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Exploring Students' Perception of Gender Diversity: Implications for Diversity Management at a University

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Abstract: The increasing role of diversity management in educational settings is a response to numerous social challenges that modern universities encounter. The diversity management training linked with promoting social sustainability is crucial in the context of accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations Organization. The aim of the paper is to explore students' perception of gender diversity for mapping their attitudes to diversity and identify main barriers for accepting diversity. It is important for creating advanced teaching strategies, which can be successfully used to build the learning environment that is safe, inclusive and unbiased. In the context of diversity management, it would help the university (students/teaching staff/administration/other employees) avoid the conflicts caused by gender diversity/equality. The main research method includes a survey based on an original questionnaire developed on the basis of students' essays. The results of the study demonstrate that students' views on gender diversity/equality are quite sensitive and can be many-sided. This fact is of a high importance for universities to be considered for promoting the democratic processes there.

Keywords: higher education, diversity management, gender equality, inclusion

Introduction

Recently, modern society has become increasingly diverse (OECD, 2020). Educational institutions are becoming more and more diverse as well, the dimensions including special education needs, migration, ethnic groups, gender, etc.; for navigating this diversity, it is important to adopt a "multidimensional" approach and intersectional that would assist education systems support equity and inclusion in the learning process (OECD, 2021).

Thus, diversity, as a broad term, refers to "any characteristic that makes people different from one another" (Robbins, Judge, 2013). The diversity concept is associated with respect, understanding that everyone is unique, at the same time recognizing all individual differences (Patrick, Kumar, 2012). The so-called surface-level diversity is related to such demographic dimensions as gender, race, ethnicity, age, or disability, which may evoke certain stereotypes. Therefore, variations in the above characteristics can become the basis for discrimination against different groups of people (Robbins, Judge, 2013). There is an increasing awareness that gender equality is a keystone of inclusive growth; "gender-responsive" policy making is expected to guarantee that all benefits of social and economic development are shared equally (OECD, 2015). Gender diversity is a burning issue nowadays; it has initiated a lot of discusses if women can perform their jobs as well as men can do (Robbins, Judge, 2013).

Numerous studies have revealed that there are no steady male-female differences regrading problem-solving, learning and analytical abilities, social skills, motivation and competitive ambition (Weiss et al., 2003). Psychological research has also revealed that though women tend to be more agreeable (to follow the authority) and men are more aggressive, those differences are unimportant (Robbins, Judge, 2013). Besides, no noteworthy difference in job performance between men and women has been found (Black, Holden, 1998). Due to existing stereotypes, gender roles may influence people's perceptions of gender diversity. For instance, women who do well in traditionally male fields can be perceived as less required as administrators (Heilman, Okimoto, 2007). At the same time, compared to men women are likely to believe sex-based discrimination is more widespread in the workplace (Avery et al., 2008).

With view of the above, diversity management should be a constant commitment that embraces all organizational levels (Robbins, Judge, 2013). Diversity management can be defined as a process aimed at developing and maintaining a constructive work environment, in which diverse perspectives

are valued, so that all people can accomplish their potential and contribute to the goals and objectives formulated in the organization's strategy (Patrick, Kumar, 2012).

Diversity management involves an assortment of practices used to improve the climate for diversity in an organization, including gender diversity, tend to be efficient if they are created to recognize all employees' perspectives (Robbins, Judge, 2013). Since prejudices influence the treatment of demographically diverse groups of people, diversity managers must be responsive to the multifaceted joint impacts of stereotypes in the organizational context for designing operative diversity management interventions (Dietz, Petersen, 2006). These interventions are aimed at a) avoiding negative stereotypes; b) excluding discriminatory behaviours; c) reducing justification factors; d) increasing suppression factors (ibid.).

In the agenda of diversity management interventions intended for eliminating destructive stereotypes and prejudices, the incorporation of the gender perspective into educational programmes is gaining popularity worldwide; an educational organization can be regarded as a social place for the "gendered cultural reproduction", so it may facilitate accomplishment of gender equity and stimulate gender fairness and equality (Mojica, Castañeda-Peña, 2017). Thus the increasing role of diversity management in educational settings is a response to social challenges that universities encounter today. Modern educational organizations should be transformed into an inclusive and co-educational space (Heras-Sevilla et al., 2021). The diversity management training, which is closely linked with promoting social sustainability, is vital in the context of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 5 – "Gender Equality" (The Sustainable Development ..., 2021).

The aim of the current study was to explore students' perception of gender diversity for mapping their attitudes to diversity and identify main barriers for accepting diversity. It is vital for creating advanced teaching strategies, which can be successfully used to build the learning environment that is safe, inclusive and unbiased. In the context of diversity management in higher education, it would also help the university (students/ teaching staff/administration/other employees) raise its competence to operate in a tolerant way and cope with the conflicts caused by the gender diversity/equality.

Methodology

There were two main research questions developed: 1) Do the views on gender diversity/ equality differ in local and foreign students' groups? What are the main differences? 2) What is the role of education/ university to help students to form their views on gender diversity/ equality?

For collecting primary data, an original questionnaire based on 95 RTU students' essays was developed. Initially, the students wrote an essay: "*Do I Believe in Gender Equality?*" The essay was written in June, 2021. The survey was conducted in September – October, 2021. One hundred forty-nine students of two universities – Riga Technical university (RTU) and Transport and Telecommunication institute (TSI) participated in the research. The population of the research included ninety-three local students (sixty-eight RTU students and twenty-five TSI students) and fifty-six foreign students of RTU. There were fifteen statements on gender diversity/equality included in the questionnaire. The statements can be split into three groups; the groups represent different diversity-related aspects: 1) Complex (multi-sided) nature of the gender diversity (five items); 2) gender equality as a democratic value (five items); 3) stereotyping and discrimination as characteristics of gender inequality (five items).

The response format was a three-point Licker scale – "agree", "neither agree nor disagree" and "disagree". The data were processed by means of Excel tools. The students were also asked to comment upon the statements included in the questionnaire. There were 32 RTU students, both foreigners and local ones, who contributed to the research.

Results and Discussion

Gender diversity management is a topical issue nowadays. However, there is a lack of researches analyzing the issues of gender diversity/ equality at university. This is an empirical research which introduces with students' view on gender diversity /equality and may help the university manage this type of diversity successfully.

The research results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of the empirical research results (related frequencies)

Item	Local			Foreign			Chi-test
	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	
S1	47%	29%	24%	50%	20%	30%	0.00027
S2	55%	25%	20%	73%	13%	14%	0.00006
S3	60%	29%	11%	79%	13%	9%	0.00005
S4	85%	12%	3%	98%	2%	0%	0.00006
S5	19%	37%	44%	32%	29%	39%	0.00010
S6	83%	14%	3%	82%	14%	4%	0.00063
S7	86%	8%	6%	91%	4%	5%	0.00041
S8	91%	5%	3%	96%	4%	0%	0.00032
S9	86%	10%	4%	86%	9%	5%	0.00060
S10	77%	17%	5%	95%	4%	2%	0.00004
S11	58%	26%	16%	73%	23%	4%	0.00006
S12	81%	15%	4%	91%	7%	2%	0.00020
S13	47%	47%	5%	68%	30%	2%	0.00003
S14	17%	37%	46%	30%	20%	50%	0.00003
S15	44%	32%	24%	36%	30%	34%	0.00023
Total	62%	23%	15%	72%	15%	13%	

Below, the results of the empirical research are discussed in more detail.

1. Many-sided nature of gender diversity (statements 1-5)

It is a well-known fact that the attitude and behaviour of students as well as the administration, the teaching staff and other employees at university create the atmosphere there. Thus, they can make it positive and inclusive or negative and segregating. In other words – approving or disapproving democratic values there. This paragraph analyses different statements on gender diversity trying to reveal its many-sided nature to develop democratic processes at university.

Statement 1. The first statement analysed in the research could be stated to be traditional, ***“men and women are different: a woman is a woman and cannot be a man. Nature has arranged it and we should not go against the laws of the Nature”***. About a half of foreign students (50%) and local ones (47%) agree with this statement. Thus, the view of about a half of students could be characterized as traditional. One of the foreign students commented that, *“it is our culture, religion and human nature which show that the men are the men and the women are the women”* (foreign student).

However, there are quite many foreigners (30%) and local students (24%) who disagree with this statement, *“but for some people it is hard to accept it”* (local student). Moreover, it is interesting to note that 20% of foreign students neither agree nor disagree with this statement but the amount of local students is higher – 29%. Thus, the data prove that students have doubts on the traditional approach to gender diversity which have also been expressed in their comments, *“the Nature decides what gender we have, however, some people have psychological or other problems, so they just do not accept themselves in a given gender. So I think everybody can decide himself who he wants to be”* (local student) or *“Nature can make mistakes”* (local student). Apart from it the students' comments prove that the most of them express tolerance to gender diversity, *“I think everyone has their own rights to define themselves. It is not my life, it is not your life, it is theirs and only they can decide what gender do they identify with and we should not judge it”* (four local students). Students also emphasize on the importance of gender equality and tolerance, *“even though we have many differences, we are all*

humans. No matter what differences we have, we should not hate someone just because they are not as "normal" as everyone else" (two local students).

Statement 2. The next statement analyzed could be also characterized as traditional. Besides, it also shares the view of religion on gender diversity, ***"I believe in justice and the wisdom of its Creator. I think He created the man and the woman with different appearances and powers that they both have been able to complement each other. And the world survives depending on the strength of both. It must be understood that the society views and expects different things from both sexes"***.

Most of foreign students (73%) agree with this statement. Local students are not so positive with it. The ones who have given a positive answer are 55%. There are also more local students (20%) who disagree with this statement or have doubts on it – 25%. The data prove that foreign students are more sure and positive about this statement – only 14% of them disagree and 13% of them neither agree nor disagree with it. Thus, the data prove that the local students tend to have a more untraditional view on gender diversity. Moreover, the local students could be characterized as critical to the religion and its doctrine. It is proved by their comments, *"the first thing – I do not believe in the Creator. We – people create ourselves and my gender cannot describe my powers – I can"* (local student). It could be explained by the atheistic propaganda in the soviet times which may have an impact on students' upbringing and values. Students also emphasize the impact of culture and traditions on the roles of genders, *"it must be understood that the societies of each culture expect different things from different genders"* (local student). However, students also deny the impact of society on their views, *"in fact women are not intended to do things that many men do. You should not pay attention to the society because everyone has almost different worldviews and lifestyle to live"* (foreign student).

Statement 3. Another statement focused on the differences of genders and their pluses and minuses more in deep, ***"when it comes to physical strength men are more powerful, but when it comes to mental strength women are incomparable"***. (Mahatma Gandhiji). ***Even though we have obvious differences we still have a very important thing in common, we are all humans"***.

The data demonstrate that foreign students are more confident with their opinion. 79% of them agree with this statement, only 9% of them disagree. And only 13% have neither agreed nor disagreed with it. The confidence of local students is not so strong and their views are different. 60% of them agree with the statement, 11% disagree but rather many of them – 29% cannot give a strong opinion. Thus, the data prove that the opinion of local students has not completely formed yet. There are quite many students' comments on physical abilities which may be stronger for males, however, emphasizing that other abilities like creative and mental ones have been shared equally, *"biologically we are built different but our creative abilities are equal"* (local student). There are also critical comments on the strengths which have been traditionally considered to be more characteristic for males or females, *"I think the quote does not really represent the reality of today. There are physically weak men and mentally weak women. I think there is more than a couple exceptions to that so it does not seem fair to say that. But I do strongly agree that everyone is a human and that is the most important part"* (local student).

Statement 4. The other statement researched could be characterized as untraditional because it stresses on the equality and importance of any gender, ***"all the people of any gender should realize that they cannot live without one another. All the genders are equally important to the world. Gender diversity is a part of the world's variety. There is no such a thing as "a better gender". Appreciation and celebration of each other's differences is what eventually can make us equal"***.

The data show that most of students both foreign (98%) and local (85%) agree with this statement. It is important to note that this is the statement the foreign students have agreed the most, and one of the most agreed also by local ones. Thus, the students are confident with this issue. However, when giving their comments some of students have a rather radical view, *"I would not be so sure about the saying that women cannot live without men or men cannot live without women. The only difference is that, if one day one of the genders disappear women will learn how to live without men and will learn their skills, but men will not do it. That is why we need to appreciate each other and hope that such situation will never happen"* (two local students).

Statement 5. Apart from other statements the research also analyzed the role of a woman focusing on realization of her potential, ***“women have yet to be able to contribute successfully and, in fact, are unaware of their full potential. Women are more likely than males to stay inside their comfort zones”***.

The data prove that there are differences in the opinion of foreign and local students. There are more foreign students (32%) who agree with this statement. The amount of local students is considerably smaller – only 19% have answered positively. The difference in students' opinions disagreeing with the statement is not so considerable – 39 % of foreigners and 44% of local ones. However, there are quite many local students (37%) not having a strong opinion on the statement. The group of foreigners who neither agree nor disagree with the statement is smaller – 29%. Therefore, it could be concluded that students react to this statement in a rather sensitive way. The root of the matter could be hidden in the status of women in the society/ labour market/ education system. It seems that women can still not find satisfaction with their place.

There are also many students' comments proving that this issue is sensitive, but also quite subjective, *“most of the women really are unaware of their full potential because they are afraid that they will be put down for what they are doing. That is why they are staying inside their comfort zones. But women should be less scared of it and try to do something because maybe it will have a huge impact on their and others' lives”* (two local students). Students also give the reasons why women are still facing these problems, *“I think women historically have had much less opportunities to contribute successfully but even so, many have. When women are in bad, unequal environments, they cannot succeed, not because they have a lack of motivation, ideas or potential”* (two local students). The data ascertain that there is a large place for improvement to solve the problems of inequality, *“we, women, are the ones who are most likely pushed out of our comfort zones because men often restrict women”* (local student) or *“because women do not always have rights to do what they really want”* (two local students). Therefore, it is important to see the gender equality as a democratic value. This aspect has been analysed in the following paragraph.

2. Gender equality as a democratic value (statements 6-10)

Statement 6. This research also analyzed those gender diversity aspects which emphasise on democratic values in the society, at workplace and at university. The first of them deals with the distribution of power, influence and decision-making equally, ***“I believe it is important that men and women can share equally in the distribution of power, influence and decision-making”***.

The data prove that most of students belonging to both groups share the same opinion – 83% of locals and 82% of foreigners agree on the statement. It could be explained by the fact that students have high expectations to distribute power, influence and decision-making as human rights of everybody placing males and females equal in their opportunities. This approach could make a success for both parts involved. Students' comments prove it, *“we can achieve more together”* (local student).

Statement 7. The next statement stresses the financial independence of male and female, ***“men and women should have equal opportunities for financial independence through work”***. The data prove that most of students agree with the statement – foreign students (91%) and local ones (86%). This is one of the statements that is most agreed by students. It means they consider the financial independence to be very important. Students' comments also prove it, *“it is discriminatory to arbitrarily restrict opportunities of someone to work and achieve financial independence, solely because of their gender”* (two local students).

Statement 8. Another statement dealt with education and personal development, ***“men and women have to enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions, talents, ability and skills”***. This is the statement both groups of students have agreed most – foreigners (96%) and local students (91%). This means that students take the education and their personal growth importantly. It could be explained by their ambitions to climb into society and professional career.

Statement 9. One more statement researched is related with freedom and responsibility to combine personal life with work, ***“...men and women have to be given equivalent freedom and responsibility to combine their personal life, home and children with work”***. Both groups of students have agreed with the statement equally – 86%. However, students' comments also reveal some dissatisfaction

about the situation at a workplace and home, “... indeed, with a particular emphasis on “responsibility” part – there are too many stories of men not contributing to either work or home life, so it must be taught that both partners need to contribute equally” (local student). There are also some comments which say that the truth lies somewhere in between, “I would not say that they should be equal but they should take advantage of this” (foreign student).

Statement 10. Another statement related to democratic values was as follows, **“by educating people, and especially, children and young people that they are not limited by the gender, and by helping those in need, we may promote the democracy and tolerance”**. The data prove that foreign students are more confident with their opinion – 95 % of them agreed with the statement. The local students are not so confident – 77% have agreed but 17 % have neither agreed nor disagreed.

Thus, foreign students evaluate the importance of education on gender issues higher. This could be explained by the fact that foreign countries pay more attention to inform and educate people on gender equality. This may help develop a more tolerant and inclusive society. Students’ comments prove that Latvia should follow good examples, *“the world is going to be closer to peace if we teach children that there are no limits to our genders but to do that, we need to understand it first by ourselves because there are so many people that have these terrible stereotypes in their heads and they pass them to their children and that is why there is still so much hate in this world”* (two local students).

Gender diversity is a many-sided phenomenon. It can also give cause for stereotyping and discrimination. These aspects have been analyzed in the following paragraph.

3. Stereotyping and discrimination as characteristics of gender inequality (statements 11-15)

Gender diversity could promote many positive tendencies in the society/ workplace/at university, however, it could also give rise to conflicts, aggression and intolerance. Then equality turns into inequality characterized by stereotyping and discrimination. Such negative characteristics can stop the progress and development of the society/ workplace/ university. There are several aspects having been researched to see many-sided problems caused by gender inequality.

Statement 11. The first statement related to the gender inequality is aggression because of different perception of gender diversity, **“we live in the society where people are treated differently and are perceived in different ways based on their gender. It could be the reason why the gender equality makes a serious problem and people may be targeted by this kind of aggression”**.

The data prove that foreign students are more confident with their opinion – 73% of them agreed with the statement, whereas, the number of local ones is smaller – 58 %. It is interesting to note that there are quite many students belonging to both groups who neither agree nor disagree with this statement – 26% of local students and 23% of foreigners. The amount of students who disagree with the statement is much higher for local students – 16%. There are not many foreign students who disagree with the statement – only 4%.

Thus, foreign students are more confident that gender diversity could cause aggression. They could be more informed and educated on the issues of gender diversity and equality/inequality. Students’ comments prove that they are concerned of problems caused by gender inequality, *“100% agree, already since we are little kids, we have been treated differently just because of our genders and we have been taught what we can or cannot do just because it has not been accepted in our society. We need to treat all of us the same. So we can stop this inequality and hate”* (local student). Students also stress on the importance of the environment, *“I think people can be treated differently because of their gender but that may be different in different environments and fields. Feels like things are more or less equal in some fields like research, most musical fields, education but in other environments they may not. So I do not want to agree completely because I realise that in some instances there is equality and that is wonderful but I do agree that this issue has definitely not solved yet and many people still experience or have experienced it”* (local student).

Statement 12. Another statement also dealt with the gender stereotyping and discrimination, **“people do not have to be compelled to act or feel a specific way dependent on their gender. The biggest reason for the gender discrimination is the gender stereotyping. Everyone has the rights to lead his/her life accordingly to their view without any discrimination”**.

Most of students in both groups agree with this statement: foreigners (91%) and local students (81%). Students' comments prove that they especially emphasize on the impact of family/ school/ university on their views, *"there have been many cases in my life when I have encountered the gender inequality and gender stereotypes. All my childhood I was forbidden to do what boys do, when I got older and wanted to do men's sports, my parents forbade me; when I went to high school, I was obliged to wear dresses to all events and birthdays, it was impossible to cut my hair too short; with the transition to high school every conversation with my parents was accompanied by tantrums and screams, as a result I was caught, now they support me almost in everything and do not tell me what to wear and what to do and what not"* (local student).

Statement 13. One more statement which may cause discussions on gender inequality is connected with a radical feminism, ***"women (radical feminists) have never given up their fight in spite there have been changes how the women feel and value themselves, and are viewed by the society nowadays"***.

The data prove that students' opinions in both groups are different. The number of foreign students who agree with this statement is 68%. There are less local students who have given a positive answer – 47%. There are also quite many students – local (47%) and foreign (30%) who neither agree nor disagree with this statement. It seems that the women status in the society is still sensitive and under discussion, especially in local students' group. Students' comments prove that the fight is still on, *"there are plenty of angles to interpret this question from. Sure, the fight is still going but is that something bad? There are still plenty of challenges and obstacles on the way of equality"* (two local students).

Statement 14. There is one more statement related to the discrimination, ***"...women willingly accept the discrimination in their workplace and family. Accordingly when other people (colleagues/ students/ children, etc.) see the discrimination at their work, university, school or home, they will practice the same in the future"***.

About a half of students disagree with this statement – foreigners (50%) and local students (46%). Then there are quite many local students (37%) who do not have a strong opinion on it. The amount of foreign students is smaller – 20%. There are more foreign students (30%) than local ones (17%) who agree with this statement. Thus, the problem of women discrimination is topical and under discussion. It is still staying very sensitive. The roots of women discrimination hide in the society/ family/ school/ university. Students' comments prove it, *"women will never accept discrimination. More and more it can be seen on a social media that women are speaking against discrimination they go through every day. And they are tired of it. But yes, children see this discrimination every day and they see it as something acceptable because that is what society does and that is how hate already starts growing inside a little child"* (two local students). However, students' comments also state that the root of the problem may hide in the women themselves – their self-respect, *"I suppose it depends on a situation and woman's character. If she is a strong person, she will not accept such attitude to her and will try to change this"* (two local students).

Statement 15. The last statement analysed is related with the never ending fight for gender equality, ***"true equality will never be achieved because of our individuality and competition between sexes"***.

The opinion of both groups does not have considerable differences. Forty-four percent of local students and thirty-six percent of foreigners agree with the statement. The amount of students not having a strong opinion is quite similar in both groups – local students – 32% and foreigners – 30%. There are more foreign students (34%) who disagree with the statement. Only 24% of local students do the same. It could be concluded that the problem of gender equality still exist and will do, *"maybe someday it will be achieved but everyone is competitive these days. Everybody is always trying to prove that he/ she does better than the other gender and it stops us from achieving equality in our lives"* (local student). However, *"the differences among people make us beautiful. Without those differences the world would seem monotonous and boring. Humanity should not view inequality as something that we should get rid of. The fact – no one is equal, does not imply that one is better than the other"* (local student). Thus, the views on gender equality are many-sided. But they are united in their topicality and sensitivity.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been made based on the results of the study.

- About half of the respondents, both foreign and local students, tend to have a more traditional approach to gender diversity/equality – following an established (customary) pattern of behaviour widely accepted in the given society.
- However, the other part of students (also about 50%) think more untraditionally, beyond traditional paradigms – being influenced by the changes occurring in the external environment, as modern society is becoming more open to new ideas and diversity.
- There is also a tendency for local students to have a more critical and sensitive view on religion and its doctrine, which may be determined by the patterns of behaviour adopted in this country.
- Students emphasize on the influence of family/school/university on their views on gender issues, which are still in the formation process. So, it proves the importance of integrating diversity management into the curriculum as a response to current social challenges.
- Both groups of students consider the education on gender issues to be important. Though, foreign students are more confident with it. It could be due to the fact that in their countries, more attention is paid to inform and educate people on gender diversity/equality, as a demand for a more tolerant and inclusive society.
- Students' views on the women's status in the society are sensitive and under discussion, especially in the local students group, which might be explained that women are still considered to be caretakers of home.

Further research with a broader research base would be beneficial for generalizing the findings of the study. The role of university to manage gender diversity there should be researched in detail to keep pace with time and progress.

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