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Questioning impact: interconnection between extra-organizational resources and agency of equality and diversity officers

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This paper examines the change agency of equality and diversity (E&D) officers with a specific emphasis on the role of extra-organizational influences and resources. The paper is informed by qualitative material collected through interviews with E&D officers from 20 higher education institutions in the UK. The paper offers an evidence-based analysis of the utility of extra-organizational mechanisms and intervention programmes for organizational E&D agenda and for the agentic influence of E&D officers. The paper contributes to both academic literature and policy-making. We present original empirical insights into the change agency of E&D officers by exploring the impact of extra-organizational bodies as potential mechanisms for support and influence. At the policy level, the paper provides evidence on the value of extra-organizational resources and tools that are produced by policy bodies in promoting progressive E&D agendas in organizations.

Keywords: agency; change; diversity management; equality; higher education; policy

Introduction

Diversity professionals and their work are often taken for granted in the diversity management literature. This paper investigates the role played by equality and diversity (E&D) officers as change agents in public sector organizations, specifically, UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The study explores how and with what effect E&D officers can mobilize extra-organizational resources to improve E&D in their organizations. Various tectonic shifts in the UK E&D context render this study particularly timely. Since the late 1990s, practices and discourses of diversity management have been increasingly justified by reference to business case arguments, leaving the impression that social justice concerns are less relevant to the principal activities of work organizations (Tatli 2011). Although we would eschew a simplistic characterization of the business case rationale as merely profit-motivated care for diversity, this shift has created a subtext where concern for diversity thrives insofar as it can coexist with business viability (Noon 2007), producing mixed blessings for E&D officers as potential change agents. For instance, Kirton and Greene (2009) found that the equal opportunities officers of yesteryear made transformative demands for change, which also meant that they were viewed with suspicion and accorded low power and prestige within work organizations. The E&D officers of today, on the other hand, are less clearly revisionistic against the *status quo*, but are ascribed greater legitimacy in their coextensive role within a business-driven organizational logic of action (Kirton and Greene 2009). Such mainstreaming of E&D

officers has resulted in strengthened means at the disposal of these actors at the expense of a possible compromise in the ends they can seek.

Another paradigmatic shift is that over the past two decades UK HEIs have radically changed, through the neoliberal reformation agenda under the rubric of New Public Management, to gradually project a managerialist grip on all aspects of the sector, based on target-setting, auditing and quality control measures (Chandler, Barry and Clark 2002; Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007). The dominance of the managerialist logic in HEIs, which are otherwise duty-bound to uphold and promote equality in their status as public sector organizations, poses a real challenge to the progressive change towards greater E&D (Fletcher, Boden, Kent and Tinson 2007). Additionally, the 2008 financial crisis and the resultant austerity measures have introduced deep cuts in the government funding of the UK universities, expediting the commodification of higher education and exacerbating the existing diversity management challenges in the sector. Finally, in line with its austerity agenda, the Conservative-led coalition government has recently introduced reforms to the UK's regulatory equality body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (Home Office 2012). The government explained that the reforms were necessary to reduce red tape, increase efficiency and focus the watchdog's energy on its core functions. The immediate effect of these reforms has meant that the EHRC's budget has been halved and its remit severely limited. In this context, the value of empirical work that explores the impact of external E&D initiatives is even more significant in order to safeguard fairness, equality, diversity and inclusion. The research question of this paper is posed in this socio-political context: What is the impact of external resources on the change agency of E&D officers in UK HEIs?

Ensuring equal treatment and outcomes for a diverse workforce requires a firm commitment to progressive change (Cornelius, Gooch and Todd 2000; Gilbert and Ivancevich 2000; Kalev, Kelly and Dobbin 2006), which challenges the organizational inequality regimes (Acker 2006). Change as a process is often complex, faces resistance and necessitates sustainable and well-resourced programmes. E&D officers have a key role in negotiating change, and it is of significant academic and policy import to understand the role and capabilities of this group in initiating and promoting change (Tatli and Özbilgin 2009). In this paper, we unpack this complexity through an empirical study of the higher education sector in the UK. Extant literature has explored the agency of E&D practitioners, by examining existing organizational structures and resources (Tatli and Alasia 2010; Tatli 2011). Our emphasis is on extra-organizational influences by external E&D bodies, which, in the case of this paper, is the impact of a government-funded sectoral E&D initiative for HEIs. More specifically, we analyse the impact of a national report by a sectoral equality body as a resource for E&D practitioners in HEIs. In the literature, reports and reporting are often seen as ineffectual, bureaucratic, discursive and a replacement for genuine E&D practice (Ahmed 2007; Noon, Healy, Forson and Oikelome 2013). In this paper, we offer an evidence-based analysis of the utility of extra-organizational E&D mechanisms and intervention programmes, such as government-led initiatives and associated reports, as a part of an organizational E&D action portfolio.

The paper has relevance for and contribution to both academic literature and policy-making. First, we generate insights into the change agency of E&D officers by exploring the impact of extra-organizational bodies as potential mechanisms of support and influence. We provide evidence on the utility and impact of an externally produced national report as a resource for internal change efforts of E&D officers in their organizations. Secondly, at the policy level, we evaluate the significance of extra-organizational resources and tools that are produced by policy bodies as a part of E&D intervention. We begin with a discussion of

what change agency might mean for E&D officers and operationalize it through an analytical framework based on the concepts of situatedness, relationality and praxis, developed by Tatli and Özbilgin (2009). This is followed by the description of the fieldwork and research methods. Next, using our analytical framework, we present and discuss the research findings. Finally, we conclude with a summary of the main contributions, limitations and implications for policy, practice and research.

Theoretical backdrop: E&D officers as change agents

Change agents are catalysts of organizational development who strategically use a combination of material, discursive, psychological and ethical resources available to them to build alliances to generate organizational transformation along one or more critical dimensions. In one sense, all employees of the organization can potentially be change agents, as change is everywhere and is incumbent on everyone (Doyle 2002; Caldwell 2005), with even work organizations themselves increasingly characterized as potential social change agents (Bies, Bartunek, Fort and Zald 2007). Despite its deployment by a wide array of actors, human resource professionals have an important role during the organizational change process (Buyens and De Vos 2001; Alfes, Truss and Gill 2010). Organized 'to replace resistance with resolve, planning with results, and fear of change with excitement about its responsibilities' (Ulrich 1998, p. 130), the human resources function often commands a key responsibility in facilitating change. Promoting equality, diversity and inclusion at work requires organizations to transform their existing systems, structures and cultures (Tatli and Özbilgin 2009). In this context, the role of E&D officers, as organizational actors who are tasked with managing the E&D of the organization's workforce, often involves acting as change agents.

The change agency literature, as it relates to human resource management, is replete with taxonomies of change agency in an effort to delineate what change agency means and to identify its boundaries of accountability, alignment and action over specific change tasks (Ottaway 1983; Caldwell 2001; Kirton, Greene and Dean 2007). The typological approach has its benefits, as it underlines the expansive variety of change agents, the substance of the change task in question and how change may be implemented (Alfes et al. 2010). However, its focus on the specific skills, strategic know-how and characteristic features of change agents could render the analysis acontextual. Further, the underlying conceptualization of the change agent as an instrumentally rational, utility-maximizing, strategic agent can lead to change agency activity as atomistically or reductively defined activity. A contextual model of change agency is essential in accounting for the agency of E&D officers because the change process towards achieving greater E&D is fundamentally embedded in the specific social, sectoral and organizational setting, and involves multiple stakeholders (Özbilgin and Tatli 2011). A contextual model helps us to eschew the linear and deterministic accounts of change agency in favour of dynamic and emergent understanding of change agency. The value of incorporating context into the analysis also hinges on a fundamental acceptance of contingency as a dynamic which is always already underpinning organizational life in all aspects so that there is no single way to look at any organizational action, change included, by coming up with a prescriptive organizational design or approach in order to create change (Galbraith 1973). Especially in uncertain environments, a deeper appreciation of contextual contingency may be a better mapping approach to understand how diversity management works (Pitts, Hicklin, Hawes and Melton 2010).

In this article, we explore change agency of E&D officers in the HE sector, by drawing on a conceptual framework proposed by Tatli and Özbilgin (2009). This framework

identifies three context-informed constructs for understanding diversity managers' agency in organizational change: situatedness, relationality and praxis. Situatedness relates to the understanding of E&D officers in their socio-economic, historical and organizational contexts, rather than disembodied practitioners abstracted from their context (Tatli and Özbilgin 2009). Thus, situatedness emphasizes the choices and constraints that frame the actions, decisions and strategies of E&D officers. Relationality, on the other hand, denotes interdependence, inter-subjectivity and interactivity of individual and social phenomena. Here, the context emerges in the mutually constitutive interaction of agency and structure. In terms of relationality, the networks and connections of E&D officers become strategic resources to enhance their change agency. Praxis, as the last dimension of the E&D officers' agency, relates to the practice of diversity management for specific goals, such as social justice and transforming inequalities in the organization through reflection and action. The learning element is implicit in this component of the model, as it recognizes E&D officers' capacity to learn and the process of sharing useful learning insights to exert influence for organizational change and development.

The recent evolution of diversity management theory and practice

Theoretical debates on the change agency of E&D officers have been needed to be placed in the context of the evolution of diversity management theory and practice, particularly in the past two decades. In undertaking a reflexive critique of diversity management, Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) compared two definitions of diversity management, one from the UK, by Kandola and Fullerton (1994) and the other from the USA, by Arredondo (1996). Both definitions quoted diversity management as a strategic tool for increasing organizational performance, and placed an explicit emphasis on the value and contribution of diverse employees in fulfilling organizational objectives. The business case perspectives on diversity management often treat workforce diversity as a strategic asset based on an implicit assumption that achieving equality and social justice are not the legitimate 'business' of organizations. Scholars warned that in this environment diversity may have to be justified by bottom-line benefits that are measurable through financial and performance outcomes, which may make diversity management contingent upon short-term business viability (Noon 2007). In their comprehensive review of the business impact of diversity, Kochan et al. (2003) found that there is no simple linear relationship between workforce diversity and improved business outcomes, and thus, a more nuanced view of the business case is needed. For instance, the business case may be strategically formulated in more holistic terms beyond the simplistic calculations of tangible benefits in a way to account for wider and sometimes intangible benefits of diversity in areas such as corporate social responsibility and reputation (Dickens 1994).

Critiques also highlight the risks of a shift in emphasis from standardized procedures for disadvantaged groups to tackle discriminatory practices, to recognizing the presumed value of diverse individual contributions to the well-being and success of an organization (Kirton and Greene 2005; Bajawa and Woodall 2006; Shen, Chanda, D'Netto and Monga 2009). The new recognition of difference comes with a health warning because a view of diversity and difference as a means to organizational ends, rather than as an end in itself, is problematic (Swan 2010). Conversely, scholars increasingly argue against creating a dichotomy between the business case and social justice case and emphasize the complementarity between the two (Dickens 1994; Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010; Jonsen, Tatli, Özbilgin and Bell 2013). Similarly, strong legislation may be considered as a part of the business case if non-compliance is perceived to have high financial and

reputational costs (Özbilgin and Tatli 2011). The equality legislation is a strong driver for diversity management in the UK public sector due to the presence of secondary legislation such as the equality duties (Tatli 2011). Resultantly, diversity agenda in universities as public service providers is influenced by legislation, social responsibility and reputation concerns as well as the narrower bottom line driven business case arguments.

Lorbiecki and Jack (2000) maintain that most forms of diversity management programmes and interventions can be seen to perpetuate, rather than combat inequalities in the organizations. They may continue to prescribe essentialist categories of difference and offer problematic dualisms for organizational change (Benschop 2001; Prasad, Pringle and Konrad 2006). Furthermore, out-groups, i.e. social identity groups associated with lesser power, status and resources continue to experience inequalities in organizations (Clair, Beatty and Maclean 2005; Ogbonna and Harris 2006; Ozturk 2011). As Kersten (2000) argues, diversity management discourses and practices, by refocusing the attention from group-based inequalities towards the bottom-line benefits of individual employees' differences, have effectively absorbed the tensions and contradictions which used to set the scene for the continued struggle for equality and change.

These critiques raise important questions related to the role of E&D officers in organizations. Drawing on an empirical study of E&D officers in a range of British organizations, Kirton et al. (2007) reveal the complexity of their positions and orientations. As organizational actors, on one hand, they are tasked with a diversity role and are supposed to be committed to the business case for diversity management that their organizations have employed; on the other hand, they commonly have a wider personal vision of organizational change and development, including transforming inequalities, with an objective of social justice. This can make them unpopular with many organizational actors and often leaves them on the margins of mainstream strategy and policy-making (Kirton et al. 2007). The primary condition for the success of diversity initiatives in organizations is top-level managerial commitment and leadership (Thomas 1990). Another study on equal opportunities officers (Kandola, Milner, Banerji and Wood 1991) points out the challenging nature of their role and suggests that they suffer greater levels of job-related stress than their organizational peers.

Research carried out by Burrett (2002) has explored the impact of equal opportunities officers on the culture of universities in Australia. She notes the highly political nature of the process of organizational change; hence, the influence of the equal opportunities officers on organizational culture relies on a number of factors, ranging from their individual commitment and interpersonal skills to the seniority of their position in the university structures, access to resources and the associated power held by them. Reporting on an empirical study of Flemish human resource managers, who are responsible for implementing the E&D strategies and policies of their organizations and engaging in discussions with different audiences about the appropriateness of such policies, Zanoni and Janssens (2004) argue that diversity discourses both reflect and reaffirm existing management practices. This perpetuates inequalities because HR managers draw heavily from grand business case discourses in terms of organizational goals, such as customer care, quality, financial competence, and teamwork, and compliance such as availability, loyalty, and work pace. On the other hand, Healy and Oikelome (2007) in their study of diversity professionals in the UK Health Service found that diversity professionals work with multiple actors with competing agendas.

Achieving progressive change in organizational cultures and practices requires E&D officers to challenge the exiting *status quo*. Many scholars argue that E&D officers use business case discourses strategically in order to gain support for diversity initiative and

programmes. However, the business case is but one of many resources that E&D officers as agents of change can mobilize in order to engage organizational actors with the E&D agenda. Furthermore, the merits and relevance of diversity for the public sector are not limited to financial and economic benefits. Therefore, this paper seeks to generate an understanding of the other strategic resources available to E&D officers in UK universities, by exploring the impact of extra-organizational tools and resources on the agency of E&D officers for tackling inequalities in their institutions.

Research methods

The paper is informed by qualitative material collected through structured interviews with 26 E&D officers from 20 HEIs in the UK. The data analysed in this paper were generated as part of a scoping study that investigated the impact of an initiative by a national equality body (henceforth anonymized as Org A) for the higher education sector in the UK. Org A aims to promote equality, diversity and inclusion in the sector across all levels, stakeholders and functional areas. Through its active role, Org A is positioned as a key agent in the wider institutional context, influencing the practices of E&D in HEIs by providing support and guidance in terms of building institutional and sectoral capacity in E&D.

The wider scoping study, participants of which were selected from Org A's database, involved administration of a short one-page questionnaire so as to map out the level of interest, engagement and action in the field of E&D in the UK universities. The questionnaire acted as an entry point for the interview study, which forms the basis of the evidence that is used in this paper. In the interviews, the primary focus was placed upon identifying structures, tools and specific interventions which the E&D officers can tap into in affecting progressive change in their organizations.

The participant organizations were selected based on the level of sophistication in terms of E&D activities. We have contacted 30 HEIs with progressive E&D practices representing a good variety in terms of institutional types (old and new universities) and geographical location. Consequently, we have interviewed 26 E&D officers in 20 universities. E&D officers are the people with the key responsibility for managing E&D goals of the university. Our respondents had varied degrees of seniority and industry experience. Due to the geographical dispersion of the universities in the sample and the budget constraints, the interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately an hour.

The interview schedule consisted of questions, which probed into the E&D approaches and practices in universities, and impact of internal and external sources of support. The interview schedule included questions on the use and impact of the reports in understanding current E&D issues in the higher education sector; developing tools for managing equality and launching initiatives for managing E&D in their organization; the degree and nature of the influence of external drivers such as equality bodies and E&D tools and interventions in the sector. More specifically, the interviews had two main parts. One part focused on the generic opportunities and challenges encountered by the E&D officers within their organizations. We asked about commitment to and ownership for E&D in organizations at different levels such as senior management, executive committees and various organizational structures, tools and interventions which have influence on E&D in higher education context. The other part of the interview explored the more specific issues related to the impact of extra-organizational resources on E&D officers' ability to act as change agents (in this case the national reports produced by

Org A). We probed respondents on the usefulness of external resources, such as reports, in terms of informing E&D practice and setting the agenda in the sector. The interview guide also included questions that aimed to uncover the strategic value of reports by equality bodies in achieving organizational buy-in for E&D activities.

We have analysed the data thematically based on open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The interview materials were first analysed independently and then cross-checked by the team against the emergent themes iteratively. During these discussions, the relationships between the themes were identified and codes of higher abstraction were established. Throughout the process of data analysis, the three key constructs in our theoretical framework, i.e. situatedness, relationality and praxis, were used as orienting concepts in order to organize the emergent themes and codes manifested by the repeated interrogations of the raw data.

Findings and analysis

Using the analytical framework of Tatli and Özbilgin (2009) introduced earlier, this section presents and analyses the findings along the dimensions of situatedness, relationality and praxis. Table 1 depicts a summary of our findings across these three levels of agency of E&D officers in the UK HE sector.

Situatedness

The change agency of the E&D officers is first and foremost situated. In other words, the agentic capacity is contingent on the societal, sectoral and organizational contexts. The

Table 1.   Change agency of E&D officers in HEIs.

Dimensions	Description	Key themes
Situatedness	Contextual embeddedness of the E&D officers' work practice	Governmental initiatives in relation to E&D in the higher education sector, including the role of Org A in initiating the reports on E&D officers, the process of the latter in engaging with the production of the reports, as well as their impact on the institutions and the sector. Institutional frameworks on equality, and sectoral priorities and traditions of equality and national HE policies
Relationality	Inter-subjectivity and interactiveness of the E&D officers' work	Positional power (or lack of it) of E&D officers in the HRM structures, strategies and policies of HEIs. Key role of top management support structures, including committees, VC/Rector, etc. Relational resources at disposal of E&D officers and their deployment for exerting influence in the organization. Shaping of the institutional agenda on E&D via the field expertise and background/focus and perspective of the different professionals employed
Praxis	Transforming inequalities in the organization through reflection and action	Reflecting on the organizational, sectoral and individual resources to draw the boundaries of change action. Reinforcing arguments for diversity and equality for organizational change and development in the university settings

Note: Adopted from Tatli and Özbilgin (2009).

E&D officers often use the contextual engagement and their expertise in navigating the sectoral practices as a strategic resource in order to enhance their positional influence as potential change agents. In that respect, Org A had a significant enabling role as it proactively supported the institutional interactions through coordinating meetings between network members (E&D officers) or providing briefing and updates about sectoral E&D issues. Respondents in this research were network members who contributed to the reports. Being part of such a process highlights the situatedness of the E&D officers within their wider institutional context. A respondent explains:

> I thought it a valuable and worthwhile project [the national report] which was likely to produce information of assistance to the sector … Its greatest value to me is to provide me with evidence to reinforce arguments I might make for change and development within the institution. (HEI 1)

Org A was seen by respondents as a potentially important catalyst in the field. The central 'agentic' role of Org A in structuring and supporting the field of E&D in HEIs was highlighted by a respondent who emphasized the significant value of the reports commissioned by Org A: '(They) gave a sense of support, (I am) the only person in the organization working on this but this feels like (being) part of bigger team'. (HEI 3) The reports were seen as valuable and informative in terms of scoping the role of the E&D officers in the field, as well as within the HEIs, with particular focus placed upon governance, pay structures and the interaction with their professional networks. Respondents thought that the impact of the reports could potentially be increased if their output was to be developed into training materials for junior E&D officers or into briefings that could be used to present a business case for E&D to senior managers and other organizational actors. More importantly, the reports functioned as tools of empowerment for E&D officers, both junior and senior. The reports were found to be a useful resource for E&D officers in reinforcing arguments towards progressive change in HEIs. In this context, the reports were utilized as benchmarking tools and real-life examples of 'what worked and what did not' in the sector. Some E&D officers used the reports to demonstrate the necessity to create more influential E&D positions in the organization, closer to the top and separate from the human resources function. Furthermore, identifying a set of sectoral standards, tendencies and trends in terms of the role of E&D officers, the reports helped minimize the ambiguity of the E&D officers' organizational position. One respondent explained that:

> The reports highlighted issues related to something inherent in the profiles and role of equality and diversity specialists – to clarify them more; and also to scope equality and diversity across universities – all have different roles and responsibilities, it helped to spell out the core ones, and create minimum standards which were to be expected. (HEI 6)

The very act of contributing to the national reports resulted in an increased organizational engagement with E&D debates in the sector, emphasizing the role of the E&D officers as key actors, who lead the organizational E&D efforts. Resultantly, the increasing visibility of the E&D officers within their institutions enhanced their agentic power in affecting change.

By engaging in the report-producing process, E&D officers acquired sectoral know-how and contextual understanding, which helped them navigate the organizational politics and communicate more effectively with different organizational stakeholders including the senior management. One respondent explained how the engagement with the report can be used as leverage in maintaining organizational commitment:

> The benchmarking perspective of the report was insightful for the nature of work we are doing similar to other institutions … One of the things that was interesting (is to) keep VC and

senior management up to date and involved (with) briefings; actually (we were) surprised how other people have been using that: a good practice that we need to remember … the specialists' guides (were useful in) keeping (us) connected to decision-making bodies, committees, management group – these were more of a reinforcement of what needs to be done. (HEI 8)

The same respondent identified that reports helped the organization realize that similar challenges and experiences are shared across the sector:

> it was a real struggle about four years ago to make a more robust equality and diversity structure, and (we) felt quite reassured that what we were trying to achieve is what other people have been identifying … (it is) very difficult to work alone, as a practitioner has to network with other people, because there are not a lot of peers one can work with. (HEI 8)

The networks, relations and connections created via the process of producing the reports and engaging E&D officers in the completion and dissemination of reports also had an impact in terms of the individuals' perceptions of their profession, remuneration, scope of responsibilities and even the institutional positioning of their roles: 'It is good to compare and try to apply to your institution from your own perspective'. (HEI 9) Additionally, the reports were perceived as helpful in providing support in institutional communications towards achieving strategic equality outcomes, building E&D structures and launching E&D initiatives. Even though establishing measures such as benchmarking, best practices, lessons learned, cross-field comparisons and audit checklists were widely used, respondents believed that the reports would have to be carefully contextualized in order to avoid marginalization and segregation. This belief highlights the importance of situatedness in terms of the context and norms within which organizational choices are made. Another aspect of situatedness is evidenced by the fact that some respondents identified the need for future reports to create a more in-depth account of the nuances of the E&D approaches in different HEIs depending on location and institutional type.

Relationality

The notion of relationality is important for shedding light on the creation of impact in terms of organizational change. Ownership of diversity issues and agendas and the ways in which these can be implemented within an organization have been perceived by some respondents as essential aspects of an organizational commitment to E&D. During the interviews, a number of respondents reflected on the role and the position of the E&D officer within the organizational hierarchy. One respondent described in detail the progression, which took place in their organization in terms of the functional positioning of his/her role:

> (initially this was at) middle management and administrative level on a p/t basis: myself: three days a week. (That was a) huge remit for one person for equality and diversity in the whole organization – very low resourcing. (It is) different in other industries and organizations; my profile has changed to f/t after one year, to four days, and after (operating during) two years f/t, I got a p/t administrator who (eventually) became f/t, and added another p/t equality and diversity advisor (who was) given recently more responsibility. More resources now have been dedicated to all this. Now it's a unit (it has) more credibility and (is) more strategic, rather than ad hoc – that was due more to institutional strategy … the work becomes self-fulfilling and there is a momentum. (HEI 5)

The above example reflects the importance of the interplay between macro-level developments, such as E&D policies, as well as institutional responses in shaping the position and prestige of the E&D officers. Some of the respondents believed that E&D officers often lack prestige and are often paid low-to-middle salaries. In this context, any

sectoral evidence such as extra-organizational reports was valued as an important resource for E&D officers in getting their voice heard by the senior managers and other organizational members. One of the interviewees highlighted the positive impact of sectoral resources in enhancing one's change agency as follows:

> The governors, the Chair and all members have copies of the (Org A) publication, this support is important; where your role is situated, in mid-range administration. (HEI 14)

Whilst the location of E&D officers in different functional hierarchies appears to be an organizational choice, it is in fact also influenced by sectoral norms as well as national policies:

> The project highlighted disparity in the sector about resources, sitting of equality and diversity specialists – some institutions have a lot, some nothing. We are interested in why there is such disparity, (but there is) little support from HEFCE, e.g. a standard to be achieved by each institution; practices differ and funding regimes differ. (There) needs to be a lot more coming from the top to support the universities and the professionals. One person to deal with it all is not enough. (HEI 18)

The lack of seniority of E&D officers could also potentially be an indicator of the absence of significant commitment to the equality agenda by some organizations (Tatli, Özbilgin, Worman and Price 2007). Relatedly, E&D practitioners often lack the authority to influence other parts of the organization, and E&D agendas tend to be perceived as being part of the human resources function. Mainstreaming of E&D is therefore still an issue for most HEIs. As one interviewee notes:

> I work under human resources, (I am) seen as more of an HR professional, with wider remit and specifically looking into issues for students and staff; (the perception is) quite positive, it depends on the approach, is it a policing attitude, or seen as a business partner with a common goal? – (nonetheless I am) respected as expert. (HEI 11)

Another relational complexity in terms of the development of the E&D function in organizations is linked to the remit and responsibility of the E&D office with respect to different stakeholders. One respondent told us:

> (Our) remit is becoming wider and wider; initially (we were) staff-focused, now (we are) responsible for students, and (the wider) community, (it has become) extremely wide and varied. At the moment E&D officers need to have more information and training on employment law and HR advisory. (HEI 11)

As the words of this respondent demonstrated, whilst the E&D agendas have become increasingly more inclusive in terms of their focus, their remit appears to have become increasingly less generic and more narrowly focused.

In considering the relational dimension of the change agency of E&D officers, it is important to note the variety of contexts and actors. Our research identified that E&D activities need to be tailored according to the audience. For example, a generic E&D training programme for the whole of the HEI sector was seen as ineffective by the respondents, as there are many differences in academic staff, administrators and higher management. In order to have relational authority and influence over the varied sets of organizational actors, the E&D officers' role would need to be more tightly integrated into institutional and strategic processes beyond the HR function. One of our respondents explains the increasingly strategic focus on E&D as follows:

> There is an equality and diversity committee in place, which reports on various schemes in the institution: gender, disability and race. Some of the other committees tackle them on an "as and when" basis – equality and diversity issues are not always on the agenda for them. Also there is a new strategy on equality and diversity, which incorporates action points from other

strategies with diversity focus – there will be additional things on the second iteration of the strategy draft. (HEI 7)

Our research indicated that creation of expert teams may lend legitimacy to E&D officers in their pursuit of organizational change towards greater equality, diversity and inclusion. E&D issues can often be facilitated through a team approach, which allows for more credibility and a more strategic role to the E&D officer through strengthening their relational resources in the institution. Several respondents highlighted that HEIs increasingly assume greater levels of responsibility and ownership for the E&D agenda, and for creating the feeling that E&D is 'everybody's job'.

> (There is) a renewed commitment (for E&D) to become a responsibility of all senior managers – not actioned yet, but new emphasis from the VC that all senior managers must take equality and diversity more seriously and (for it to be) more embedded in their work and formally become part of the professional development review. The equality and diversity function is no longer being dealt with by a committee, but all senior committees in the university have been told that they must have equality and diversity in all their terms of reference mainstreaming and work with Chairs of committees to make sure that they get it right. (HEI 16)

The relationally-defined dynamic interaction between the E&D officers' change agency and organizational context is also evident in the ways in which the importance of the E&D agenda is disseminated and further embedded in organizations via interaction between different organizational actors and departments. An example of this is the creation of mechanisms of mainstreaming E&D in the HEIs interviewed. Mainstreaming mechanisms include the embedding of E&D into existing reporting mechanisms and committees, the cross-fertilization of work remits (for instance E&D and staffing; E&D and widening participation) or the integration of equality issues in leadership development programmes. Our interviewees emphasized the significance of gaining engagement of organizational actors at the top management, departmental and operational levels. For example, involving academic staff through creating streams of E&D in educational and research programmes was stressed, together with the inclusion of heads of department as champions:

> We are lucky in that the Rector is Chair of the E&D committee (this gives the initiative) a lot of influence. As far as other colleagues are concerned, they regard equality and diversity highly, and as one of the issues that came up recently; a staff survey came out, a whole section was dedicated to that. Equality and diversity was rated highly in the survey. (HEI 17)

Institutional engagement and creating 'high level' champions appeared as another relational resource for E&D officers in their efforts to affect organizational change. Senior diversity champions command legitimacy to E&D goals particularly when they involve transformation of the organizational culture.

Praxis

Praxis of E&D officers involves two interconnected aspects: reflection and action. E&D officers, in their role as change agents, need to reflect on the organizational and sectoral context within which they are situated and on the relational resources that are available to them. This reflection then forms the basis of the action they take towards affecting organizational change. The interviewees placed a special emphasis upon how they are perceived and valued in their E&D role. Some E&D officers closely interacted with Vice-Chancellors and committee Chairs and performed strategic tasks with senior managers. Of equal importance, however, appeared to be networking with peer professionals. Such

interactions with organizational actors and peers allowed E&D officers a space for reflection, which enabled them to navigate the boundaries of their change agency. This aspect highlights further the 'agentic role' and the concept of 'praxis' in the organizational setting, where individuals can have a remit to promote a change agenda for greater E&D via their actions. Nonetheless, several participants in the study acknowledged that their capacity for change agency can be limited on occasions where support from senior management is not granted. Such support was deemed an enabling condition for successful take-up and development on the institutional level of the E&D agenda. According to one respondent: 'There needs to be a lot more coming from the top to support the universities and the professionals. One person to deal with it all is not enough'. (HEI 18)

The presence of top management support can be a significant catalyst for change and development of the E&D presence in the organization. As another respondent comments:

> (We are) always learning, but because of the size and scale of the university, we had the opportunity to have reasonable resources, we are a small team, but we had a new post three years ago, re-organizing the structure and also introducing a new management group executive authority to take the work forward … (we also have) two individuals on the VC executive, but they are active champions, securing resources and making sure that they have necessary interventions. We are located in a central strategy unit which is also very helpful, one of five offices that are well-placed to network across the institution, we are quite visible, in the past we have been more marginalized, but now with the new structures we have become more mainstream. The work is now addressed with more professionalism and (is being) taken more seriously, as a strategic priority. (HEI 8)

The interviews showed that the notion of 'praxis' can be effectively leveraged via interaction with supportive structures as well as leadership in the HEIs. In reflecting on their power and resources as change agents, E&D officers assessed the state of the E&D in their organizations, and the level of organizational commitment, which allowed them to develop realistic strategies for change, setting achievable goals.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored the role of E&D officers in affecting organizational change in HEIs in the UK. Our analysis is contextual, as it focuses on a specific sector in a specific national context, and it frames the agency of E&D officers as an outcome of the relational dynamics between multiple organizational actors. Building on Tatli and Özbilgin's (2009) conceptual framework, our research has generated insights into the change agency of E&D officers in UK universities. Our findings showed that the change agency of E&D officers is situated in the societal, sectoral and organizational context. External drivers for E&D in HEIs, such as sectoral norms and traditions, national policies and regulation have significant influence on the professional role and remit of E&D officers. Organizational approaches to E&D and processes, mechanisms and systems for managing diversity are equally important to understand the capacity of E&D officers to act as change agents. Relational dynamics play a crucial role in enhancing agentic power of the E&D officers. Our findings suggest that commitment to E&D at both sectoral and organizational levels as well as creating champions at a high level are key elements in order to facilitate organizational change towards greater equality, diversity and inclusion. Involving academic staff in E&D initiative is important, as well as including line managers and senior managers as champions and creating activities that engage organizational members in different positions. Our research highlights that the national reports are used strategically by E&D officers when they negotiate the sectoral and organizational context as well as relationships with organizational actors.

The role of E&D officers as change agents in UK HEIs is an important area of study if we are to understand the ways in which greater E&D can be achieved in the sector. At the same time, E&D officers have their own institutional battles to win, in terms of demonstrating the potential impact of their work and affirming its value for the organization. Research shows us that organizations with diverse workforces do not necessarily always perform better (Kochan et al. 2003), yet the E&D officers can strategically deploy the logic of the business case (which is more readily intelligible to management), and perhaps even use of a more expanded conceptualization, which incorporates reputation into the business case (Dickens 1994), that UK universities increasingly value in a highly competitive environment. The strategic use of national reports is a case in point for the necessity for E&D officers to mobilize a wide range organizational and extra-organizational resources in order to increase their influence as potential change agents. This study contributes to debates within the diversity management literature in regards to the efficacy of organizational or sectoral audits and reports on E&D. There is an emergent suggestion that such reports may be futile exercises that hide from view the underlying equality challenges that pervade organizations (Ahmed 2007; Noon et al. 2013). Our research demonstrated that national and sectoral reports may in fact constitute important strategic resources for E&D officers in their role as change agents.

Our findings have implications for the practice of E&D in organizations. In public sector organizations, including universities, a compelling case for effective diversity management practice is increasingly evident. A holistic approach to diversity management, which includes different stakeholders (e.g. both staff and students in the case of HEIs) is essential in order to enable change. The work of E&D officers is key in achieving strong commitment, engagement, support and ownership required for enacting a change in the systems, structures and culture. There are important lessons for E&D officer. First, that diversity management is not a one person show. It can be only successful if it is shared by external and internal stakeholders and supported by the organizational leadership. Second, E&D officers need to be creative about utilizing different strategic resources in order to strengthen the case of organizational change. These resources can be of a wide variety and may originate both within and outside of the organization. Third, the value and utility of extra organizational resources may vary depending on the contextual and relational configurations that pertain to the organization. Therefore, E&D officers need to reflect on the context-specific resources and understand their relational position before they design E&D practice. The practical insights generated by this research are equally transferrable to private sector context as well as other national settings. E&D officers face similar challenges in terms of transforming the existing *status quo* in order to move towards diverse and inclusive organizations. Our study explored the specific case of E&D officers in the UK HEIs. However, various extra-organizational resources can be used similarly by E&D professionals in other sectoral and national contexts. For instance, in addition to reports, sectoral champions, diversity networks, equality benchmarks and indices can be utilized by E&D officers in order to demonstrate the importance of their change agenda.

There are also limitations to this study. The study focused on the impact of extra organizational resources that is specific to one sector. Future research can identify cross-sectoral resources as well as compare the efficacy of different resources across various sectoral and national settings. Furthermore, a wider range of extra-organizational resources can be studied in terms of impact and process. Our paper provides a template for extensions. Future research might also benefit from extending the application of similar

conceptual frameworks (Tatli and Özbilgin 2009; Tatli 2011) that account for the contextual and relational nature of E&D work to different types of organizations and different national and sectoral settings.

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