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Diversity as a Catalyst for Competency Development through Model United Nations Classes

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Abstract

According to the EU Council Conclusions on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (2003/C 134/02), the European Education System urgently needs to adapt to both the demands of the knowledge industry and the society and to the need for a high quality employment. From both a scientific and an academic perspective, in order for students to actively live within a democratic society and to meet the requirements of national and international labor markets, all individuals must first be taught certain indispensable skills in the course of their university program. Students, who successfully gain a university degree, need to experience, above all, personal competency development, which can be enhanced by diversity in classroom and through the project National Model United Nations.

Key words: Model United Nations simulations, diversity, competency development, Classroom interaction, Classroom designs, NMUN testimonials

1. Introduction

“Diversity: the art of thinking independently together.”

- Malcom Forbes

“Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together. [... and to understand] how powerful our voices are in the world.

And then to turn around and see how much more we have to do.”

- Jacqueline Woodson

According to the EU Council Conclusions on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (2003/C 134/02), the European Education System urgently needs to adapt to both the demands of the knowledge industry and the society, and to the need for an high quality employment, a standard especially Germany represents. From both a scientific and an academic perspective, in order for students to actively live within a society and to meet the requirements of national and international labor markets, all individuals are to be taught the following basic skills in the course of their university program: Expert knowledge as well as general knowledge, subsequent and individual learning and study methods as well as a profound understanding of correct attitudes towards fellow people in a working environment. Students successfully gaining a university degree furthermore need to experience inclusion, personal fulfillment and satisfaction and, above all, personal development.

2. Rethinking Education and Tackling Unemployment

Before going into depth with the different skills that are indispensable to possess in order to develop competency and in order to use diversity as a catalyst for the aforementioned, education needs to be rethought and an investment into the skills for better socio-economic-outcomes must be undergone, as specified by the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions in 2012 (COM, 2012).

Skills can trigger innovation and growth, move production up the value chain, stimulate the concentration of higher level skills in the EU and shape the future labor market. The broad mission of education and training encompasses objectives such as active citizenship, personal development and well-being. While these go hand-in-hand with the need to upgrade skills for employability, against the backdrop of sluggish economic growth and a

shrinking workforce due to demographic ageing, the most pressing challenges for Member States are to address the needs of the economy and focus on solutions to tackle fast-rising youth unemployment.

2.1 Part One: Stakeholder Perspectives on Learning Processes

The preparation for and launch of an international Model United Nations (MUN) event requires attention to a large number of components and the cooperative efforts of many stakeholders. In order to appreciate the complexity of this undertaking, it is important to first delineate the various components and how they intertwine/overlap with each other. Then, each of the components should be described and analyzed from the perspective of a major stakeholder for that specific component.

3. Reaching Today's Conditions for Employment

Furthermore, modern, knowledge-based economies require people with higher and more relevant skills. Transversal skills, such as the ability to think critically, take initiative and work collaboratively towards solving difficult situations, will prepare individuals for today's varied and unpredictable career paths. Moreover, in a world of growing international exchanges, the ability to speak foreign languages is a factor for competitiveness. The ability to negotiate in foreign languages is becoming enormously important to enhance employability and mobility of young people. Poor language skills are a major obstacle for international job rotations and personal development. Nowadays, organizations request profound language skills as a condition for employment to ensure that workforces are capable of acting effectively and efficiently in the global marketplace.

Increasing transversal and basic skills alone will not be sufficient to generate growth and competitiveness, and there is still too much distance between the educational environment and the workplaces. Targeted investment in Vocational Education Training (VET), namely initial and continuous training, is vital for innovation, growth and competitiveness. The value of VET, and notably dual training systems, in facilitating youth employment is now strongly acknowledged (refer to Figure 1, published by UNESCO OECD Eurostat (UOE), showing the percentage distribution of upper secondary students by program orientation in 2010).

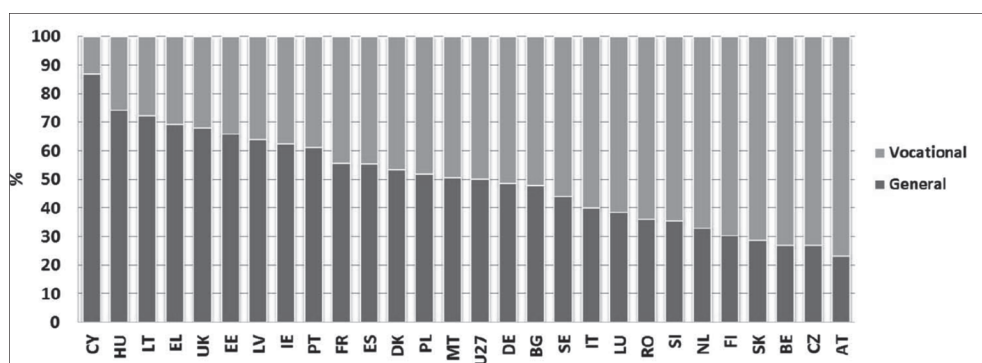


Figure 1. Percentaged distribution of upper secondary students by program orientation in 2016 by UNESCO OECD Eurostat (UOE)

4. The Lack of the European Qualifications Framework

To improve learning outcomes, assessment and recognition, open and flexible learning has to be encouraged, because achievement needs to be driven by learning outcomes. Education and training can only contribute to growth and job-creation if learning is focused on knowledge, skills and competencies that are acquired by students (learning outcomes) throughout learning processes, rather than learning being concentrated on completing a specific stage or on time spent in class.

While the learning outcomes approach is already the basis of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and national qualification frameworks, this fundamental shift has not yet fully percolated through to teaching and assessment. Institutions at all levels of education and training still need to adapt in order to increase the relevance and quality of their educational input to students and the labor market, to widen access and to facilitate transitions between different education and training pathways.

While many Member States have reformed curricula, it remains a challenge to modernize assessment to support learning. As outlined in the European Commission Staff Working Document on the assessment of key competences, “*the power of assessment has to be harnessed by defining competencies in terms of learning outcomes and broadening the scope of tests and exams to cover these*”. Assessment for formative purposes to support the day-to-day skills learning of pupils also needs to be more widely used. In this context, the potential of new technologies help to find ways of assessing key competences which needs to be fully explored.

5. Formative Assessments are Student Focused

According to the European Commission and the Directorate-General for Education and Culture, in their Education and Training 2020 Work program with the Working Group 'Assessment of Key Competences' from 2012, formative assessment is purposefully directed toward the student. It does not emphasize how teachers deliver information but, rather, how students receive that information, how well they understand it, and how they can apply it. With formative assessment, teachers gather information about their students' progress and learning needs and use this information to make instructional adjustments. They also show students how to accurately and honestly use self-assessments to improve their own learning. Instructional flexibility and student-focused feedback work together to build confident and motivated learners.

Formative assessment helps teachers to: 1) Consider each student's learning needs and styles and adapt instruction accordingly, 2) Track individual student achievement, 3) Provide appropriately challenging and motivational instructional activities, 4) Design intentional and objective student self-assessments, 5) Offer all students opportunities for improvement, 6) Conduct observations, 7) Select and order information, 8) Summarize and draw conclusions, 9) Form opinions on social issues, 10) Recognize beliefs and values in opinions and actions of oneself and others, 11) Distinguish opinions from facts, 12) Work together on assignments, and 13) Evaluate the quality of one's own work. Performance-based assessments tasks include: Presentations, Group work, Projects, Portfolios, Reflective diaries, Role plays, and Interviews.

6. Benefits of Diversity in Academics

How diverse is an academic setting? It is about students and faculty staff. It is about age, religion, acquired skills, ethnicity, gender, biography – personnel and academic – and beliefs including political attitudes. All in all these premises influence the work and progress in class and foster the environment for teaching and the development of skills. On the other hand side, these preconditions may bring challenges, which result in less cohesiveness, effectiveness, anxiety and communication problems. Respect and appreciation of dissimilarities and the creation of awareness are the keys for avoiding interactive problems in class.

Research-projects in the U.S. came to interesting conclusions (Herring, 2009; Friday & Friday, 2003). Diverse working groups are more productive, more creative, more

innovative and enhance teaching and research. Schultz-Hardt et al. (2006) found that groups exposed to minority viewpoints gained a higher level of critical analysis and alternatives as in homogeneous groups. This is because minority viewpoints stimulate discussions and initialize the elaboration of multiple perspectives and previously unconsidered alternatives as well.

Further investigations reported by Chang (cited in Fine and Handelsman, 2011) discovered that from 2011, women and faculty of different ethnicity more frequently employed active learning in the classroom. In this context the EQF active learning methods are assumed as an opportunity to tailor education and training to individual needs and thus promote “active learning” (CEDEFOP, Using learning outcomes, 2011).

7. Classroom Interaction Affected by Culture

Several researchers pointed out that the dimensions of culture influence the work in classroom enormously (Yoo, 2014). If the class is more diverse, this effect may cumulate. On the other hand, some argue that globalization has led to the loss of identity and culture. The Ruhr-Region, where our University is located, has been a melting pot of cultures for decades. Nevertheless, the process of assimilation seems to last.

8. Findings with Respect to 15 Years of Experience in Teaching Multi-diverse Classes

Every ninth student studying in Germany has a foreign nationality (see Figure 2). In North Rhine-Westphalia the diversity of the student body differs regionally.

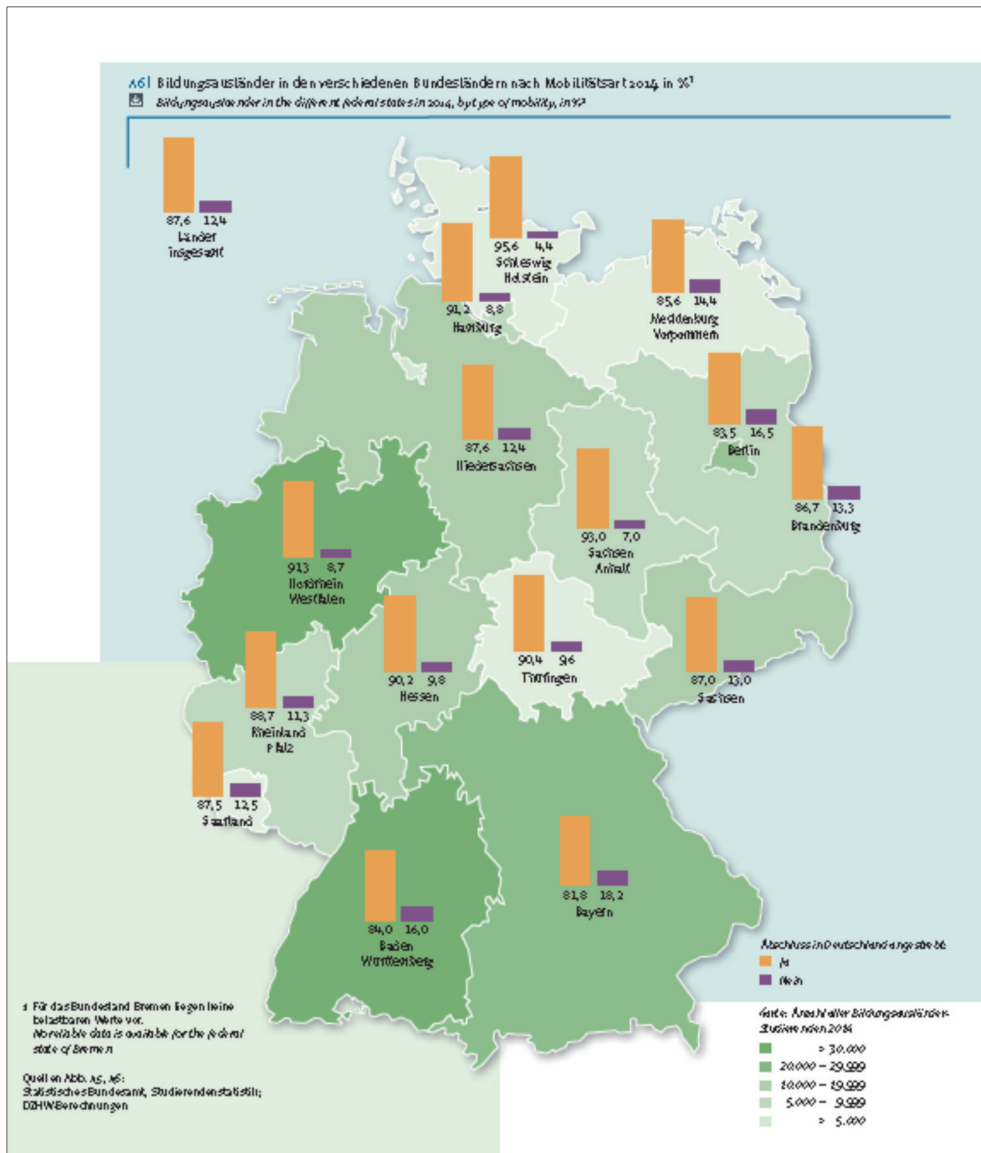


Figure 2. Students with foreign nationalities in Germany

Furthermore, as can be seen in Figure 3, 34% of students at universities of applied sciences in North Rhine-Westphalia have a migrant background based on their country of origin.

These numbers illustrate the classroom situation at the Westphalian University of Applied Sciences and in preparational NMUN-Classes.

Percentaged Students with Migrant Backgrounds

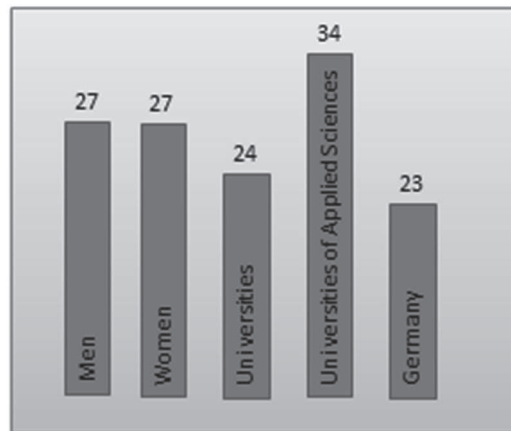


Figure 3. Students with Migrant Backgrounds by Fels (2016) in Studierendenwerke-nrw in the Regionalbericht

Cockrell et al. (1999) addressed the necessity for lecturers to learn about your students. They identified five main categories lecturers have to focus on:

- diversity experience,
- relationship between culture and schooling,
- diversity vs. multiculturalism,
- how to do multicultural education and
- the location of university.

Country of origin and destination country has to be focused on simultaneously according to Dronkers and Velden (2011).

Greater diversity of school populations means that diverse schools have more students whose capabilities and potentials differ from one another. The following five aspects can have an impact on diverse capabilities of students:

- social structures
- can have positive effects on educational performance
- first or second generation immigrant
- home language
- combination of parents from different ethnical background

9. Creating a NMUN Classroom Environment

National Model United Nations (NMUN) conferences are international and diverse. The National Collegiate Conference Association (NCCA), who has been organizing NMUN since 1946, monitors the diversity of the conferences themselves. Referring to the NCCA figures for the academic year 2015-2016, 6.500 Student Delegates participated in 3 conferences. They studied at 416 Colleges and Universities in 47 UN Member States and 39 different states in the U.S.. At the 2016 N.Y. conference, the NCCA reviewed diversity with respect to country of origin and ethnicity of U.S. student participants. 55% percent of all student participants were non-U.S. students. This number underscores one of the main objectives of NMUN-Conferences.

Guiding Principle - Cooperative, hands-on, experiential learning allows students to confront a range of topics with the perspective of their assigned country or organization. Through these experiences - during preparation, in committee sessions, and even in hallway caucuses - students develop an appreciation of differing viewpoints, experience the challenges of negotiation, see the rewards of cooperation, broaden their world view, and discover the human side of international relations and diplomacy.

Representing a foreign country requests a diversity approach. Students have to recognize their own beliefs and behavior based on country, culture, ethnicity, religion and other orientations. During the process of preparation, they start to learn about themselves. At the same time, another process demands to understand the policies of a country they may not have known before or they even disagree with. Table 1. shows the diversity of participants from the Westphalian University of Sciences between 2003 and 2017.

Table 1. Diversity of participants from the Westphalian University of Sciences between 2003 and 2017

Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Belgium	Bosnia
China	Ghana	Greece	Germany
Italy	Iraq	Indonesia	Iran
Kazakhstan	Netherlands	Nigeria	Poland
Russia	Slovakia	Sri Lanka	Spain
Tunisia	Turkey	Ukraine	Vietnam

Preparing students to participate in a NMUN conference demands the creation of a

culturally inclusive classroom setting. Student and staff alike are actors in this process. The outcome should be the appreciation of diversity as a key to build and foster a culturally inclusive learning surrounding. Some useful strategies could support lecturers. But how to establish mutual respect, the appreciation of diversity and recognize cultural diversity as an asset? Figure 4 offers an answer to this question by showing the most essential elements for designing an effective classroom for NMUN-Classes, which can be divided into three major categories: 1) Inclusive classroom, 2) Rewards of cooperation, and 3) Personal development.



Figure 4. Elements to design a classroom for NMUN classes

10. Subjects of Classroom Designs for NMUN-Classes

Students need to be invited and encouraged to apply for NMUN and to take part, as NMUN is an unusual setting for all of them. They are not used to interactional classroom settings, because regular classroom settings are lectures that are being attended mostly passively. However, increasing self-confidence and thus encouraging active participation (such as delivering a spontaneous speech before class) is a regular task as well. Also essential for students and the NMUN-Classes is the formation of a team. A team or a delegation requires social interaction and discourages of incivilities. All these efforts should enable students to engage in respectful discussions.

10.1 Peer to Peer Teaching

This educational strategy is a strong tool. Senior students tutor junior students in collaborative learning settings. Peer to peer situations create mutually beneficial learning outcomes. Senior students share their knowledge, experience and learn by explaining their ideas to other students and by participating. At the same time they develop important skills, such as organizing and planning learning activities, working collaboratively with others, giving and receiving feedback and evaluating their own learning through teaching.

10.2 Consciousness for Personal Dispositions

Students who participate in a NMUN-Class have expectations. Some of the participants have not experienced their individual restrictions or new learning opportunities. To motivate students to individually reflect on their approaches to learning and to start structuring their own learning experience and direction demands certain learning inventories.

Critical thinking or critical curiosity is an important skill within the analyses of beliefs, statements and positions. Creativity demands risk-taking as a positive attitude and resilience as well; and last but not least to learn to establish and form relationships.

Within these processes, the diversity of the students is at present due to those personal attitudes that influence their personal communication strategies.

10.3 Learning Outputs for Students Supported by Testimonials

Diversity has been proven to be essential to generate skills like leadership abilities, cognitive development and engagement in active thinking and motivation as well. If students are offered an exchange with individuals that are entirely diverse to themselves or if they are offered cross-cultural experiences, they step into the process of gaining from diversity.

Self-assessments of students show in an exemplary way how competencies grow and beliefs evolve to dimensions, they would never have imagined before. The knowledge acquired through NMUN encompasses functional skills. But this should not be the main perspective of the class design. The following quotations, taken from self-assessments, show how intense the processes are that students experience with NMUN:

“Through NMUN I have been able to get to know many countries their politics and their culture as well as new people with different characters. Something that made me really start thinking was, when I represented Greece.”

“However, NMUN was a very great experience. The most success I made, which made me proud of myself, was when I held the closing speech in my committee. Through the process of NMUN I learned to be bold, to represent myself, to put myself in different situations and mostly to be confident in the things I am doing. I learned to corporate with people who may be more prepared then me.”

“I learned to work with different kind of people, who had different opinion which I had to deal with and that was not easy sometimes. I had to change my way of thinking to get to a solution.”

“[...] my confidence grew during the conference. Especially as I held speeches in front of a large group of students and also in front of Native speakers. Before the conference, I was insecure about my English skills. But with the time I got more confident and I even got a good feedback from some delegates in my committee. Now I speak more fluently and more confident.”

“There I have learned that it’s important to listen to every country and their argumentations, because every nation is affected in a different way by the discussed topics and problems. If you want to achieve a resolution you have to work with other nations together and find a common ground. You can’t only listen to the big powers because they have the money or influence. In the end, every nation is equal and has the same vote. Every sponsor needs to be satisfied with the working paper. Therefore, it’s a hard progress that every nations` ideas are represented in the working papers. It’s a long way of argumentation and discussion necessary until everyone is satisfied with the working paper.

“But most important for me is that you meet so many students from all around the world and get to know foreign traditions. Especially as we formed a joint delegation with a Japanese university. Basically, it makes a difference if you read about foreign countries in a newspaper or if you talk with people from foreign countries and get a feeling that they live thousands of miles away but have kind of the same challenges

and goals like you.”

“It sensitized my consciousness for the appreciation of other cultures and their beliefs. It opened my eyes for the world of others and once again I was encouraged by taking part at the international debate about human rights, world economy and capabilities to work with all nations as a whole. It gave me the strength to face the difficulties of international communication as well as the courage to work for it. The moment we start listening and exchanging ideas with people who are far from our own point of view, is the only moment we can succeed the accomplishment of any international task.”

“I learned to cherish the diversity of culture, policy, religion and history. I learned to cherish the infinite necessity to solve and work together on global tasks of humanity. And the most intense lesson I have learned is that everybody can take part at changing our world and creating a sustainable future for all. We can take action and it is up to ourselves how much we want to do so.”

“Where do I start, when I think about the things I’ve learned in NMUN and about the journey to get there .I think this has been the most intensive process in my life lately,Why ? Because I haven't seen me grown so fast in such a short amount of time.”

However NMUN was much more, it literally showed me, if you fall get up and go on. It doesn't matter how you start, the importance is to make the journey, which probably always has some lessons on its way. Don't give up, even if the journey seems to be harder sometimes, because it might turn out better than you’ve expected. I can only appeal to everyone who has the opportunity, to participate at NMUN. Why? Because you will learn much more than how to write a position paper or a resolution, it might not only enlarge your mindset, but may also diversify you as a person. To me NMUN was a life lesson, which I would never want to miss. A place where I would learn from my team mates, which would strengthen my skills in teamwork, where you would learn integration and new sense of belonging. ”

The impact of NMUN classes goes far beyond teaching how the UN work, it goes far beyond training to deliver speeches in front of a committee, it is about to shoulder responsibility, it is thinking outside the box, it is about experience personal limits and it is

about to bring yourself to do things you would never expected to be able to. And as lectures is offers the unique opportunity to encourage young people undergoing the experience being able to make a difference. Ms. Natalia Kanem Deputy Executive Director of UNFPA puts this experience in the following terms: “We must look at current challenges through the prism of youth and young people on the ground.” In the end it is really about passing the torch to the next generation.

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