Policy and Practice Recommendations Report

TGAL

THINK GLOBAL ACT LOCAL
DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Consortium

BRCCI BULGARIAN-ROMANIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY	**BRCCI Bulgarian - Romanian Chamber of commerce and industry**
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StoryBag STORIES FOR ORGANISATIONS AND EDUCATION	**StoryBag - Stories for Organisations and Education**

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A. Introduction

Diversity management is a crucial topic in Europe's diverse workforce, and entrepreneurs must embrace this diversity to form successful teams. Diversity management is an essential part of human resource management strategies in today's increasingly diverse Europe. The workforce is diverse (not just in terms of nationality, age or gender) and businesses need to be in tune with this fact, as creating diverse teams and respecting this personal and cultural diversity will soon be the norm that will lead to success. This is also why the European Union is placing increasing emphasis on promoting diversity in the workplace through various initiatives such as National Diversity Charters and an annual European Diversity Month intended to promote and encourage diversity within the EU workforce.

The *Think Global, Act Local* Erasmus + project, intends to promote cultural change in companies by leveraging storytelling to inspire and motivate managers and employees. This project aims to develop the skills and competencies of target groups, including VET professionals, HR personnel, and SME CEOs, to use narrative approaches to support diversity management in driving cultural change within SMEs.

A significant part of the project's implementation is this **Policy and Practice Recommendations Report**, with the Policy Brief serving as the key output for the project's Work Package 4. These outputs are essential for communicating research and policy recommendations to a broad audience, including decision-makers and practitioners. This policy paper transforms the project's primary findings into clear, action-oriented advice to drive policy initiatives.

The **Policy and Practice Recommendations Report** will support European policymakers and practitioners to adopt the Think Global, Act Local model to use narrative approaches (e.g. storytelling) to promote Diversity Management within SMEs in Europe fostering inclusive and open workplaces. This is specifically linked to our project objective: to adapt VET to labour market needs and contribute to VET's innovation.

By focusing on specific issues and refining key research insights, this report seeks to present evidence-based recommendations that are both practical and feasible for implementation. Through this structured approach, the projects aim was to enhance the accessibility of high-quality evidence, ensuring that policy decisions are driven by the most reliable and up-to-date information available.

B. Methodology

The methodology for developing the **Policy and Practice Recommendations Report** for the Think Global, Act Local (TGAL) project involves a structured and systematic approach to research, analysis, synthesis of data from previous projects' outputs and reliable sources. The goal is to provide feasible insights into D&I Management that can be implemented by VET institutions, (management and HR) professionals, SMEs, and policymakers across Europe.

The methodology that we decided to follow was a series of **comparative analyses** conducted across the eight partner countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, and Slovenia. This involved four main comparative analysis tasks:

1. Assessing the current state of VET provision and the adoption of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives within companies.
2. Examining national programs and initiatives that address anti-discrimination measures and equality quotas in the workplace.
3. Investigating the rationale and business case for implementing D&I initiatives within SMEs.
4. Exploring the attitudes and actions of businesses, especially SMEs, towards diversity management and inclusive leadership.

Partners have collected quantitative and qualitative data through surveys, interviews, existing reports, topical publications, policy documents, case studies, and business performance metrics to achieve these objectives. They then compared the VET systems, the extent of D&I initiatives, the effectiveness of policies, the perceived and actual benefits of D&I activities, and the attitudes and practices related to diversity

management and inclusive leadership. This comprehensive comparative analysis has identified patterns, strengths, weaknesses, commonalities, and differences across countries, ultimately highlighting best practices and areas for improvement.

The data from the comparative analyses and focus group sessions are captured in this comprehensive Policy and Practice Recommendations Report. The synthesis process involved integrating findings from the comparative analyses to identify overarching trends, common challenges, and successful strategies, as well as a summary of the insights and recommendations from the focus groups.

The process undertaken provided the partnership with a comprehensive, inclusive, and practical approach to produce policy and practice recommendations that can effectively promote diversity management and inclusive leadership within SMEs and VET institutions across Europe.

C. CA1 – Key Findings

In Work Package 4 (WP4), to reach the Policy-level Recommendations of the TGAL project, a comparative analysis – CA1 was conducted to evaluate Vocational Education and Training (VET) provision and the adoption of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives across partner countries. This analysis aimed to identify best practices, challenges, and opportunities within VET systems and corporate environments, fostering a deeper understanding of how different countries integrate D&I principles into their educational and professional frameworks.

Bulgaria has seen VET centres and the Human Resources Development Agency integrate D&I concepts through workshops and training sessions. Although national laws support anti-discrimination, their practical application is often limited. Focus groups indicated that companies are beginning to recognise the importance of diversity, primarily focusing on gender, age, and disabilities. However, financial, and cultural barriers continue to hinder the broader adoption of these initiatives.

In **Cyprus**, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and human resources professionals emphasise the need for inclusive leadership and anti-discrimination measures. Government quotas in the public sector and internal policies within organisations support gender and racial equality. Despite these efforts, focus groups discussed significant barriers such as unconscious biases and resistance to change. There is a need for more targeted training to foster acceptance and inclusivity.

The **Czech Republic** is placing a growing emphasis on inclusive training for HR and business leaders. Government policies include quotas for women in management and measures to ensure work-life balance. Focus groups revealed that some companies have internal policies for flexible work and support for LGBTQ employees. However, there is often a gap between policy and practice, with many companies relying on voluntary measures rather than enforced regulations.

Ireland, while not legally requiring businesses to have written D&I policies, has seen many large companies adopt D&I policies. Vocational Education Training (VET) is funded by SOLAS and delivered through various educational and training boards. National legislation promotes Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and the Gender

Pay Gap Information Act mandates gender pay analysis. Focus groups indicated that non-profit organisations such as BITCI and ICD support businesses in developing D&I policies. However, SMEs often lack the resources to implement these policies effectively.

In **Italy**, there is a clear awareness of government anti-discrimination policies and supplementary D&I programs, such as Law 68/99 for people with disabilities and Law 183/2020 for gender identity and sexual orientation. Companies are increasingly adopting voluntary gender quotas. However, focus groups revealed that resistance from traditional structures and a lack of resources in SMEs impede the effective implementation of these D&I initiatives.

In the **Netherlands**, there is a strong emphasis on inclusive education and training provided by both public and private institutions. Universities such as Amsterdam, Leiden, and Utrecht offer dedicated programs in D&I management at both the bachelor's and master's levels. The Dutch government has implemented significant policies, including the National Program against Discrimination and Racism, encouraging companies to adopt the Diversity Charter. Focus groups in the Netherlands revealed that while larger organisations demonstrate more commitment to D&I through mentorship programs and cultural diversity training, the implementation and effectiveness of these initiatives vary, with smaller companies (e.g. SMEs) showing that they do their best to implement D&I, but more often than hoped for are having difficulties (often dictated by other priorities) in adopting comprehensive D&I policies.

Portugal's approach to D&I includes specialised courses in gender education and workplace equality offered by institutions like the Open University and the Institute of Employment and Professional Training (IEFP). The government supports initiatives such as the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (ENIND) and the ADIM LGBTI+ guide, promoting inclusive practices. Despite these efforts, focus groups highlighted that limited resources and awareness among SMEs hinder the full realisation of these initiatives, even though larger corporations are leading in implementing robust D&I measures.

In **Slovenia**, several companies have joined the "Socially Responsible Employer" (SRE) initiative coordinated by the *Ekvilib Institute*, focusing on fair working conditions, diversity, environmental responsibility, and social inclusion. The University of Ljubljana has adopted the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) to ensure inclusive policies. Despite these efforts, focus groups highlighted that the implementation of these initiatives varies, and awareness of their existence and benefits is often limited.

In summary, VET provision and D&I initiatives exhibit significant variation across different countries. Larger organisations and public institutions typically lead in D&I efforts, while smaller companies and traditional structures often face challenges due to limited resources, more 'urgent priorities', or simply unawareness. Government policies and support from non-profit organisations are crucial in promoting inclusive practices, but the effectiveness of these initiatives is often hindered by practical barriers and cultural resistance. More targeted training and increased awareness are essential to foster a more inclusive environment across all sectors.

D. CA2 – Key Findings

This section presents a comparative analysis of **national programs and initiatives** across partner countries that address **anti-discrimination measures and equality quotas in the workplace**. It examines the efforts and progress made by various governments and organisations to promote equality and inclusivity, highlighting the successes and challenges each country faces in fostering diverse and inclusive work environments.

Bulgaria's legal framework for equality includes the Constitution, Labour Code, Social Security Code, and the Discrimination Protection Act. The 2016 Law on Equality between Women and Men mandates gender mainstreaming in national policies, although enforcement is weak. The National Strategy for Promoting the Equality of Women and Men 2021-2030 sets out annual plans and monitoring mechanisms. NGOs like JAMBA facilitate employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Focus groups indicated that the development and adaptation of diversity and inclusion policies are recent and implementing effective D&I programmes remains challenging.

In **Cyprus**, political parties have implemented internal quota systems to promote women's participation in decision-making bodies. A legislative mandate requires a 10% employment quota for persons with disabilities in the public sector, but this target is often not met due to implementation challenges. Focus groups revealed that while equality quotas are becoming necessary for public companies, they are not widely adopted in the private sector. Despite the lack of quotas, some organisations have policies to combat discrimination based on gender, race, and mental health.

The **Czech Ministry** of Labour and Social Affairs issues and monitors anti-discrimination policies, following EU directives on gender quotas, salary transparency, and work-life balance. However, the practical implementation of these policies often falls short of the intended standards. Focus groups noted that although policies and quotas exist, their enforcement and impact are limited.

Ireland's national action plan against racism aligns with the EU's anti-racism action plan, targeting racism in employment and education. Efforts include promoting

access to management roles for ethnic minorities and recognising foreign qualifications. While legislative equality quotas are absent, the Irish Corporate Governance Bill aims to promote gender balance on company boards. Focus groups emphasised aligning company policies with laws, enforced by bodies like the Labour Court and Workplace Relations Commission, and advocated for broader implementation of D&I initiatives beyond legal compliance.

Italy's national programmes, spearheaded by the Italian National Anti-Discrimination Office (UNAR), focus on combating discrimination and promoting workplace equality. Organisations like the Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane (FS) group have voluntarily implemented measures such as the Gender Equality Plan. Focus groups indicated that businesses are increasingly adopting supplementary diversity and inclusion policies, including employment percentages for individuals with disabilities under Law 68/99 and combating gender identity and sexual orientation discrimination under Law 183/2020 ("Zan Law").

The Dutch government (**Netherlands**) have established the National Program against Discrimination and Racism (2021) and appointed a National Coordinator to enhance equality and inclusivity. The Social Economic Council's Diversity Charter encourages businesses to embrace diversity across various dimensions. However, workplace diversity often lags behind societal diversity, with notable improvements in female leadership roles. Focus groups indicated a mixed awareness and implementation of diversity policies, and some scepticism about their effectiveness, despite existing regulations like gender balance reporting to the Social Economic Council and commitments to the European Charter Diversity. Universities and government initiatives are recognised for their diversity efforts, but better recruitment practices are needed to mitigate biases and ensure inclusivity.

Portugal's National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2018-2030, "Portugal + Equal," addresses gender equality, violence against women, and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) developed the ADIM guide to help companies include sexual diversity and gender identity in the workplace. Additionally, GRACE created a toolkit to support the recruitment and integration of people with disabilities. Focus groups highlighted the roles of the National Strategy for Equality and

Non-Discrimination (ENIND) and the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment (CITE) in promoting equal opportunities between men and women at work.

Slovenia's constitutional Article 14 ensures equal human rights and freedoms, with the 2016 Law on Protection against Discrimination establishing an Advocate for Equal Opportunities. This independent body addresses discrimination complaints and evaluates laws for discriminatory aspects. The government's strategy for integrating non-EU foreigners includes labour market inclusion measures. Focus groups indicated limited recall of specific diversity and inclusion programmes or initiatives.

The reviewed countries demonstrate varying levels of commitment and success in implementing anti-discrimination measures and equality quotas in the workplace. While governmental frameworks and organisational initiatives exist, their effectiveness and implementation vary, reflecting ongoing challenges and areas for improvement in fostering truly inclusive work environments.

E. CA3 – Key Findings

The CA3 part undertakes a comparative analysis across partner countries, focusing on making the **business case for Diversity and Inclusion** (D&I) **initiatives within small and medium-sized enterprises** (SMEs) at the **national level**. This chapter provides an overview of how various countries approach D&I, highlighting both the successes and challenges faced by SMEs in integrating these practices into their business models.

The business case for D&I in **Bulgaria** focuses on integrating diverse social groups to address youth unemployment and labour shortages. Companies are encouraged to adopt D&I practices through workshops and awareness campaigns. Nonetheless, financial constraints and cultural resistance to change significantly hinder broader implementation, according to focus group discussions.

Cyprus emphasises the efficiency gains and potential cost savings from diverse teams. Internal policies support gender equality and combat racial discrimination, although broader adoption is limited. Focus groups reveal that unconscious biases and rigid market practices pose significant barriers to the adoption of D&I initiatives.

In the **Czech Republic**, there is a highlighted need for strategic D&I initiatives to address demographic changes and an ageing population. Companies are encouraged to adopt inclusive policies to comply with EU legislation and enhance employee engagement. However, resistance to change and the lack of prioritisation of D&I initiatives remain major obstacles, as indicated by focus groups.

In **Ireland**, SMEs face barriers to implementing D&I initiatives due to limited resources and less structured hiring practices. Nevertheless, the business case for D&I is strong, with economic benefits including improved employee engagement, productivity, and problem-solving. Initiatives like the Elevate program and support from organisations such as BITCI and ICD help SMEs develop and implement D&I policies, as discussed in focus groups.

In **Italy**, there is a strong emphasis on the economic advantages of D&I, promoting inclusivity as a strategic benefit. Voluntary D&I policies are increasingly common, with some companies implementing flexible work arrangements and diversity

training. However, traditional hierarchical structures and resource limitations present significant barriers for SMEs, as identified by focus groups.

In the **Netherlands**, the value of a diverse workforce is well-recognized among SMEs. Many entrepreneurs do their best to actively support the integration of individuals from various backgrounds. Initiatives such as the '100000 Jobs Plan' aim to provide employment opportunities to those who are significantly distanced from the labour market. While larger SMEs are more likely to have formal diversity policies in place, smaller businesses often struggle to formalise D&I practices due to limited resources, as revealed by focus group discussions.

Portugal emphasises the economic benefits of a diverse workforce through initiatives like the IDE Social Hub, which advocates for inclusive hiring practices. Companies such as the Portugália Group have internal policies that support diversity, highlighting social dignity and equal opportunities. Despite these efforts, focus groups indicate that the adoption of comprehensive D&I measures in SMEs is hampered by resource constraints and limited awareness.

Slovenian SMEs face labour market challenges and need to adapt to an ageing workforce while ensuring gender equality. Initiatives such as the Diversity Charter in Slovenia and the Slovenian Directors' Association advocate for gender diversity in management. Despite these efforts, the widespread adoption of D&I practices is hindered by limited awareness and resources, according to focus groups.

This comparative analysis reveals that while the recognition of the value of D&I is widespread, the implementation and formalisation of such initiatives are significantly influenced by the size of the enterprise, resource availability, and cultural factors within each country.

F. CA4 – Key Findings

This section presents a comparative analysis of attitudes and actions toward **diversity management** and **inclusive leadership** among businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), across several European countries. By examining the unique approaches and challenges faced by companies in the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Ireland, this study aims to highlight both commonalities and differences in how inclusive practices are implemented within diverse business environments.

Women in leadership roles have significantly contributed to advancing women's rights in **Bulgaria**. Initiatives like the Bulgarian Centre of Women in Technology (BCWT) promote women's involvement in the digital industry and foster professional networks. A study revealed that 90% of foreign companies with offices in Bulgaria display their D&I policies on their websites, while only 20% of local companies do the same. Inclusive leaders in Bulgaria need to understand and embrace the whole person, continually learn about D&I, seek feedback, and foster workplace relationships.

The Diversity Charter **Cyprus** promotes diversity and encourages individuals to fulfil their potential regardless of their unique characteristics. It provides guidelines for public and private organisations to develop inclusive policies, enhancing innovation and competitiveness. Events like the Diversity & Social Inclusion Fair and the annual 'Femme Festival support gender equality and intercultural understanding. Inclusive leadership in Cyprus requires leaders to act as role models, integrate diverse individuals in leadership roles, ensure everyone feels welcome, and address specific needs.

The introduction of gender equality quotas in leadership roles at major companies in the **Czech Republic** has sparked mixed reactions. While over 60% of people oppose quotas, preferring selection based on individual abilities, activists argue they are necessary due to the country's low global ranking in gender equality. Positive examples of proactive attitudes toward diversity include Vodafone CZ and MSD Czech, which have received awards for their inclusive practices. "Pride Business Forum ", a platform that unites companies committed to equality and inclusion of

LGBTQ+ people in the workplace + "Diversity Charter " run by the "Business for Society " is the coordinator of the European Commission's Diversity Charter in the Czech Republic. Inclusive leadership in the Czech Republic requires empathy, active support for diversity, self-reflection, openness to feedback, managing fear, harnessing individual strengths, and possessing good soft skills.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), encompassing D&I, is important for SMEs as well as larger companies in **Ireland**. However, resource constraints and time limitations pose challenges for SMEs in implementing such initiatives. Encouraging collaboration between larger corporations with established CSR and D&I policies and smaller businesses can provide vital support. Initiatives like Skillnet enhance D&I within SMEs through training and skill development for senior managers. Essential qualities for fostering D&I in Ireland include fairness, open communication, leading by example, respect, receptiveness to new ideas, listening to staff, and maintaining informed knowledge.

Italian companies, particularly SMEs, are increasingly recognising the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity. They understand that an inclusive business culture can significantly boost engagement and productivity. A study presented at the "Competitive Inclusiveness" conference in Milan highlighted the ethical and financial benefits of D&I, leading many SMEs to actively participate in diversity management programs. Inclusive leadership in Italy requires empathy, equity, openness, courage, and teamwork, fostering a work environment where everyone feels appreciated and included.

Inclusive leadership in the **Netherlands** is multifaceted, requiring adaptability, empathy, understanding, genuine engagement, servant leadership, and equity. Leaders need to facilitate conversations and empower teams to drive inclusive practices. Dutch companies increasingly implement diversity and inclusion policies that reflect their unique values, culture, and societal developments. They are training staff and fostering inclusive leadership through various initiatives. A few SME examples: IJskoud B.V. hire employees from diverse nationalities and backgrounds, offering hybrid subject training to develop their talents. Van Raam manufactures adapted bicycles to enhance mobility and independence for people with disabilities. Library Rozet and Olympia actively promote inclusivity in their programs, staff, and

management, providing language lessons and financial help to those facing exclusion.

In **Portugal**, while larger corporations are gradually evolving in their D&I initiatives, SMEs often struggle due to limited resources, awareness, and expertise, leading to superficial efforts. Inclusive leadership in Portugal involves empathy, openness to different perspectives, a commitment to equity and fairness, respect, collaboration, combating unconscious biases, and taking concrete actions to support diversity and inclusion.

In **Slovenia**, there is a notable lack of specific inclusion programs in over half of both large corporations and SMEs. This underscores the need for increased attention to social aspects like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices. Initiatives such as the Diversity Charter Slovenia and efforts by the Slovenian Directors' Association highlight ongoing endeavours to promote D&I, advocating for gender diversity in management through voluntary targets set for 2026. Inclusive leadership in Slovenia starts with creating a positive work environment and requires a commitment to D&I efforts at all management levels.

Across these European countries, the implementation of D&I policies and the promotion of inclusive leadership vary significantly. Larger corporations are generally more advanced in their D&I efforts compared to SMEs, which face challenges due to limited resources and awareness. Inclusive leadership is universally recognised as critical, with common traits such as empathy, openness, commitment to equity, and the ability to foster an inclusive work environment. Continued efforts and support are necessary to advance diversity and inclusion in SMEs, leveraging the experiences and resources of larger corporations where possible.

G. Policy-level Recommendations

In order to foster truly inclusive and equitable workplaces and societies, policymakers must adopt a multifaceted approach towards D&I management. This approach should encompass legislative support, educational integration, resource allocation, and innovative methods, for instance, Participatory Narrative Inquiry (including storytelling and story analysis). By prioritising these strategies, policymakers can ensure that diversity is not only valued but that everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Recommendations for Policymakers on Diversity and Inclusion (D&I)

- **Empowerment through training:** Allocate funds and resources to D&I training programs to help employees and leaders understand the importance of diversity, foster an inclusive workplace, and drive positive change. This investment can lead to greater employee engagement, innovation, and long-term success.

- **Collaboration with experts:** Engage with industry leaders, educational institutions, and community organisations to learn from their successful D&I policies and strategies. This collaboration can help in adopting effective practices to promote diversity and inclusion.

- **Educational reforms:** Incorporate D&I topics (e.g. into Bulgaria's educational and VET systems), using methodologies like the TGAL CPD program and Storytelling Toolkit. This inclusion can enhance social learning and provide students with diverse means of communication and self-expression.

- **Inclusive Legislation:** Recognise that policies effective for the general population may not address the unique challenges faced by marginalised groups. Tailor policies to meet the specific needs of these groups to ensure equitable outcomes.

- **Support for SMEs:** Offer resources and support, such as funding for training programs and technical assistance, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that may lack the capacity to independently implement D&I initiatives.

- **Accountability measures:** Mandate companies (e.g. in Slovenia) to report on diversity metrics like workforce composition and the implementation of inclusive

policies. Use frameworks such as the "Socially Responsible Employer" initiative to track progress and incentivise D&I prioritisation.

- **Evidence-based policies:** Invest in research and data collection to understand the specific challenges and opportunities related to D&I initiatives. This includes studying unconscious bias, the impact of diversity on organisational performance, and best practices for promoting inclusion.

- **Comprehensive D&I policies:** Emphasise the importance of intersectionality in D&I initiatives, addressing overlapping systems of discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, disability, and socio-economic status. Collect and analyse demographic data to tailor interventions and resource allocation effectively.

- **Narrative approaches:** Use storytelling and narrative approaches (e.g. Participatory Narrative Inquiry) to address D&I challenges. Encourage leaders to engage in these approaches to enhance mutual respect, reveal tacit knowledge, and identify solutions. This approach can improve corporate culture, and cooperation, and attract suitable applicants.

H. Focus Group Findings

This section presents the current state of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives across various European countries, highlighting the unique challenges and progress within different workplace environments. Through a series of focus groups and studies, we examined how Bulgaria, Slovenia, Italy, Ireland, Cyprus, Portugal, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands are addressing D&I in their Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors and corporate cultures.

BRCCI – Bulgaria: The focus group revealed the challenges and development of D&I initiatives in Bulgarian workplaces. Participants emphasised the need for training and raising awareness among managers and employees. Challenges include lack of awareness, fear of change, and limited financial resources. Bulgarian companies need a comprehensive plan to integrate D&I into key departments, teams, processes, programs, policies, and core values. Using inclusive language, understanding the value of D&I for company success, and embracing D&I as an opportunity is crucial for successful implementation. A comprehensive plan integrating D&I across departments, teams, processes, programs, policies, and core values is essential for successful implementation.

CCIS - Slovenia: The focus group revealed the challenges and progress of implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives in Slovenian workplaces. Barriers such as lack of awareness, fear of change, and perceived systemic biases hinder wider adoption. The leader noted a low level of awareness in Slovenia, where many people do not recognise the country's increasing diversity. Contradictory behaviour, such as advocating for women while practising casual sexism, suggests that removing these barriers and promoting comprehensive education and awareness-raising activities will be crucial for advancing diversity and inclusion efforts in Slovenian workplaces.

EXEO LAB - Italy: The study reveals a complex yet encouraging environment for diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs in Italy. Sviluppo Lavoro Italia, an organisation that supports inclusion, develops assistance programs for disadvantaged groups like women, youth, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. The Forum of Family Associations (FAF) promotes policies to support gender equality and reconcile work

and family life but faces significant obstacles in implementing these policies. However, firms are increasingly recognising the need for diversity and inclusion, voluntarily adopting D&I policies. The report emphasises the importance of public and private sectors working together to address discrimination and promote an inclusive workplace. It also highlights the need for financial and continuous assistance to ensure the success of D&I projects and overcome logistical and cultural obstacles. Despite these challenges, Italy is experiencing a strong shift towards a more diverse and fair workplace culture, potentially positively impacting businesses and society.

FIP - Ireland: The focus group discussion highlights the gap between legal compliance and practical implementation of D&I policies in Irish companies. While companies are generally compliant with anti-discrimination, bullying, and harassment policies, there is a need for more proactive efforts to foster an inclusive culture in the workplace. Awareness and engagement of diversity, primarily focused on gender and race, is growing, but specific D&I programs and initiatives are not widely known or implemented. Barriers to D&I adoption include time constraints, costs, lack of senior management support, and competition with other corporate initiatives. Overcoming these barriers requires persuasive arguments emphasising the long-term benefits of D&I, such as improved employee retention and productivity. Inclusive leadership is crucial, characterised by fairness, open communication, and a commitment to leading by example. Effective tracking and measuring success in D&I efforts involve benchmarking diversity, monitoring hiring and promotion rates, conducting surveys, ensuring pay equity, and learning from industry standards.

IOD - Cyprus: In summary, the focus group's observations provided insight into the status of D&I projects throughout Cypriot firms. Despite apparent efforts, especially in the public sector, there is still a significant gap between legislation and practice, with private enterprises lagging in terms of fully implementing D&I.

MINDSHIFT - Portugal: The study found that while national initiatives like ENIND and CITE promote Digital Inclusion (DI), practical implementation faces challenges like resistance and lack of knowledge. The benefits of DI include innovation, reputation, and financial performance, urging broader adoption among companies. Key inclusive leadership traits and effective metrics for tracking DI progress guide

companies in enhancing their strategies. The findings emphasise the need for continuous education and structured policies to integrate DI effectively.

SEMwell – Czech Republic: The Czech Republic's D&I initiatives are complex and face challenges in achieving their full potential. Despite government policies and quotas for women in large organisations, their impact is limited. Internal policies, such as parental leave support and LGBTQ employee support, show a growing recognition of D&I's importance, but enforcement remains variable. Challenges include a lack of prioritisation and resistance to change. Inclusive leadership qualities like empathy and openness to feedback are crucial for fostering supportive organisational cultures. Success in D&I efforts requires a multifaceted approach, including internal feedback mechanisms and external benchmarking, to align with organisational goals and address systemic barriers.

StoryBag - Netherlands: The synthesis highlights the challenges and opportunities in promoting D&I within organisations. Furthermore, it highlights the need for inclusive leadership, tailored approaches, and robust measurement strategies. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is a valuable tool for fostering inclusivity and promoting mutual understanding among employees. A holistic approach, including employer support, up-skilling VET professionals, and leveraging PNI, is suggested to drive meaningful change within European workplaces. The synthesis underscores the nuanced nature of D&I initiatives and the need for adaptable strategies.

J. Practice-level Recommendations

This chapter outlines practical recommendations for setting D&I into organisational practices. By raising awareness, developing, and updating D&I policies, promoting inclusive leadership, fostering Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), implementing bias training, collaborating with external partners, supporting mentorship programs, trying to raise awareness and understanding, and embracing storytelling in D&I training, organisations can build a culture that values and respects diversity. These strategies, adaptable to various cultural contexts, are designed to help organisations create inclusive workplaces where all individuals can flourish.

- **Raise awareness**: Conduct training sessions, workshops, and awareness campaigns to highlight the benefits of D&I. Educate employees at all levels about the importance of diversity and how it enhances innovation and productivity.

- **Develop and update D&I policies**: Create clear D&I policies that reflect the organisation's commitment to inclusion. Regularly review and update these policies to ensure they remain inclusive and equitable.

- **Promote Inclusive Leadership**: Encourage leaders to model inclusive behaviour. Provide training in soft skills that develops empathy and active listening as well as training that helps leaders understand and promote D&I within their teams.

- **Foster Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)**: Establish ERGs to support employees with shared identities or interests. Use these groups to promote community and support within the organisation.

- **Implement bias training**: Offer programs on unconscious bias, microaggressions, and inclusive language. Foster open dialogue about D&I to enhance understanding and empathy.

- **Collaborate with external partners**: Partner with NGOs and community groups to share best practices and resources. Use these collaborations to gain new perspectives on D&I initiatives.

- **Support mentorship programs**: Implement mentorship and leadership development programs for underrepresented groups. Use mentorship to improve the efficiency and inclusion of women and minorities.

- **Cultivate Awareness and Understanding**: Promote unconscious bias training for all employees. Establish clear communication channels for D&I concerns and suggestions. Use inclusive language in all company communications.

- **Embrace storytelling in D&I training**: Utilise storytelling to build trust, address sensitive issues, and reflect on organisational practices. Train educators and practitioners in narrative approaches to effectively teach and manage D&I. By following these strategies and adapting them to the specific cultural contexts of their countries, practitioners can create more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

By implementing the practice-level recommendations outlined in this chapter - ranging from awareness campaigns and policy development to inclusive leadership and mentorship programs - organisations can create environments that celebrate and harness the benefits of diversity. Collaboration with external partners, fostering open communication, and utilising storytelling in training further enhance understanding and empathy within the workforce.

Adapting these strategies to specific cultural contexts will not only improve internal dynamics but also establish a standard of inclusivity. In the end, the goal is to build workplaces where every individual feels valued, contributing to greater innovation, productivity, and organisational success.

K. Policy Statement of Recommendations

Policy Statement of Recommendations

PURPOSE

The Think Global, Act Local project (2022-2024) aims to support VET professionals, HR managers and in-company trainers in building inclusive and diverse workplaces. The project aims to overcome labour market barriers faced by certain groups such as people with disabilities, women, migrants or ethnic minorities and thus aims to improve existing working environments.

The TGAL project's Policy Statement Recommendations highlight the key findings and recommendations for improving diversity and inclusion in SMEs. It engages stakeholders, promotes best practise, raises awareness and influences policy development.

Open University and IEFP offer courses on **gender education** and **workplace equality**.

"Socially Responsible Employer" initiative promotes fair working conditions and diversity.

SOME NATIONAL INSIGHTS

National **anti-discrimination laws** with growing corporate recognition of diversity importance.

Government quotas and organizational policies support **gender and racial equality.**

Government quotas for **women in management**; gap between policy and practice.

Legislation supports **CSR** (Corporate Social Responsibility) and **gender pay analysis.**

Government policies support **D&I** and **voluntary gender quotas** gaining acceptance.

National Program against Discrimination and Racism promotes **Diversity Charter** adoption.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Practitioners should promote diversity and inclusion (D&I) through:

- leadership training
- education
- policies

They should also:

- support businesses in **implementing D&I policies**, monitor their impact and develop **employee resource groups**.

A qualitative approach such as **Participatory Narrative Inquiry** can create and foster mutual understanding between employees and their managers by sharing and analysing stories. It can uncover the root causes of D&I problems, identify solutions, increase efficiency and lead to better alternatives. Overall, this approach aims to create a **sense of community and promote inclusivity**.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers should promote intersectionality in **Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies** to address overlapping discrimination systems.

Legal mandates and leverage mechanisms should be strengthened to support SMEs in adopting comprehensive D&I practices.

A dual approach should be used for measurement and accountability, combining quantitative metrics with qualitative insights.

Inclusive leadership should be encouraged, and resources should be provided for **empathy, equity, and communication skills**.

Financial incentives and support programmes should be offered to help SMEs implement D&I initiatives.

L. Conclusion

The *"Think Global Act Local" (TGAL) project* highlights the critical importance of fostering Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) within Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions across Europe. Through comprehensive research and comparative analyses, this report provides practical and policy-level recommendations that aim to integrate *D&I principles* into organisational and educational frameworks.

The document starts by emphasising the growing focus on **diversity management** within Europe's varied workforce and the use of storytelling to foster cultural change in companies. It outlines a systematic research approach that includes comparative analyses across partner countries, data collection via surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and the synthesis of these findings into action-directed recommendations. The comparative analyses assess VET provision and D&I adoption across partner nations, identifying best practices, challenges, and opportunities in VET systems and corporate settings. Insights from focus groups reveal gaps between legislation and practice, the significance of inclusive leadership, and the need for targeted training.

Policy-level recommendations provide strategic advice for policymakers at both national and European levels to promote D&I within SMEs and VET institutions. Practice-level recommendations suggest practical steps for organisations to integrate D&I into their operations, such as raising awareness, developing policies, promoting inclusive leadership, and fostering Employee Resource Groups - ERGs.

Key findings from partner countries show varying degrees of success and challenges in implementing D&I initiatives. Common patterns include recognising the value of diversity, the existence of government policies and quotas, and the role of internal policies and voluntary measures. However, barriers such as cultural resistance, financial constraints, and the gap between policy and practice remain widespread.

To overcome these challenges, the report offers strategic **recommendations for policymakers** and practical guidelines for organisations. Raising awareness is crucial and can be achieved through training sessions, workshops, and campaigns

that highlight the benefits of D&I and educate employees at all levels. Developing and updating D&I policies to reflect an organisation's commitment to inclusion is also essential. Promoting **inclusive leadership** involves encouraging leaders to model inclusive behaviour and providing them with training to understand and promote D&I within their teams. Fostering Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) can support employees with shared identities or interests, promoting community and support within the organisation. Implementing bias training programs on unconscious bias and inclusive language can foster open dialogue to enhance understanding and empathy.

Collaborating with external partners, such as NGOs and community groups, allows organisations to share best practices and resources, gaining new perspectives on D&I initiatives. Supporting mentorship programs, especially for underrepresented groups, can improve the efficiency and inclusion of women and minorities in the workplace. Embracing **storytelling in D&I training** helps build trust, address sensitive issues, and reflect on organisational practices.

Adapting these strategies to specific cultural contexts will enhance internal dynamics and establish a standard of inclusivity, leading to workplaces where everyone feels valued. This, in turn, contributes to greater ***innovation, productivity, and well-being***.

This comprehensive approach ensures that the TGAL project effectively promotes diversity management and inclusive leadership, fostering inclusive and open workplaces across Europe.

TGAL

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