

Diversity – the European perspective

The European region is made up of 8 different countries, with different histories, cultures and 8 different languages. So, it is difficult to put forward a purely European perspective even when this is related to DKG.

It became clear very early in the process of information gathering for this presentation, that there is widespread involvement in projects both at home and abroad, that are directly related to aspects of diversity. However, there is little attention given to actively ensuring that the membership of DKG reflects the diversity of the society around us. There can be many reasons for this. For example, when there is general acceptance of variations in sexual orientation it would be strange to specifically target lesbian and transgender persons for recruitment to DKG.

It is perhaps relevant to look briefly at the background of the European member countries in order to appreciate their diversity and thus, their attitudes to diversity.

The population of the member countries vary considerably:

Iceland	364 000
Estonia	1 329 000
Norway	5 368 000
Finland	5 540 800
Sweden	10 099 300
Netherlands	17 135 000
Great Britain	67 886 000
Germany	83 784 000

Some countries have been colonial powers, some have been invaded or under the control of other countries for longer or shorter periods. All these factors have an impact on attitudes to diversity, whether it be ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, political beliefs or socio-economic status.

Religion - Despite the fact that Christianity arrived in Europe in the first century, there have been many changes and challenges over the years. There are significant numbers in some countries who are either orthodox or catholic although the Lutheran /Protestant churches are in the majority in most of the DKG member countries.

Active participation in religion has declined over time, but there are those in all the countries who find it hard to accept that there are significant numbers of immigrants who have Islam as their faith, and can view this as a threat to 'their' values.

Gender and sexual orientation - It is not that many years since it was necessary to fight for women's rights. In the 21st century, there have been significant developments in official attitudes and laws related to gender and sexual orientation, reflecting the attitudes of the

population. The Netherlands was the first country in Europe to legislate for same sex marriage and all other member countries have followed suit. It would be naïve to claim that there is total acceptance by everyone, there is still prejudice and discrimination, although not as openly as previously. There is legislation intended to offer protection and an ever-increasing awareness and acceptance that we all have the right to choose who we are.

Physical ability - Mainly in response to the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities which came in 2006, all 8 countries have legislation to ensure the rights of those with disabilities and to regulate building codes in order that there shall be accessibility.

There are however differences in the organisation/availability of funding to individuals with disabilities at the state level. Most countries in Europe have developed social systems to provide differing levels of financial support for disabled, based on the philosophy that this is one tool that can be used to 'level the playing field' in relation to those who are able-bodied.

A challenge for all countries is of course the cost of these initiatives. In Estonia there was a report a few years ago that highlighted the fact that the number of those eligible for support with regard to incapacity in work was rising significantly and that there was a real danger that this would not be sustainable over time.

Immigration - The subject of immigration is a major one in all the 8 countries and it is perhaps in this area that we see the greatest impact on DKG Europe, it is one aspect of diversity to which all can relate.

Throughout history there have been many international crises that have led to huge numbers of people moving to a new country/ becoming refugees. This is not a new phenomenon.

After the Second World War, there was significant migration throughout countries in Europe. Many from the Baltic countries stayed in Sweden after the war. This was quickly followed by the arrival of a wave of migrant workers from Finland, Italy, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Turkey and other Balkan countries.

Estonia was occupied by the Russians from 1944 -1991 and Russians still make up about 24% of the population.

Thousands of Russians also fled to Finland after the Russian Revolution and subsequent conflicts.

The 1960's saw the end for the colonial powers and there was an influx of immigrants to Europe from the previous colonies in Asia, Africa, the West Indies and South America. This was particularly the case when there was unrest and civil war in ex-colonial countries.

Even before the European Union decided to allow free movement of workers between countries, immigrants from Poland make up the largest ethnic minority of immigrants in Iceland.

The rise in the number of asylum seekers and refugees began in the 1980s with high levels of immigration from countries like Iran and Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Somalia, as well as South American countries with repressive regimes.

The Syrian crisis from 2015 is a significant factor shaping Europe at this time. In the first year 890 000 Syrian refugees crossed the border into Germany and applied for asylum! This was extreme, but all the member countries have been affected by an influx of refugees from war-torn Syria.

Immigration brings a wide range of challenges for the receiving country. There are cultural and religious differences, language challenges, schooling, and not least, financial concerns. Can the immigrants become economically self-sufficient, and who pays in the interim and in the long run if they do not become self-sufficient? Even in countries with well-developed social welfare systems, the question is hotly debated as to whether the numbers of refugees will undermine the system.

In Sweden an initiative has been developed to fast-track Syrian refugee teachers so that they receive training in the Swedish educational system in Arabic while undergoing an accelerated course in Swedish and undertaking teaching practice in Swedish schools. An invaluable addition to a school system endeavouring to cope with numbers of students with no Swedish. Similar initiatives have been started in other countries too.

General perceptions - We clearly see that issues related to diversity are frequently on the agenda for chapter and conference meetings. Speakers/guests are invited to talk about a wide range of topics which come under the umbrella of diversity: Immigrants talk of their experiences, and organisers of initiatives for a variety of challenged groups report on their work.

What is just as important is that members throughout Europe are actively involved in volunteering their time, skills, and money to help a wide range of groups and individuals. Thus providing a valuable and significant supplement to the centrally organized initiatives for diverse groups.

In Germany DKG is involved in providing financing that enables children of refugees to attend an art project (Malort) so that they may draw. In Norway many chapter members work with refugees giving assistance with homework, training conversation skills and giving general assistance in adapting and finding one's way around the system. In the Netherlands 'gender neutral' education is part of the education system and much debated by DKG members.

Estonia is reportedly a fairly conservative country where noticing diversity of any kind is a fairly recent phenomenon. There have been representative groups for different minorities for some time, but there can be some competition for funding when new initiatives are formed. DKG members are doing their part as private citizens, for example working with students from different backgrounds as part of their jobs, while others have established volunteer groups who work with the disabled, the neurodivergent etc.

When hearing/reading of the activities of chapters throughout the region, it is clear that valuable contributions are being made by DKG members.

Some members have suggested that diversity awareness can have a geographical aspect. They question whether there is easier acceptance of immigrant groups in rural areas than there is in the cities where there is greater diversity of race, sexual orientation etc. Levels of unrest in some cities would seem to indicate that this is where the challenge lies. No doubt there is research that could help us with this question.

Following the death of George Floyd in the US, the whole world has again been confronted with the need to address and meet the rights of minority groups. Demonstrations were by no means limited to the US.

In many countries the Covid 19 pandemic has made us brutally aware that significant numbers of health care workers come from ethnic minorities.

The general response from member countries indicates a high level of acceptance of diversity in the European region, but there is also an awareness that there is still work to be done.

In conclusion, here are a few quotes received when asking for ideas on this topic:

'we value old and new members equally without considering diversity or lack of it.'

'Europe as a region is already a place where "Embracing Diversity" is a part of daily life and not something to think of sometimes when you are reminded that the world is wider than your neighbourhood.'

'The events of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations here (GB), in the USA, and world wide, must serve as a wakeup call to all of us to remember we are a multi-cultural society and every organisation should reflect that.'

'We tend to invite people to speak at meetings who are similar to us, who we have a connection with and who are our friends. We also do this when we look for new members. There is nothing wrong with this, but this means that we can become insular and then DKG does not feel welcoming to different communities, who do not see themselves reflected in the group.....'

'For the organisation to thrive, we need to give a (socially distanced) hug to all potential members. For example, an all-women group could well appeal to teachers from Muslim, Sikh and Hindu backgrounds who are used to attending women only groups in other settings.'

The same can be said for many other groups – how many opportunities have we missed to extend an invitation to someone who could widen our outlook, give DKG a new relevance in society today?