Enhancing Community Sustainability in the North Through Valorization of Competencies

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Abstract

Recently governmental policies of Finland are to attract international students and scholars into Finnish higher education institutes (HEIs). A retention policy has been adopted by the government program titled Talent Boost Program (Talent Boost, n/a). Although refugees and third-country nationals who have arrived and have been living in Finland are the most vulnerable group facing challenges in creating values of their previously acquired qualifications. Getting access to particular jobs based on their educational background is difficult for refugees, students, or international students.

Our research explores how to enhance community sustainability in a sparsely inhabited diverse society through the valorization of competencies of newcomers in the community. This study argues that encompassing new members from different cultures, making the communities of the mainstream society familiar with diversities, and recognizing diverse needs to build trust and reciprocity between majorities and minorities need equal recognition of diversity and showing respect for diverse perspectives of all citizens despite their socio-cultural, economic, and political backgrounds. Multiple needs of multiple groups of people in a community are vitally important for sustaining the societal construct and building trust among locals and immigrants. In this study, we explore the skill valorization of international students and scholars, why and how it is a sign to valorize the competencies of international students, and how this valorization of diverse skills is interconnected to the "community stability" of the North.

1. Introduction

The principal elements of sustainable development are ecological, economic, social, and cultural sustainability (Koger & Scott, 2007). "A sustainable community strives to maintain a healthy and thriving economy, society, and environment; adapts to internal and external stresses; takes advantage of internal and external opportunities; provides a high quality of life for residents; and persists through time" (MacKendrick & Parkins, 2004: page 3). A sustainable community means that sustainable development pursues change in individuals' and communities' actions and the fundamental understanding of successful attitudes toward life in an extensive perspective (Shephard, 2008; see also Uusiautti & Hyvärinen, 2020).

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Adequate access to information, access to social-cultural, and economic opportunities, political freedom, and psychological well-being are the components of a sustainable community where people can feel a sense of belonging. Continuing sustainability practices are the key factor for managing the diversity and inclusion of minorities in societies (Dempsey et al., 2011). Sustainable Community Development (SCD) very much depends on the practice of equity and social justice in a respective society where diverse interests are a concern (Kohon, 2018) of a sustainable society. Attaining the aim of SCD requires changes to meet the needs based on the present situation, compromising the abilities of the community to include newcomers to cope with a new environment and improving the contemporary values for a better future (WCED, 1987; Roseland, 2012). The significance of quality of life for the stability of the respective community is the focus of the attention of any community.

Now the question is why does the Sustainability of the Northern society matter? The North is a sparsely populated region, people are aging, and the birth rate is comparatively low (Yeasmin, 2018) has created an unbalanced situation in the economy. Some cities are shrinking, whereas others are growing in the North (Heleniak, 2020). Lacking ways of quality lives in smaller municipalities is one of the push factors why young people are moving to bigger cities and require resilient communities (Leskisenoja & Uusiautti, 2019). The Northernmost societies require skills and human resources from outside the region for socioeconomic stability. The immigration policies of Northern decentralized municipalities have increased the number of skilled, semi-skilled, and highly skilled immigrants in the line of labor demands (Yeasmin, 2020).

Recently governmental policies of Finland are to attract international students and scholars into Finnish higher education institutes (HEIs). A retention policy has been adopted by the government program titled Talent Boost Program (Talent Boost, n/a). On the contrary, refugees and third-country nationals who have been already residing for many years in Finland are facing challenges regarding the recognition of their previously acquired qualifications. Getting access to particular jobs based on their educational background is difficult for refugees, students, or international students. Language is the biggest impediment to access to adequate information, as the information available is mainly in the Finnish language. Lacking local language skills limits access to socio-political and economic opportunities for newcomers in the host community. This limited access to adequate information leads them to feel isolated and vulnerable. From a practical viewpoint, it is essential to assess the need of newcomers in society to build a sustainable and resilient community for all-in-one hand and on the other hand, a community needs to put a value on its capacity to integrate new members into the community. Thus, more focus is required for social sustainability (Zuo, Jin, & Flynn, 2012).

Our research explores how to enhance community sustainability in a sparsely inhabited diverse society through the valorization of competencies of newcomers in the community. This study argues that encompassing new members from different cultures, making the communities of the mainstream society familiar with diversities, and recognizing diverse needs to build trust and reciprocity between majorities and minorities need equal recognition of diversity and showing respect for diverse perspectives of all citizens despite their socio-cultural, economic, and political backgrounds. Multiple needs of multiple groups of people in a community are vitally important for sustaining the societal construct and building trust among locals and immigrants. In this study, we explore the skill valorization of international students and scholars, why and how it is a sign to valorize the competencies of international students, and how this valorization of diverse skills is interconnected to the "community stability" of the North.

2. Valorization of competencies: a conceptual framework

The European higher education sector has been bearing many changes and reforms in line with the consequences of the Bologna Declaration 1999 and the Lisbon Recognition Convention 1997. This declaration and convention have provided an educational autonomy paradigm to HEIs in the national states. These two processes ease the knowledge valorization abilities of universities to integrate international students into their respective higher education communities. Valorization of competencies stimulates the sociocultural and economic integration of international students by recognizing their skills and values and previously acquired skills that have a degree of usefulness (Slišāne et al., 2021). Valorization of knowledge of international students or immigrants increases their engagement equally within the university community and the respective society by maintaining their social values accordingly (van de Burgwal et al., 2019).

Valorization is defined as a process that "… aims at enhancing societal impact in the widest sense of the term" (Drooge & de Jong, 2015). As valorization can take many different forms, our study suggests valorization of competencies of international students is a process that can create added value for the community sustainability in the North. Since the recognition of previously acquired skills aims at enhancing a sustainable future for the North by safeguarding equal opportunities for immigrants to continue their higher education in the Finnish HEIs, valorization of their knowledge subsequently will give them access to socio-political and economic opportunities in the community which could create a safe environment of respect in society towards diverse communities in a greater society. According to the Lisbon recognition convention, any background document is needed to continue "further studies or appropriate employment" (UN, 2017) to be issued by the respective university in the EU. Any assessment for the valorization of qualification soon after arriving in the host country (UN, 2017). Establishing a value within the education system and respectably within the host society is the target of the recognition process of previously acquired competencies. Creating value of the qualification is part of ensuring someone´s right to feel included, can lead to better acculturation, and enhances SCD in terms of an increasing sense of belongingness and satisfaction to be recognized in the host society.

3. Methodology

The research question set for this research was: How can the valorization process enhance sustainable community development in the North?

Our study on the North of the world indicates a sparsely populated region where towns are shrinking by population. This research explored the question of how does diversity matter for such Towns or cities? This explorative study has been based on a literature review, interviews, and ethnographic observation of activities and workshops between the years 2019-2022 conducted under the project MaxiPac.EU gets funded by Erasmus KA2 Plus. The project has targeted to maximize the previously acquired competencies of Third country nationals in Finland who are embracing the status of international students or in a similar position of refugees or displaced persons or a refugee-like situation (The Lisbon Convention, 1997). The project activities include discussions, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and in-depth interviews of staff members (N=35) of higher education institutes in Finland. Respondents of the study are staff from vocational institutes, international students, scholars, and researchers (N=56). The knowledge convened from the focus group discussions (N=40) arose during the workshops. All interviews and FGD were semi-structured and organized by the project researchers. The qualitative content analyzing method (Mayring, 2000) has been used for analyzing materials according to the thematic focuses of societal, intercultural, economic, and moral value creation.

4. Findings

Valorization is a process (see Figure 1) linked with the sociocultural, economic, and moral obligations of the host societies to meet the needs of multiple groups of people. Ensure a safe environment to be respected and recognized in every sphere of their life in a new societal framework based on their competencies or skills rather than their nationality. Such a process will enhance their overall integration. Those who have integrated into society can be involved in the sustainable development of the greater community.
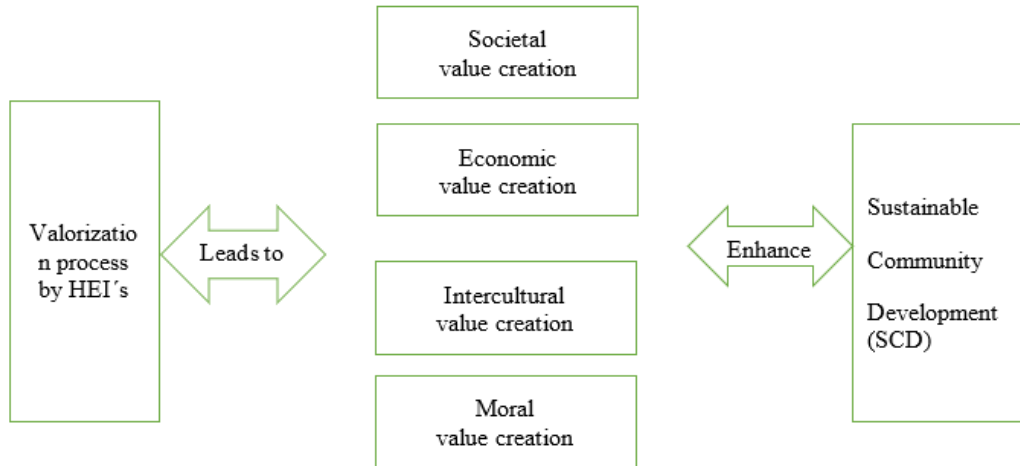

Figure 1: Valorisation process enhances SCD (own elaboration based on data)

Analyzing our materials, we end up with a hypothesis: the ease of valorization process that needs to be explored by HEIs is still a complex phenomenon by knowing its complexities.

Everyone involved in the methodological process well knows about the challenges and opportunities. The societal value creation process depends upon many actors and sectors of society. Thus the entire process of creating values lacks appropriate coordination. Standard coordination could enhance sustainable community development.

Societal value creation through understanding the needs of societies that lead to upskilling or reskilling of the competencies of immigrants lack a clear definition of competencies. Since recognizing competencies are interpreted in multiple ways by different actors and sectors. There are no such answers once TCN´s documentary shreds of evidence are not enough to prove their qualifications (Focus Group, 2021). Society per se supporting through several programs to enable the study and work of immigrants are not reposting social values and not even increasing societal acceptance scales of the TCN require additional efforts to change societal attitudes by finding answers to the questions of societal inclusion (Focus group, 2021).

Intercultural value creation refers to the hidden restrictions of creating separate spaces for separate groups of people based on their cultural backgrounds. Based on our research findings, intercultural values include acceptance of particular identities and cultural values and interests. Equal encounters without any discrepancies between peoples from different principles and realities. (Student, spring 2022; Focus group, 2021). Hierarchies between cultural minorities and educational culture can create an understanding of shielding colonizing states, intercultural precepts, and subjective ideologies towards certain groups of people in the society can hinder social justice (International researcher, fall 2022). "Recognizing" and "not recognizing" skills of some groups of immigrants restrain equal respect towards each other. A concept of sustainable community

development includes a safe, uniform, and respectful environment for all residents despite their cultural backgrounds.

While pieces of evidence and certificates on previously acquired competencies are not enough to ensure adequate access to the professional life of the host society could create an unbalanced and unequal social status among different groups of immigrants. Likewise, many highly educated immigrants working as food delivery men failed to highlight their educational qualifications and subjective satisfaction. Such underemployment practices threaten several different systems of values. This deskilling process underrates wealth and worth of experiences and competencies in the labor market. (Students, 2021-2022; Focus group, 2021-2022).

Discussion on moral values raises awareness in European society after the invasion of Ukraine. Pursuing higher education for Ukrainian refugees in the HEIs was recognized and systemized in many HEIs in European countries. This immediate recognition reaction of the countries constructs a culture of positive discrimination grounds on creating moral values in the society in terms of including particular groups of people in the greater European community. Easy access for Ukrainian refugees to study and work in local labor creates a moral value of sustainable community development. These moral values towards Ukrainian refugees affirm the successful integration of refugees in the EU is an exemplary case study of moral-value creation. Despite many ambiguities or conceptional opacity, it has been discussed after the arrival of Ukrainian refugees that sub-division of socio-cultural, linguistic, and rational competencies are acceptable by creating positive discourses on moral values in society. (Focus group, fall 2022) which can lead to a change of paradigm of the disciplinary legitimacy of sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Combining and prioritizing each objective of creating value values or a set of values enhances (see Figure 1) the overall proposition of a sustainable community. Building the practice of recognizing previously acquired competencies of immigrants might attract and keep immigrants in the respective society by increasing their motivation (Boga, 2022). Identifying a person or a group of people and their specific skills can reinforce psychological well-being for empowering further individuals and the respective group to be effective and valuable for the society where one belongs (Leskisenoja & Uusiautti, 2019).

The recognition of skills leads to long-term sustainability to survive by facilitating access to the economic ecosystem of the host society (Yeasmin & Koivurova, 2020). Identity has a moral value that sets a stable level of self-confidence and is consequential in showing respect for ourselves (Ikeda, 2008). Making someone feel valued is a key to well-being. To many extents, recognizing someone by respecting competencies is equivalently respecting the identity.

Recognition and satisfaction lead to a sense of belonging to a particular community as a chain reaction (Yeasmin, 2022) because the co-creation of added moral values leads to the sustainable development of the larger community. The concept of sustainability of positive environments describes well the desired situation (Corral-Verdugo & Frías-Armenta, 2015). In the sphere of ethical values, the recognition granted by the Treaty of Lisbon is subject to partial processing, which only requires the initiative of higher education institutions.

Moral values include empathy and loyalty, which are needed to maintain relationships between individual beings and the community that surrounds people (Hechavarria et al., 2017). Cultural recognition creates a sense of acceptance of diversity. Valuing personal and collective identity is one of the main factors of determination to be involved in a respected community related to SCD engagement (Sharma, 2020). Acknowledging the

skills of some individuals or cultural or ethnic communities means recognizing a noteworthy feature of individuals, their ethnic backgrounds, and the characteristics of different cultures (Sharma, 2020).

A sense of intercultural realities and a sense of universal thoughts on humanity by understanding different cultures can create values for intercultural realities (Sharma, 2018; 2020). Acknowledging the previously acquired skills of immigrants also gives a sense of recognizing the different cultural backgrounds, functions, and educational cultures of the particular community where they have obtained their skills and competencies. According to the Council of Europe, the academic cultures of people from ethnic backgrounds are a framework that includes the teaching and learning practices and methods of a particular educational system (Council of Europe, n/a). Knowledge of cross-cultural realities is a significant factor in assessing skills, which include beliefs, attitudes, and trust (Bañas & Buyse, 2016) in the learning style and teaching style of another, systematically different educational culture, which can bring diverse perspectives to that particular society for community cohesion. Acknowledging different cultures and perspectives is a focal principle of the education system of the country in question.

Society needs substantial knowledge to change its attitudes based on circumstances. Such value creation by the higher education institute influences and activates the skills of thinking, feelings, and determination among the population (Scharmer, 2018). Having a positive change toward the inclusion of equal and diverse practices secures sustainability in the livelihoods, health, and safety of ethnic groups in the host society. SCD requires reshaping social values by focusing on the concepts related to equity, inclusion, and justice (Kopnina et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2020; Filho et al., 2022). Although many European countries have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the universities and colleges of the EU member states have ignored the practical implementation of this agreement.

This existing Convention needs to be activated by a positive initiative that can lead to a chain value structure for the society for underpinning its community development.

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