1999, 68% achieved a 1st and 32% achieved a 2:1 which represents the full cohort. Whilst clearly there are other variables which enhance student performance as outlined above in our description of the module, we would argue that the recognition and valuing of the diversity elements has not had a negative effect on performance.

That these marks were fair and representative of the work done has been confirmed by our external examiner (an external verifier of our teaching, learning and assessment) who commented, "this module has successfully run over several years and the students' rise to the challenge and achieve high grades. I was impressed by both the student work and the work of the teaching team".

Managing Diversity – The Students Perspective

Whilst diversity issues concern a growing number of staff and institutions in the HE sector, we felt it useful to examine how significant the issue was for the student body. In particular, we explored whether "Organisational Consultancy" provides a forum for diversity to be exposed, acknowledged and managed.

The Cohort Profile

The diversity of the 1999 cohort was explored via a questionnaire that was completed by 64 student, or 89% of the group. The following points emerged.

- The majority of the group were 25 years of age or under (78%). 42% of the cohort were aged between 18 and 21.
- 22% of students were over 25, with 6% being over 30. Thus there were not an insignificant number of "mature students."
- The gender balance was 60% female and 40% male.
- The students were invited to specify their ethnicity, which resulted in the identification of eight categories. The largest group was Western Europeans, which comprised 41% of the cohort, followed by British born Asians (25%) and British born Africans (16%). Additionally, the group included Chinese (8%), Greek (6%), Turkish (6%), Afro-Caribbean (5%) and Filipino (1.5%) students, but in much smaller numbers.
- In terms of religion, the largest grouping (53%) was associated with some form of Christianity (Roman Catholic, Church of England, Protestant). 13% of the group were Hindus and 8% Muslims. Buddhists and Sikhs comprise 5% each. Finally there were very small numbers of Orthodox (both Greek and Christian) and Jewish students.
- Some form of part-time employment was undertaken by 56% of the group, with clerical, supervisory and sales jobs being those most frequently identified. In respect of hours, 36% of the group were in paid work for between 11 and 20 hours per week.

Individual Learning Report – Students views on Diversity

The following quotations were drawn from the learning reports of 39 students (49% of the whole group). These reports were examined for the inclusion or absence of references to diversity-related issues such as culture or gender. There was no requirement for students to identify such issues, but rather to review their learning in the four areas identified above. Interestingly, 79% (31) referred to some form of difference as being an area of learning, as the following quotations indicate. These are arranged into two broad categories. Firstly, quotes from students were organised based on specified diversity dimensions espoused in the literature: the impact of age, gender and nationality, different backgrounds and appreciating cultural diversity.

However, students demonstrated that they valued diversity and had developed key diversity management skills. Therefore the second set of quotations are organised under the following headings: tolerance and ambiguity and valuing individuality.

Student Quotations which identify specific Diversity Dimensions

The Impact of Age

Both mature and young students noted the significant influence of age diversity. This was seen as an inhibiting factor at initial team meetings.

“Being a mature student and having the most work experience of the lot, I had to adjust myself mentally in order to work well within the team. Initially, all members were very “respectful” of me as they listened and waited for my ideas. After a few meetings, I managed to encourage them to speak up as we got to know each other better.” (KLN 1999)

“At first I felt a little apprehensive to share my thoughts and ideas with the team, especially as two of the team were mature students.” (NEI 1999)

Interestingly, both students regarded age disparity as an issue to be addressed and managed. In one instance, though, it would appear that the influence of age (and culture) remained an issue, which negatively influence the teams operations.

“They failed to be aware of their effect on other members although this may have been due to difference in age and culture.” (KW 1999)

Gender and Nationality

Few references were made specifically to the influence of gender and nationality, although the following is an exception:

“We are all from very different backgrounds and I admit I did have initial reservations about working with three non-English women.” (EH 1999)

These initial reservations were not born out by experience. This student managed his apprehensions and worked successfully in a mainly female and non-English team.

Different Backgrounds

Similarly, getting to grips with the unknown, including differences in background, was seen as an influential element in the development of the team. It caused some concern.

“I found myself in a group with three students I had not previously worked with. My initial reaction was one of worry that we would not work well as a group and so receive poor marks at the end of the module.” (JP 1999)

“My main concern was how would individuals fit into the group, as we all had different backgrounds.” (MC 1999)

But it was seen as resulting in a positive experience.

“It was a very good learning experience, especially knowing that each one of us had very different backgrounds.” (ASS 1999)

If fact, those who did not do so indicated a sense of having missed an opportunity.

“Working with different people, not on the same course, would have been advantageous in gaining different perspectives” (JHJ 1999)

Appreciating Cultural Diversity

The significance of recognising cultural diversity, and the associated differences of approach, was highlighted by a number of students, as was the need to understand and learn from this. For some, this was a first-time experience. Set out below are some typical extracts on this theme.

“This was the first time that I had to co-operate with the British. And that changed a lot. It made me think different and work in a completely different way than I was used to. I had heard from some friends that British are more demanding than the Greeks but this time I actually experienced the difference.” (MT 1999)

“In addition, to the different degree programmes we were a multi-racial group consisting of students from Sri-Lankan, Greek, Maltese and English background. It was necessary to understand the different cultures of each of the members in order to work well as a group.

“This was the first time that I have worked closely with people of different nationalities, I found that I able to learn from this experience in that people have different approaches to doing things and one must be aware of this. This experience will be of use in my future career as it is expected that I will work with people from different nationalities”. (JP 1999)

“Contact with the client taught me to understand the point of view of persons from a culture I previously had no knowledge of. This, in addition to working with the rest of the group taught me to deal with people who are culturally diverse and have a different mind set to my own. I feel this will be particularly beneficial as I move up the career ladder at the end of my course.” (JJ 1999)

“The different opinions, attitudes and cultures that each individual possessed influenced us not only to learn from each other but to learn about each other. We all had different ways of working and different methods of interpreting problems and forming solutions. Understanding this made it easier to effectively perform our task.” (AA 1999)

Learning about and from each other, in the context of cultural diversity, was seen as important for both the task in hand and for future career prospects.

Student Quotations which identify specific Diversity Skills

Tolerance and Adaptability

A number of students reflected on the strategies they developed in response to working with diverse perspectives. Thus

“I learned that listening and trying to understand what each member said is a vital part of making a team work. Organisational Consultancy has taught me to be more open minded and tolerant.” (AH 1999)

“There were times when I had to adapt...I used different approaches...For example, if I could not get my point of view across, I tried to change my tone of voice and say it in a different way. This was important because of the different background of each member.” (RV 1999)

“I found myself working with a number of people I have not worked with before. First of all I had to learn about the people in my team and how they work. That meant listening to them and their ideas....my attitude in respect of changing, being flexible about altering concepts, ideas, approaches has changed. I am more open to other people’s opinions and criticisms.” (SM 1999)

“During this module I developed awareness of other peoples’ beliefs through personal interaction. I have gradually learnt to treat others values, opinions and beliefs with respect.” (JC 1999)

An increased awareness of different perspectives and the need to understand and work with these was facilitated by listening, and by being tolerant and adaptable.

Valuing Individuality

The significance of recognising and respecting the individuality of team members was noted as a learning area. No one commented that their team was disadvantaged because of its heterogeneous make-up. Some typical quotations are as follows.

“The team created an environment where each member felt significant.” (KTB 1999)

“Learning to accept each group member as individuals.” (JT 1999)

“I have developed this knowledge further by adjusting towards individuals, and understanding that every individual has different abilities, not everyone is capable of the same as the next.” (HP 1999)

“The process highlighted the individuality of each team member and I have come to realise individuality is an essential trait of a successful team.” (NEI 1999)

The exercise highlighted, then, the process of acknowledging, rather than suppressing, individuality.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper begins by explaining why diversity and its management are important to the authors. The significance of past educational experiences, both on the part of academics and students should not be underestimated as a source of current practice and future developments. The context within which diversity is now a live issue was outlined and reference made to developments in the field of Human Resource Management, and Universities in the USA and UK. The differentiation between diversity and equal opportunities was useful in the case study review, which explored student development, teaching methods and assessment. This demonstrated how the design of a module can expose, utilise and bestow significance on diversity amongst students and staff.

This case represents a contribution to our developing understanding of how we manage diversity in practice. Interestingly, students evidenced the dual perspective identified by Liff (1999) by “dissolving differences” in that they treated their peers as individuals. Yet at the same time, as identified under diversity skills above, they “valued differences”, that is they recognised dimensions reported above. They recognised that these individuals operated in different ways, because of their membership of particular groups, but nevertheless had something to contribute. Of key significance was the process of developing the skills and attitudes necessary to manage the identified differences. It was reported that this was achieved primarily by listening, being open minded, adapting and respectful.

This example is based on the learning reports of 39 students, which was just under 50% of the whole group. What impact, if any, did the experience have on the remainder? Whilst we believe it is idle to speculate on this, it would be interesting to do a whole cohort analysis in the future. In any event, the conclusions we have drawn can only be regarded as tentative. Our experience suggests that not all teams work effectively. On average about one a year works less well. Again it would be useful to explore the reasons for this in a more systematic way, and in particular, to examine what role diversity was seen to play in generating conflict. We also need to consider how to inject co-operative learning into courses involving large numbers in a traditional lecture/seminar format. Perhaps most importantly, we need to identify ways of underscoring the significance of dealing directly with diversity in learning situations amongst our academic colleagues. Finally, the desirability of providing content that raises awareness of, for example, gender-based differences in behaviour needs to be considered.

We live with a paradox: on the one hand, increased numbers and static resources; on the other, a growing realisation of diversity as a significant part of the learning process, both in HE and organisations generally. HE often responds to “mass” with “mass”, that is, large numbers are given lectures en masse, with little flexibility for diversity even to be recognised, let alone utilised. Much the same can be said of many employer led practices. The case outlined above suggests a way forward: within the parameters of a module, which are explicit and non-negotiable, there is a degree of flexibility for students to utilise their diversity and feel comfortable in doing so.

A similar model could well be utilised in the world of work as a means of developing diversity skills, not least because the case example involves the students directly with working organisations. In the longer term this strategy of experiential learning, of working with diversity as a means of understanding it, will have the benefit of steering learners, whether students, employees or employers, away from a search for the secrets of the universe, the one right way. In our post-modern society, recognising, valuing and being able to work with variety, diversity and multiple perspectives will be an essential pre-requisite to survival in education and in work.

Notes

Both authors are employed at Middlesex University Business School, the former as a Principal Lecturer in Organisational Development and the latter as an Associate Lecturer in Management Practice.

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