Swedish Council for
Higher Education

The value of diversity in a multicultural team - the results of a survey

In April 2020, a survey entitled "The effectiveness of a multicultural team" was carried out at the Department of Qualifications Recognition, ENIC-NARIC Sweden, at the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR).

The survey was conceived and conducted during my PHD research period spent at the same department from January to May 2020, while researching in the field of intercultural design applied to the communication of the universities in a global context. From the first day of my research at the UHR, I was impressed by the ENIC-NARIC's multi-cultural and thus multi-linguistic team, with approximately 75 staff members. Even the rooms where the meetings were held had the name of a foreign city: Calcutta, Peking, New York, Moskva and many others.

When the line of duty encompasses/covers the whole world, companies need plurality in the office to meet the needs, and the results of this survey demonstrate this hypothesis and gives important suggestions for companies that work in a global context, especially in the field of credentials evaluation. In this specific case, the necessity of developing a multicultural team came up especially due to the political and economic crisis of other countries, especially Syria, but also others, such as Afghanistan, Bosnia Herzegovina, Eritrea, India, Iran, Iraq.

"Due to Syrian refugee crisis, after the civil war started in 2011, we have been forced to rethink to our recruitment strategy, as the number of applicants from the regions of war grew exponentially" stated the head of the Swedish Department of Qualifications Recognition, Lars Petersson. "The further increase of the cultural diversity at the Department brought several positive aspects, especially on quality, efficiency of the work activities, also in terms of deep language competences, increase in regional knowledge and also enrichment of the sociality in the work environment".

"We have learned that plurality is key when taking on the whole world" underlined the head of the Academic Unit of the Department of Qualifications Recognition Cecilia Ulfsdotter, adding "when education programs of all levels from all over the world lands on our desks, we find that having plurality in the office makes not only quality and efficiency, but also development and innovation so much richer".

The topic of the diversity management is certainly a not recent one, and the authors Halverson and Tirmizi in 2008 argued that "the emergence of multicultural teams is evident in a variety of organizations in the private, public and civil society sectors" (1). But which are the main elements that represent general causes of cultural diversity in a company? As the professor

of Sociology and Digital Sociology Donatella Padua from the University for Foreigners of Perugia wrote in her book, entitled "Sociology of diversity management" (2), is possible to consider at least three elements.

- A first aspect lies in the evolution of the markets and the consequent need for flexibility. This determines the need to have personnel who present the skills dictated by the progress across the board that is being experienced today. Ethnic-cultural diversity in itself offers specific skills.
- Secondly, it has become imperative for businesses to produce new ideas. The coordination between competition and the production of new ideas requires a lot of creativity and talent, which do not arise from conditions of homogeneity.
- Finally, another aspect related to the topic dealt with lies in the fact that the relationship with work has changed. The person is willing to work on more disadvantageous economic conditions but is not willing to give up satisfaction and gratification. This is reflected in the search for a positive relationship with work.

Flexibility, creativity, satisfaction and gratification look the key words talking about the general causes of the cultural diversity in a company. But what is the value of the cultural differences in a multicultural team working in a global scenario? Starting from this question, the following survey was created and sent to all the staff of the Swedish Department of Qualifications Recognition of the UHR.

The survey "The effectiveness of a multicultural team"

Period: 04/04/2020 - 04/17/2020
67 respondents on 75 recipients
52 completed responses (which is 77.6% of the respondents. Respondents accepted the privacy statements based on the GDPR, Regulation 2016/679)

Main roles of the respondents in the department

Head/Coordinator of unit: 4
Credential evaluators: 39
Communicators: 3
Administrators: 6

Languages and education

- At the Swedish Department of Qualifications Recognition are spoken and used in the daily work several languages: English (100%), Swedish (98.08%), Arabic (28.85%), French (26.92%), Spanish (15.38%), Farsi (7.69%), Russian (5.77%). Among "others": German (43.48%) and Italian (13.04%) and other languages, to a lesser extent, such as Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, Ukrainian, Chinese, Japanese, Tigrinya, Amharic. According to the respondents, the knowledge of the language for their daily work is "important or very important" to more than 90% of the respondents.
- The level of the education is mainly the Bachelor's level (28 people); then the Master's level (21 people).
- Regarding the study abroad, 22 employees studied abroad at the bachelor level and 9 people at the master level, while 5 people did the high school abroad. The countries abroad were people studied are: Austria, China, Egypt, Finland, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Kurdistan, India, Iran, Irak, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Russia, Spain, Syria, Switzerland, Ukraine, USA.

Countries and target

- The main countries the employees actually work with are: Europe and North America (42.86%), Arab States (38.78%), Asia and the Pacific (26.53%), Africa (20.41%), Mediterranean Region (20.41%). They also work with other ENIC-NARIC centers (14.29%). This situation can change depending on the cases that arrive at the office, and can change quite frequently accordingly.
- It is interesting to note that the main percentage of them identify in the main target of their work non-EU citizens with a regular permit to stay in Sweden and EU citizens (69.39%), followed by Swedish employers (42.86%), Universities and agencies (38.78%), other ENIC-NARICs (24.49%), EU-organizations (6.12%). Despite of that, in the ENIC-NARIC portal, designed to support Swedish universities and public employment agencies, most of the members are employees of the local universities. But this idea is not surprising, because is linked to the main mission of the Swedish ENIC-NARIC center, which is the recognition of the foreign qualification for the integration of people with foreign credentials in the local labor market.
- In the same time, to the question related to the main stakeholders of the output of their work, 92.16% of employees recognized individuals wanting to work or study in Sweden, followed by a 56.86% who replied 56.86%, and 52.94% Swedish employers. With this question, the focus of the ENIC-NARIC activities became "individuals" holding a foreign credential, who already live in Sweden.
- In a long-term view, UHR employees see their customers/applicants as "labor migrants going to Sweden for jobs" (76%), "people with foreigners' background regularly resident in Sweden wishing to study" (50%), "international students" (30%). Among others, in the future some employees see also "EU citizens who want to work in Sweden in a regulated profession", "teachers from all the countries", "a new wave of refugees", "Swedish professional going to work abroad".

International environment

- Regarding what attracted employees to be a part of this Department, 83.67% replied "the international perspective", and 75.51% replied "doing good". "Colleagues from all over the world" was the reply of 46.94% of the respondents. Also mentioned was the social value of ENIC-NARIC's work, which is seen as "an important function in society" and a "help for people". The employees are also particularly proud of the "good spirit among them" (58.82%), "openness in the work place" (43.14%), and "opportunity to know each other in an intercultural prospective" (39.22%).
- Among the main skills cited as most important in knowledge and understanding surrounding international issues, the most important were: "knowledge of the education systems of other countries"; "understanding interaction and contact in different cultures"; 2intercultural understanding"; "flexibility"; and "multi languages". Some respondents highlighted that language is just one of the competencies needed to work in an international environment: "It helps to have knowledge of how the system (public administration, education system, prevalence of corruption and other risks, etc.) is set up in the target country". "International experience is an asset, as it's usually the most efficient way to acquire this type of competence".

Shared knowledge

- Regarding activities that can push to develop an international prospective and, consequently, an intercultural approach in daily work, respondents underlined the importance of understanding the nature and culture of the specific country they deal with, especially regarding the "educational stakeholders" of the other countries. The differences are in the documents themselves ("handling educational documents from different countries"). Other activities were connected with specific historical periods, such as the war in Syria, which led to "an always increasing number of applications from that country between 2015 and 2018, but even the increasing of applications from other Arabic countries, where the Syrian studied before". Other historical periods mentioned were "Brexit, and the labour migration from India and Pakistan". One particularly interesting input was "following the fraud markets on Facebook and other news channels to be able to combat fraud. Following the situation in Libya and Yemen in order to know how to use that at work, for example closing universities and changing names of universities". All perspectives highlighting that people who "meet people from the whole world every day, write to universities and stakeholders in many countries, and speak more than three languages everyday" have the advantage of recognisition and the predisposition to do it.

Cooperation and social exchange

- One employee mentioned that "credential evaluators cooperate all the time and many have knowledge about language, education systems and culture to share with others. We hold internal seminars about central issues for our work (countries or subjects). Country experts support others with recognition matters and matters of fraudulent documents, and language proficiency is needed for this kind of expertise". Some respondents referred to the Swedish fika, saying that "during fika we may share info on traditions, etc. but there's no multicultural purpose in this". Fika is just a social aspect of the workday, "having breakfast and fika from different countries and discussing the difference in food".
- In the last question, entitled "what does diversity mean to you", it is interesting to note the main words used by the employees: "different" (41.03%); "backgrounds" (25.64%); and other words, such as: "cultural", "cultures", "perspectives", "understanding", "experience", "respect", "better", "share", "languages", and "need".

Conclusions

Opportunities and challenges are essential components of cultural diversity management and these components have a local and an international dimension. As can be deduced from the words of two co-workers at the Department of Qualifications Recognition: "I think our agency is a perfect example of diversity when you can see people from different backgrounds with different roles and many languages. When we can share our cultural knowledge and experiences. Diversity is great because it makes everyone special and without diversity, our agency and even our country would be so boring", and also "Cultural differences make me aware of other kinds of lives in Sweden. That we are all human".

The results of the survey show that cultural diversity is not only an advantage for a team, but also a necessity when a public authority works in an international environment, as is the case with the activities carried out by the

ENIC-NARIC Department at UHR. The knowledge of several languages is very helpful, especially in the search for authentic sources in the original languages at institutional and university websites. But this is not the only positive thing, as working in a multicultural team also means having the opportunity for deep knowledge of the general system of the target country, in terms of public administration, education system, prevalence of corruption and other risks, using an approach of shared knowledge, competence and information about specific countries. Finally, diversity also plays an important role in a social dimension, as the cultural differences are often topics even during the Swedish "fika", a relaxing coffee and cake break shared with friends and colleagues. Fika is an important part of the Swedish culture, a special moment when all cultures represented in the Swedish ENIC-NARIC meet together and discuss an assortment of topics, including the food from their different country of origins.

Contacts

For further information about the activities surrounding the "Recognition of foreign qualifications" (which can be requested both for academic and professional reasons by local and European citizens and non-EU/EEA foreign citizens currently residing in Sweden) carried out by the ENIC-NARIC Department of the Swedish Council for Higher Education, send an e-mail to utbildningsbedomning@uhr.se (mailto:utbildningsbedomning@uhr.se).

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(1) Halverson, Claire B., Tirmizi, S. Aqeel, Effective multicultural teams: theory and practice, Springer, Dordrecht, 2008
(2) Padua, Donatella, Sociologia del diversity management. Il valore delle differenze culturali, Morlacchi Editore, Perugia 2008, pp. 67-68

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Diversity – an advantage for UHR

17 November 2020

NEWS

INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, (/EN/START/PRESSMEDDELANDEN/?
COUNT=5&CATEGORIES=6)

QUALIFICATIONS RECOGNITION, (/EN/START/PRESSMEDDELANDEN/?
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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, (/EN/START/PRESSMEDDELANDEN/?
COUNT=5&CATEGORIES=22)

ABOUT UHR (/EN/START/PRESSMEDDELANDEN/?COUNT=5&CATEGORIES=29)

UHR's Department for Qualifications Recognition works with assessing educational qualifications from all corners of the world. Language skills and employee diversity are therefore of great importance, a finding also found on a recent survey.

For five months in the spring, Daniela Cundrò, PHD student in International Communication at the University for Foreigners in Perugia, Italy, spent time at UHR conducting research. She is studying how higher education institutions can perform better in a global context, applying cultural models to the communication with foreign target groups. During her time at UHR, she carried out various research activities, one of which was to survey the employees at the Department for Qualifications Recognition.

"From my very first day, I was impressed by the department's multicultural and multilingual team," said Daniela Cundrò. "I wanted to show that a team's multiculturalism is indispensable for performing tasks in a global context, such as recognising foreign qualifications."

Seven languages used daily

The survey indicated that the department's approximately 75 employees use English, Swedish, Arabic, French, Spanish, Farsi and Russian in their everyday work activities. The main geographical areas in focus are Europe, North America, Northern Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific. Employees also work with ENIC-NARIC offices, which are offices in other countries that, like UHR, assess and recognise foreign qualifications.

Daniela Cundrò, PHD student at the University for Foreigners in Perugia, Italy.

"Cultural diversity isn't just an advantage for the team, it's also a necessity for a public authority working in an international environment. This is also the case with UHR's Department for Qualifications Recognition. Knowledge of several languages is very useful, especially when searching for authentic sources in the original language at the websites of institutions and

universities. It also provides an opportunity for deeper knowledge about countries in terms of public administration, education systems, the prevalence of corruption and other risks" said Daniela Cundrò.

Changed recruitment strategy

Over the last ten years, the department has seen an increase in diversity among its employees, a consequence of the economic and political crises in such countries as Syria, Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Eritrea, India, Iran and Iraq.

According to Lars Petersson, Head of Department for Qualifications Recognition, "The Syrian refugee crisis after the start of the civil war in 2011 led to a dramatic increase in applicants here. We then changed our recruiting strategy in order to bring in even more people with different cultural backgrounds. It has brought with it a number of positive aspects, for example in the areas of quality, effectivity in work-related tasks in terms of deep language skills, an increase in local and regional knowledge and it's even enriched the social work environment."

About UHR and the recognition of foreign qualifications

UHR has a number of areas of responsibility, one of which is the recognition of foreign qualifications. We make it easier for a person who wants to search for a job in Sweden by issuing personal recognition statements for foreign qualifications. We also offer a digital assessment service – the Qualifications Assessment Tool – in both Swedish and English.

UHR is Sweden's ENIC-NARIC office which means we're part of an international network. Among other things, our duties are to provide information about foreign education in Sweden, and information about Swedish education internationally.

Related pages and documents

Read more about Cundrò's research   →

The Qualifications Assessment Tool   →

SeQf table in English   →