

**Equality, Diversity & Human Rights:
Driving culture change through innovative governance**

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Abstract: This paper discusses an action research project which explores the effectiveness of a diversity management strategy based on an innovative governance structure. The structure being tested has at its root a definition of diversity not based on group diversity (i.e. race, gender and disability). It focuses upon functional diversity (i.e. organisational roles, business area, community engagement, et cetera). It departs from the traditional hierarchical structure and creates a cyclical approach in which all players have equal status in, responsibility for and influence in creating an organisational structure and business model with equality, diversity and human rights at its centre.

Keywords: equality; diversity management; human rights; corporate governance; organisational change; leadership; further education, complexity theory, polyarchal democracy, change management.

Introduction

Many global and national diversity initiatives have failed or are failing. They are based upon a US-centric approach to equality and diversity. This approach narrowly defines diversity in terms of the differences that exist between individuals and groups, and focuses upon aspects of group identity, such as the seven strands of equality (race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion/belief and age and transgender). They have not delivered as much as they could in terms of positive social and economic impact.

This paper argues that the US approach of 'one size fits all' does not lend itself to non-US type cultures. It is not able to mould itself to different cultural context where the players and their histories are substantially different from that of a US context in order to ensure social equity within such cultures.

The action research project discussed here explores a way of effecting positive social and economic change by embedding democratic principles and values into core business functions in order to facilitate social and economic growth.

The research project is conducted as part of my role as corporate responsibility and development manager for Wiltshire College in the southwest of England. Prior to joining the college in September 2008, as the equality and diversity manager, I worked within global industry as a diversity consultant and educationalist since 1993. My experience of diversity management strategies is manifold, having delivered programmes to assist management and leadership in creating corporate cultures which promote equality of opportunity, value diversity and respect human rights. If strategies are to be effective there is a need to develop a model that addresses the underlying complexity of organisational and cultural dynamics which preclude the development of equitable environments.

It is argued here that several key reasons for the failure of diversity initiatives are: lack of enlightened leadership; weak democratic processes; an inability to embed principles into core business functions; and over-emphasis on minority group identity. This research paper addresses what is required in order to make the ground fertile and receptive to positive social and economic development.

There is substantial literature on diversity management models emphasising either the legal or the business case for valuing diversity. There are few explicit models based on the moral case for diversity, although morality is implicit within each of the other two models. This research advocates the validity of each of the three approaches in equal measure, and creates a model in which all three can exist explicitly and collaboratively.

The Legal Case for Valuing Diversity

Traditional diversity initiatives, which have been based upon a US-centric model, define diversity in terms of social minority group status. The key categories of social inequity that are redressed through western legal structures are seven strands of equality.

Many organisations and their accompanying diversity initiatives define diversity in terms of individual and group differences expressed within the seven strands of equality. Companies thus strove to comply with legislation to avoid litigation and being branded a discriminatory employer. Thus, in the 1980s through to the 1990s within western organisational cultures the legal case for managing diversity became a central focus. At this point the law only reflected three of the main equality strands: race; gender and disability.

Some organisations were ahead of the curve during this time period and already began to speak in terms of equality for groups not covered by legislation. There was an acknowledgement that the diversity of many groups needed to be valued regardless of legislation whether or not there was clear legislation to protect these groups. Such discussions were based upon what is considered to be the business case for diversity.

The Business Case for Valuing Diversity

Towards the end of the 1990s, as people prepared for the challenges of the new millennium, a report *Workforce 2000*, was published by the Hudson Institute in the US. This report highlighted the changing demographics within the US and the fact that minorities (particularly minority ethnic groups and women) were a growing numerical majority which had a lot more spending power. As a consequence of the perceived new position of minorities within the economic marketplace, business changed its orientation around the value of diversity. It shifted from being motivated solely by the need to comply with legislation to understanding and to respecting the needs and demands of minorities. In the late 1990s the rhetoric of the business case for diversity first came into the foreground.

The first ten years of this millennium have seen a plethora of initiatives which have linked the valuing of diversity to the strengthening of financial performance and the economic bottom line. This argument has been used extensively in the justification of budgetary spending on diversity training and consultancy; however, there have been no tangible returns on this level of investment.

While this shift in rhetoric was taking place from the legal to the business case for diversity, additional UK and European laws were being passed to protect the rights of other minorities groups. New laws created new equality strands which include the social categories of: sexual orientation (2003); religion/belief (2003); gender re-assignment (2004); and age (2006).

The Moral Case for Valuing Diversity

The legal case for diversity is simply not a case that can be made globally, and can be seen as invalid by non-western cultures which do not have comparable legal systems, and are not as liberal as western constructs appear to be. The business case for diversity is completely spurious, and perpetuates what can be considered ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ syndrome, with a huge potential for being based on a political delusion. Researchers and organisations have been plagued by an inability to demonstrate the causal relationship between increased cultural diversity and improved social and financial business performance.

It appears insufficient for people to promote equality, diversity and human rights because such action is the right and moral thing to do as part of one’s continued professional and personal development. This moral case for diversity has never held much clout within traditional business practices.

We are now faced with what can be considered a morally bankrupt global economic system which is in a state of collapse and potential irresolution. It is time to put morality back into the system, wisely with the understanding that morality in itself is a complex issue.

Human Resources and the Devolution of Responsibility to Business Divisions

Most diversity programmes have been initiated by human resource departments. As the business case for diversity gained popularity the responsibility for workforce development has often shifted to internal business divisions and their leadership. After such a shift the momentum and focus upon diversity is often lost. This action

research project attempts to answer the question: ‘How do we make diversity strategies sustainable once responsibility has been devolved to local business division level?’

Quality of Leadership

Paramount in dealing with the complexity of this agenda is the quality of the leadership and its ability to help maintain stability while at the same time it paves and forges the way to positive change. Strong ethical, engaged and committed leadership is something that, as a consultant and trainer in the global marketplace, I did not see as part of many diversity initiatives. Some powerbrokers intellectually understood what human rights are, why they are vital to all people, and how they are best protected, but few leaders who understood, also understood emotionally and spiritually.

It is argued that many diversity initiatives have fallen far short of their objectives because of the quality of the leadership and because of the inability of leaders to deal with complex and conflicting realities.

While the action research project being discussed here continues to explore equality and diversity in terms of individual and group differences, it departs from the US-centric focus on the above seven strands of equality. It focuses upon the core strands of business operations, and works towards ensuring these strands operate according to the values and principles of democracy in order to facilitate greater cultural diversity.

It is argued that the systems, the quality of leadership and the presence of a democratic governance structure are key components and foundations for enabling organisational cultures to promote, support and develop equality, diversity and human rights.

Innovative Diversity Governance

Innovative diversity governance is the central mechanism by which culture change can be stimulated and embedded. This study attempts to make clear to all social actors the utility of the legal, economic and moral cases for valuing diversity.

It is also important to note that most diversity initiatives begin with the creation of social network groups that revolve around the various strands of equality (i.e. women's networks, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender networks). This is not the approach used in this case. The groups created as sub-divisions of the diversity committee are business specific groups, each of which is given the responsibility of ensuring that it operates in a way that is fair and inclusive of all strands of equality and respectful of the human rights of all.

An Action Research Project: Wiltshire College, real life, real time

This case study that was carried out at Wiltshire College situated in the county of Wiltshire in the west of England. It is linked with my role as corporate responsibility and development manager, though I began employment and research with the title of equality and diversity manager. This shift reflects part of the organisation's evolution post merger 2008.

The objective of the research was to explore effective ways in which to embed equality, diversity and human rights values into business processes and business culture.

Methodology

The methodology used in this research is modelled around the work of Robert Dahl, Professor Emeritus, Yale University. He states that the fundamental democratic principle is that when it comes to binding collective decisions, each person in a political community is entitled to be given equal consideration to their interests.

Dahl (1989) argues that in order to reach a democratic ideal there are five necessary pre-conditions:

1. Effective Participation.
2. Voting Equality at the Decisive Stage
3. Enlightened Understanding
4. Control of the Agenda
5. Inclusiveness

He advocates the concept of polyarchy, which is defined as a structure which has many rulers, and a political system in which power is dispersed.

The objective of this current action research project was to: devise a governance system in which the traditional hierarchical structure of further education is kept intact while at the same time creating a new system of governance which allows for a different level of interaction, engagement and dialogue of the key powerbrokers with one another and all stakeholders, thus giving strength and equal power to all stakeholders in the process.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected is primarily from: the minutes of committee and diversity working group meetings; incident log of complaints of an equality, diversity and human rights nature; staff and student surveys; and externally validated equality and diversity self-assessment reports. It is also likely that I will interview key individuals to round the research off.

Preparing the Way

Step One: Understanding the college's history

It was very important to get to know the history and the environment. The project did not begin completely from scratch. The first thing I did was to work with the consultant who had previously provided support to the college and who was one of the interview panellists when I applied for the job.

I had to review all historical performance data and progress made by the old Wiltshire College and by Salisbury College. My first task for the Corporation was to create a 3-year vision and action plan for culture change for Wiltshire College based on this.

Step Two: Understanding Further Education Culture

As a newcomer to further education, I had to become familiar with its culture. This included its hierarchical structures; the language and acronyms used; funding priorities; legal and statutory requirements; internal processes; where equality and diversity was placed within the organisational structure and hierarchy of needs; and the expectations that the Corporation had of an equality and diversity manager.

Step Three: Re-vitalising the equality and diversity committee

One key priority was to re-establish the equality and diversity committee. There was a prior equality and diversity committee, which appears to have existed only in 2007-2008. According to the structure of the old Wiltshire College, it was a small group of people who primarily represented middle management and below. There was no evidence of the participation of the key powerbrokers within the college. Many of these individuals were not employees of the new Wiltshire College, post merger in January 2008.

In re-structuring the new Wiltshire College's equality and diversity committee the members represent the college's newly created college leadership group (a group

which consists of the principal, vice principals, directors of curriculum and directors of business services). No one lower in the hierarchy would be on this committee, bar me, the equality and diversity manager.

I decided that only members of the college leadership group (i.e. the principal, vice principals, and directors of curricula and business support services) would be eligible to join the equality and diversity committee. It was also vital that these powerbrokers had an opportunity to interact and exchange directly with other stakeholders. It was therefore determined that each director would take responsibility for, or at least be a member of the working group which directly related to his or her professional responsibilities.

While there needed to be a key committee that was responsible for setting the targets and monitoring the performance of the college with regards to equality and diversity, it was also important to establish working groups on the ground that would be instrumental in 'getting things done' on a practical level. These working groups would not be equality strand specific, but related to core business operations.

Step Four: Identifying multiple stakeholders

There was a potential problem if the restructured committee excluded the participation of those who were part of the old committee. In order to ensure continuity, fairness and consistency, this sparked the belief that we should have in operation working groups which enable those who were involved in the past, and those who currently wish to get involved, to have an influence on the development of the new Wiltshire College's business and culture.

The idea which emerged was to engage multiple stakeholders within the context of this work. Stakeholders would be engaged where they wished to be engaged and upon their own terms. This was done in order to create: a shared sense of responsibility; a collective sense of identity; the development of effective strategies to satisfy sometimes competing agendas; and an effective communications mechanism by which to share and to develop information. Initially, the key stakeholders identified were staff and students. Over time, and as a consequence of democratic dialogue,

stakeholder groups came to include: governors; employers; local community members and groups; and statutory partner agencies. While parents were identified at the beginning, no strategy has been put into place in order to actively include this stakeholder group.

Step Five: Opening up Dialogue

It was important to bring multiple stakeholders together. On 5 November 2008 the first meeting of individuals interested and committed to the equality and diversity agenda was held. Out of this initial discussion emerged several key areas upon which people felt the college should focus. These were later distilled to reflect: demographic data; learning and teaching (the college's core business); the learner voice; the Festival of Culture; policy review; procurement; marketing and communications; and staff well-being.

Step Six: Formalising the diversity governance structure

The polyarchal governance structure is designed to: represent and enables all stakeholders; reflect a polyarchal democracy; and integrate social and business network. Most importantly, the networks focus upon business operations, and in so doing they reflect the values and principles of democracy, equality, diversity and human rights.

Based upon the collective discussions which took place, what emerged is a governance structure which reflects the relationship between stakeholders and the direction of communication and social action. This is represented in the Diversity Quality Cycle (Fig. 1)

Diversity Quality Cycle (November 2009)

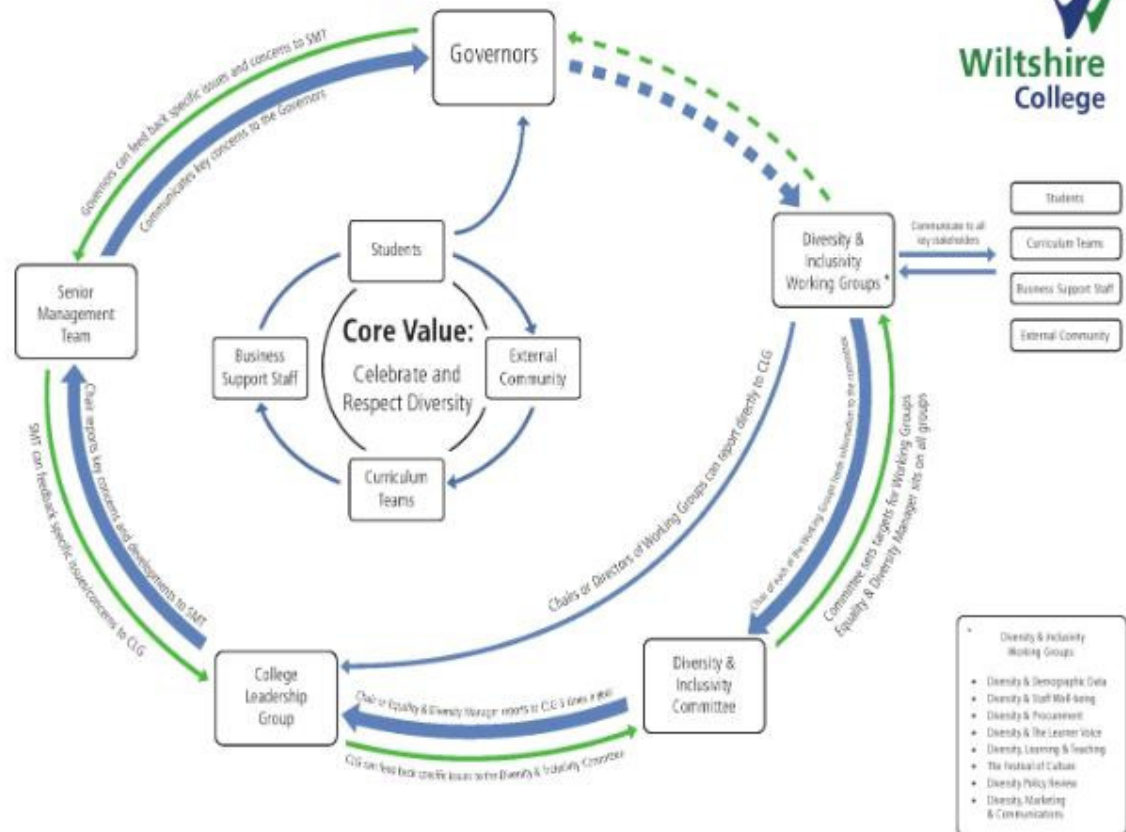


Fig. 1- The Diversity Quality Cycle

Getting Things Underway

Step Seven: Activating the committee and its working groups

By July 2009 the composition of the committee, the working groups and working group Chairs had been established. As noted above, members of the committee may be chairs of a working group.

To encourage enlightened leadership, and also to ease the burden of meetings, it was made possible for members of the college leadership group who were not members of the committee to become members and even chairs of any of the working groups. This was done to ensure that the dialogue spread throughout the college and all business areas.

The objective of the Diversity Quality Cycle is to: engage in constructive and critical dialogue; generate solutions; share responsibilities/tasks; collectively execute plans; review outcomes; and communicate results; and plan for the future. The Diversity Quality Cycle was officially activated in September 2009, with a schedule of termly meetings for the committee, and at least one termly meeting of each group, depending upon the circumstances and the demands of that business area.

Step Eight: Tracking development

From September 2009 committees and groups met regularly to establish terms of reference, set objectives and engage in collective action for social change within the organisation. Minutes of committee and diversity working group meetings provide important data which tracks and highlights developments and setbacks throughout this period of time.

Step Nine: Bringing it to a close

Data collection is due to end on 19 July 2010. At this point I will re-visit, collate and analyse the minutes of the various meetings.

Changes that have also been taking place within government also play a vital role in this action research project, as they have direct implications upon organisational structure, liquidity and future directions. These changes will be taken into consideration within the context of analysing the organisational data generated from Sept 2008 – July 2010.