
EUROPEAN HR AWARD 2013

Promoting diversity
in the workplace
through academic
intervention

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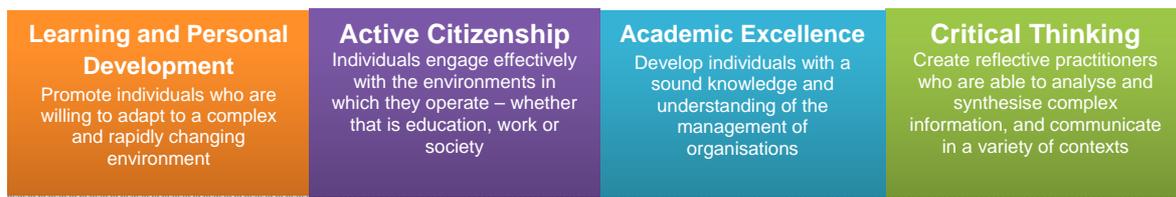
In the 1990s, the concept of diversity gained popularity as a new management approach in the UK. Workforce diversity philosophy has now a broader scope and perspectives to traditional and accepted ways of working (Kumra and Manfredi, 2012). The workforce is becoming more and more diverse as managers have to deal with a range of complex diversity issues: changing gender relations, aging population, immigration, flexible employment, religion pluralism (Kumra and Manfredi, 2012). Globalisation, technological advancement, labour market demands and changes in societal values' have attributed to the transformation of the workforce. In such, a transformation environment managing a diverse workforce is considered as a requisite for any successful workforce strategy (CIPD, 2006). Diversity is not an option; it is automatically part of the package and diversity management framework is a necessity (Ozbilgin, Mulholland, and Worman, 2008). Literature shows that embracing diversity is not only a moral obligation, but there is a sound business case (Clements and Jones, 2010). Proactive diversity management policies can transcend communication problems and solve workplace related conflicts (Kumra and Manfredi, 2012; Kirton and Green, 2010). It enables organisation to create an inclusive environment and support open-minded thinking (CIPD, 2006). Numerous studies provide vital evidence about the take-up of diversity management initiatives at organisational performance (i.e. Kumra and Manfredi, 2012; Konrad, Prasad and Pringle, 2006; Daniels and MacDonald, 2005). Therefore, engaging in education, training and awareness programmes is a request to promote diversity.

In this process, Higher Education has an important role in promoting diversity education and developing the 'New Generation' of HR leaders. The business community places pressure on Higher Education to develop HR managers that they are critical readers and original thinkers as well as systematic analysts and effective managers. In such fragile economic environment, the profession should encourage individuals to take appropriate and effective learning actions, to communicate effectively, to collaborate with others and learn from experiences in changing and unfamiliar workplace circumstances. Thus, students, future leaders, should be able to engage in lively debates and activities around diversity related issues in the workplace. To achieve this, the idea of '*DIVERSITY ACADEMIC INTERVENTION*' could be utilised to explore fundamental changes in the world of work and change socially constructed perceptions about diversity management. Of course the development of 'diversity awareness training' programmes is not new to diversity discipline. Nevertheless, the idea to establish an integrated approach to diversity education which assimilates the business environment and academic rigor could encourage individuals to approach diversity from different perspective.

Reflecting upon such values, the approach of 'academic intervention' has been adopted at York St John University. Students studying HR programmes have been asked to plan, design, host and facilitate a Diversity Awareness Day (see Appendix I). Having completed the learning process, students have been asked to apply theory into practices and organise and run the actual event. This student led event aims to promote awareness and appreciation of topical issues around diversity and equality in the workplace through the use of non-treated, innovative learning approach. Embracing and celebrating diversity is not just a set of policies managers need to develop to meet the legal requirements. It allows individuals to discuss the challenges organisations face in a highly diverse and cross-cultural society and take proactive action in develop an inclusive working environment. Through interaction with academics, peers and employers, HR students learn about freedom of expression, tolerance and responsible citizenship.

Participants were also given ‘The Little Book of Diversity’, written by students with their own understanding of what diversity is and its importance in a business environment (see Appendix II). Such tools disseminate information about the changing nature of the workforce and enable individuals to improve their understanding of the contemporary issues in diversity. Of course, training practices have too often failed to deliver what has been expected. However, innovative learning resources enable organisations to encourage individuals to modify attitude, knowledge or skill behaviour around diversity management. The following Figure 1 shows the key values that underpin diversity related initiatives. It illustrates the approach on developing the academic, personal and professional development of individuals to meet the changing needs of organisation, the economy and society.

Figure 1: Key principles of diversity academic integration



(Source: Nachmias, 2011)

The contribution of such academic related initiative to diversity management is twofold. On one hand, several public and non-public organisations attended the Diversity Awareness Day aiming to address contextual realities in managing diversity. Participants develop essential skills and abilities which can transform the way they approach diversity matters back in their organisations. They have the ability to have a positive impact on organisational culture through adopting adequate solutions to organisational problems in the workplace. Issues such as cultural patterns, sexual orientation in recruitment, external relations, business ethics, mental health and employee attitudes all need to be taken into account. For example, a workshop has been organised to explore gender identity and attitudes at the workplace with a particular emphasis on the propensity for women to support each other to reach senior management. One of the participants said:

“...that was a truly unique experience... I felt less threaten and more open to discuss my concerns and I am leaving the University full of new ideas to be used in my organisation... I love the idea of producing the little book of diversity for my organisation... it’s a hand tool which simplifies the purpose of diversity” (senior manager for a local public organisation).

This is a crucial element of employment practices as managers should be forced to make radical changes to their approach to gender equality and employment policies. The workforce is becoming more diversity. Thus organisations need to develop effective organisational culture, highlighting the importance of collaborative dialogue and shared understandings between key stakeholders in employment (Dredge, 2012). It is not only about recognising the need to develop distinctive learning opportunities, but is a matter of developing the appropriate ‘authentic’ culture among the key stakeholders through the development of preparatory learning initiatives in the curriculum. A pertinent point highlighted by Stein, Isaacs and Andrews (2004) was the notion of codified and tacit knowledge.

On the other hand, such an approach enriches the HRM educational experience. Students are able to improve qualities and knowledge on how to handle diversity issues and promote personal growth. It helps students learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. In order to gain benefits of workforce diversity, we need to develop future

proof managers which they will be able to take forward the diversity agenda in the new millennium. This approach also enables students to experience the 'real life' of businesses allowing them to develop further their professional reputation and status in the field. Some other students highlighted the need to apply theory into practice:

"The Diversity Day enabled me to develop my personal skills; I felt that I became a more confident individual... I found the event a great opportunity to put my theoretical knowledge into practical experience" (undergraduate student).

However, current thinking dismisses the important role of 'academic intervention' into student learning. Learning has been seen as a coarse-grained skills process rather than a process of experience the business environment (Pegg et al., 2011). With 'authentic learning', students can debate key HR related issues and create a tangible, useful products to be shared with the business world. This unique feature of the teaching philosophy encourages students to think creatively and innovatively, and to take initiatives to challenge themselves and take responsibility and ownership of their own learning. A student comments about the Diversity Day:

"The Diversity Day enabled me to develop my personal skills; I felt that I became a more confident individual. I found this a great opportunity to put my theoretical knowledge into practical experience". Some others argued that "working with real companies in York was quite challenging but at the same time a great experience and one in which I learned a lot about myself" (postgraduate student).

This kind of event enables individuals to develop and expand networking skills and enhance discipline reputation across the business community (see Appendix IV). Education within a diverse setting prepares organisations to become good employers in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork; and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions. As a result, students were asked to deliver sessions for a local Council or expand their networking links with local, regional and national businesses. Some students said:

"The diversity day was a real turning point in both self-development and career prospects allowing me to focus my attentions on my personal strengths and weaknesses and preparing me for the world of work" (undergraduate student).

In reality, most organisations mainly focus on issues covered by legislation and ignore the broader aspects of the business case. Very few organisations undertake learning activities to make sure that diversity is mainstreamed into either the way people do their jobs or operational practices (CIPD, 2006). To overcome such challenges, the next 'Generation' of HR leaders need to be able to understand the business case of diversity and develop essential skills in managing diversity complexity at the workplace. Higher Education can play a vital role in bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality. Academic intervention into diversity education could develop an awareness of the dynamics of managing a diverse workforce in the twenty-first century. Future HR managers can ensure that the corporate values, culture and practices do not isolate diverse individuals, so that such losses to the organisation are minimised. It would also enable managers in the profession to understand the benefits of recruiting a diverse workforce and how effective diversity strategy foster flexible, motivated and capable workforces.

Such academic initiatives also establish new 'platform' where various perspectives on workforce diversity can be discussed and debated. This is not to assume that 'academic

intervention' is one-size-fits-all solution to long-standing management issues. Nevertheless, it can be used as a pedagogical approach to delivery an integrated approach to diversity education which assimilates the business environment (Steiner and Watson, 2006). Behavioural change is key for advancing HR thinking in the future. Learning should be a major focus to really drive sustainable organisational change and allow individuals to graph the opportunities created in the diverse workforce. To achieve authentic learning, a culture fostering the integration of both practitioners and academics as 'academic practitioners' should be developed to enable practical engagement and academic rigor (Wang, Ayres and Huyton, 2009). It is one thing to 'understand' what diversity is, but it's quite another to 'live it' by understanding the human complexities of the today's diverse workforce.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Diversity Awareness Day Schedule



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Schedule of the Diversity Awareness Day

Friday 10 May 2013

This event aims to enhance awareness, appreciation and acceptance of topical issues around diversity and languages.

09.30 – 10.00 Registration **Fountains Lecture Theatre**

10.00 – 10.30 Welcome Speech **Fountains Lecture Theatre**

Prof David Fleming

Vice Chancellor, York St John University

Ann Margaret Green

Chair of the Board of Governors, York St John University

10.30 – 12.00 Guest Speakers **Fountains Lecture Theatre**

Prof Robert Garvey

Professor in Business Education, York St John Business School

Dr Rachel Wicaksono

Head of Subject Languages and Linguistics, York St John Business School

12.00 – 13.00 Networking and Lunch **Student Union Reception**

13.00 – 15.00 Workshop activities **Temple Hall**

Delegates will have the chance to challenge, discuss and debate the key issues and gain relevant insight into the importance of diversity in the workplace.

- **The Danger for Diversity and Business Ethics**

This workshop will explore the marriage of military and business globalisation in years of recession.

- **Mental Health in the Workplace**

This workshop will explore how to manage depression and stress at the workplace as well as how to eliminate discriminative actions against people who have mental issues.

- **Gender Identity and Attitudes**

This workshop will explore gender identity and attitudes at the workplace with a particular emphasis on the propensity for women to support each other to reach senior management.

- **Language and Culture in the Workplace**

This workshop will explore the use of inclusive language at the workplace.

15.00 – 16.30 Guest Speakers **Temple Hall**

Frances Pantin

Senior Occupational Therapist, York House

Lukas Njenga

University Chaplain, York St John University

*Please note that the timings for the above event may change slightly on the day

BOOK NOW AT

www.diversityday.co.uk



Appendix II: The little Book of Diversity

The little book of diversity is attached as a separate file because of the size.

DIVERSITY

The Little

Book

EQUALITY

THE PRESS

Diversity Awareness Day at York St John University

By Julie Hayes

DIVERSITY in business and the wider community will be on the agenda at an event at [York St John University](#) on Friday.

The free one-day Diversity Awareness Day, organised by undergraduate and postgraduate students at York St John University's Business School, aims to raise awareness, appreciation and acceptance of issues around diversity in the workforce.

The annual event will again include the Diversity Ambassador Awards, recognising people from the community who actively promote inclusion.

Dr Stefanos Nachmias, head of the MA leadership and management programme who has supported student organisers, said: "We have over 115 participants involved in the event, including representatives from charities, businesses and not-for-profit organisations.

"It is open to everyone and will allow external members to network and meet our talented students who have organised this highly informative event.

"We hope that delegates will be inspired to interact and learn more about diversity. We then hope that they take their learning experience back to their own organisation and see how they can make a difference in their own workplace."

The day will incorporate talks from guest speakers and workshops on subjects relating to diversity, including mental health, gender identity, business ethics, languages and culture.

Speakers include Francis Pantin, senior occupational therapist from York House, professors in business education and languages and linguistics from York St John University, and the university's chaplain, Lukas Njenga.

Delegates will be given The Little Book Of Diversity, written by York St John students with ideas on what diversity is and its importance in a business environment.

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