

Chapter 3

Addressing Minority Discrimination in a Master's Education Program for Construction Management



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Abstract Increasing minorities' participation in high-tier and managerial positions in the construction sector can compensate for the shortage of skilled workers faced by the industry even in Sweden. However, relevant initiatives seem to not have achieved substantial results yet. This is also evident in construction management education, which then creates implications for the industry. In this paper, we attest to shortcomings in tackling the aforementioned issues, as well as present possible solutions. Theoretically, we adopt diversity management and critical diversity theory and then conduct a literature review followed by an empirical focus on a master's education program for construction management in a Swedish university. Our findings show that while methods and policies may exist, they are generally implemented inefficiently. Even more alarmingly, there can be a "diversity washing" through relevant low-budgeted programs, which may serve more as an extraction for underperforming managers rather than serious initiatives. As such, university-proposed solutions may fail, as the organizational structure does not support them, and the responsibility of implementation lies primarily with the teachers. We therefore propose broader initiatives with a strong reflection in praxis – such as following up on students' behavior in the classroom and examining not only the way foreigners can be integrated but also the way the majority is blindly maintaining and reproducing its privilege. Those could allow construction management education to contribute toward a diverse and equitable development of the Swedish construction sector. In that vein, this paper aims to contribute to SDGs 4, 5, 8, and 10.

Keywords Minorities · Diversity · Construction industry · Construction management education · Sweden

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3.1 Introduction

Clarke and Gribbling (2008) had made the prediction that in many industrialized countries, the construction industry would face a serious shortage of skilled workers (esp. managers) – a prediction that, evidently, still holds true (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020; Jurisic et al., 2021). Increasing minorities' participation – who have so far been underrepresented in the sector's managerial positions – can compensate for this (Choi et al., 2022). Diversity management within companies is addressing this by proposing a systematic plan and commitment to recruiting and retaining employees with diverse backgrounds and abilities (Köllen, 2021).

However, despite numerous relevant initiatives in the Swedish construction industry (e.g., for increasing women's representation in the management), the rate of minorities' participation (particularly in the trades and on-site construction management) has not grown significantly over time; women constitute 9% of the total workforce, although only 2% of the workforce involved in craft trades, and 5.25% among site managers. The highest share of women employed in the Swedish construction industry is found in administrative tasks (Byggföretagen, 2020; SCB, 2018). Similarly, whereas foreigners are well represented among blue-collar workers (Thörnqvist & Bernhardsson, 2015), their participation as managers has been identified to be limited (Byrne et al., 2005). Moreover, when these minorities are reaching managerial positions, they may still face stigmatization and discrimination (Conway et al., 2018). So, we once again take a closer look at minorities' discrimination in the construction industry, by specifically examining the ways a university is trying to deal with these issues and prepare students to work as managers in the male-dominated and integrally homogenous Swedish construction sector. Focusing on a master's (MSc) education program in construction management, this paper's purpose is to reflect on the relevant issues, as well as to present possible solutions addressing such issues toward the diverse and equitable development of the Swedish construction sector. As such, this study also aims to contribute to UN Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (Immler & Sakkers, 2022). It should be noted that due to the paper's delimited scope, we simplify the minority categorization and conventionally use a binary understanding of gender; however, we are aware that such traditional notions are increasingly being challenged in scholarship and social representation (Koscieszka, 2022).

This introduction is followed by the research method, a literature review on diversity management, critical diversity theory, and minority discrimination in construction-related industry and higher education (also in Sweden), the empirical focus on the aforementioned MSc education program, a discussion offering critical insights, and the conclusions.

3.2 Research Method

3.2.1 Literature Review

The literature search was conducted using the concept-centric framework of systematic review augmented by units of analysis (Webster & Watson, 2002). As such, the review was gauged to be completed when no new concepts relevant to the search terms could be found (Webster & Watson, 2002). The main concepts were “minority discrimination in construction,” “higher education,” “construction management education,” “Sweden,” and “diversity.” The units of analysis emerged as the review was conducted in several iterations – thus facilitating its revision. These units of analysis included, indicatively, “gender” and “intercultural group work.” By applying exclusion criteria (Dundar & Fleeman, 2017) in each of the review iterations, the references were eventually reduced to the ones featured in this study.

3.2.2 Empirical Part

For the empirical part of this study, a multi-paradigmatic approach (Lewis & Grimes, 1999) was used, combining elements of autoethnography, action research, and content analysis. Autoethnography is utilized to gain insights and qualitative results through self-observation and self-reflection – also implemented in the construction academia and industry (Grosse, 2019). It is hereby deployed to draw on the authors' own experiences (teaching in the MSc program for, respectively, more than 9 and 3 years). Moreover, the authors utilize action research in the context of higher education (Gibbs et al., 2017) to reflect the “fiduciary responsibilities” (Pecorino et al., 2008) they have toward the students, namely, acting with the intent of benefitting the students' learning, not harming them, and ultimately leading to knowledge coproduction with them (Gibbs et al., 2017). By engaging in autoethnography and action research, we are both subjects and actors in the research process itself, apart from being just observers (Alfaro-Tanco et al., 2021). This can be considered a limitation, as it introduced our own biases in the analysis, but can also be understood as a conditional possibility, because we were able to experience the effects of the researched phenomena ourselves. Finally, content analysis (Donald, 2022) was deployed for reviewing 120 individual assignments of first-year MSc students that self-assessed their performance and collaboration in group work. The students' citations mobilized for this paper are excerpts from these assessments.

3.2.3 *Synthesis*

The synthesis of the insights gained from the literature review and the empirical results follows the abductive reasoning of qualitative research – where observations and explanations of phenomena are developed by working iteratively between theory and data (Bell et al., 2019). Through abduction, critical reflections can be developed gradually (Bell et al., 2019).

3.3 Literature Review

There has been increased pressure for intensifying the participation of minorities and marginalized groups (esp. women) in companies' management – including boards of directors (Choi et al., 2022). Research has shown that two main reasons justify this intensification. First, women are assumed to bring different values and attitudes in the workplace and therefore should improve company performance and profitability (Nielsen & Huse, 2010). Second, there is a shortage of qualified candidates, as leadership becomes more important in the face of globalization, fierce competition, and shorter lifecycles of building concepts – creating pressure on company competences and recruitment processes (Norberg & Johansson, 2021). Diversity management can be mobilized for solving this issue (Köllen, 2021).

Diversity management practices in the workplace are developed, formalized, and implemented by organizations (Yang & Konrad, 2011). This is mainly dealt with by Human Resources (HR) management and covers recruitment, reward, performance, appraisal, employee development, and individual competences in delivering competitive advantage through leadership and teamwork (Yang & Konrad, 2011; Köllen, 2021) – also for higher education professionals (Rani & Kumar, 2021). By having a planned strategy, the minority integration should be facilitated (Köllen, 2021). But to be actually efficient, diversity management “should allow employees to bring their entire set of identities to work rather than requiring employees to suppress important identities in order to assimilate to the dominant organizational culture and use the entire sum of their demographic and cultural knowledge to bear on organizational problems” (Yang & Konrad, 2011). Diversity management usually builds on traditional definitions of diversity (e.g., regarding race, ethnicity, or gender) (Howarth & Andreouli, 2016). The authors are aware that individuals differ in numerous ways, and factors such as migration history, class, material base, sexual orientation, disability, culture, and religion should also be considered. However, university projects and initiatives are still mostly dealing with traditional definitions; as such, the authors revert to those for the purposes of the current study.

As a response to a too-rosy picture of diversity management as an economic solution – downplaying the real minority issues in the workplace – authors have also gathered under the banner of critical diversity theory (Zanoni et al., 2010). Their main critique is that using a strong business rhetoric focusing on individual

contribution, diversity management literature fails to address issues related to social inequalities, discrimination, and exclusion, while downplaying power issues and resistance (Zanoni et al., 2010).

In addition to the aforesaid, minorities are defined in many studies against a white, well-shaped, heteronormative, and ambitious male (which itself may not fit even with the general male population), and equality initiatives often imply that minorities should be treated akin to this “ideal” man (Barnard et al., 2010). This understanding assumes that this “ideal” model is the one to follow, and minorities should be assimilated into the dominant group – regardless of differences between (and within) minority and majority groups. However, ignoring those differences might create a false dichotomy and hamper a contextualized definition of a minority or marginalized group. For example, it is naïve to treat women and men as homogeneous groups; it is likely that some women actually enjoy working in a male-dominated sector such as construction and equally likely that some men in the industry find this patriarchal culture problematic (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011). Regardless, gender segregation is very well documented (also in construction), and many studies are listing the challenges and dominant male culture of the respective industries (also in Sweden, see Styhre, 2011; Johansson et al., 2021). Bridges et al. (2020) identify a relationship between male gender identity, the work of skilled trades, and the body, insisting that the traditional binary conception deems the feminine body as inferior – especially in construction, where work is often associated with physical performance. Existing informal recruitment and hiring practices also reproduce existing inequalities (Bridges et al., 2020), even extending to managerial positions (Choi et al., 2022).

The participation of ethnic minorities in construction management is, however, less documented than gender segregation. Besides, most of the few studies addressing this issue are focusing on the managerial challenges linked to culturally diverse managers on the building site and not on the way the respective minorities may or may not access such managerial positions (Gale & Davidson, 2006; Dainty et al., 2007; Loosemore et al., 2012). However, according to Clarke and Gribbling (2008), the adherence to traditional practices such as old-style apprenticeships, craft-based skill structures, an itinerant workforce, and intensive deployment of labor can explain the lack of managerial diversity in the construction industry.

In Sweden, researchers have documented ethnic discrimination, where immigrants face higher rates of residential segregation, unemployment, and criminality. For example, Andersson et al. (2010) have demonstrated that the three successive waves of state anti-segregation policies have failed to deliver the expected results. In education, the Swedish system produces a considerable gap between nonimmigrant and immigrant students' achievement results and completion rates, which is above average when compared to other Western nations (Lundahl & Lindblad, 2018). As it is difficult for minority students to improve their personal position, they may engage in various protective mechanisms – e.g., social and academic disengagement – in response to negative stereotypes and previous experiences with discrimination (Verkuyten et al., 2019). This can even mean that when arriving at the

university, minority students may be already conditioned to a long experience of discrimination (Buser & Koch, 2014).

To moderate minority discrimination in the classroom, Verkuyten et al. (2019) have proposed a mixed classroom composition, close student-teacher relation, and a multiculturalism-conscious education. Regarding interculturalism and multiculturalism, Jansen (2004), De Vita (2005), Downey et al. (2006), Spencer-Oatey and Dauber (2017), and Poort et al. (2018) have all shown that variability-conscious, intercultural group work in project-based courses within higher education can help diminish minority discrimination and help construct a flexible professional identity that can function in multiple different contexts. Going beyond group work in the classroom, Leask (2009) has noted that a rewarding and motivating integration and interaction among majority and minority students on the curriculum and campus levels is key – something seemingly aligned with high-level Swedish national policies for, overlappingly, internationalization and diminishing of racial discrimination (Swedish Government Inquiries, 2018). On gender, Leicht-Scholten et al. (2009) have argued for institutionalization of integration measures in research and teaching (especially in STEM), while Lindberg et al. (2011) showed that among both teachers and students in Swedish higher education, the distribution of high-tier career paths between the genders is imbalanced – despite the almost equal percentage of women obtaining the relevant degrees. Mellén and Angervall (2021) and Peterson and Jordansson (2021) have been critical in that policy, enrollment, recruitment, and organizational measures tackling gender discrimination in Swedish academia have been relatively “shallow,” as they follow a neoliberal market logic and favor an integrationist rather than a transformative translation of gender mainstreaming. Regarding disability, studies focusing either on neurodiversity (Knott & Taylor, 2014; Casement et al., 2017) or physical disabilities (Corrêa et al., 2021) have shown that while higher education staff is reasonably well informed about existing cases, there is a wide discrepancy on the measures and assistive technology implemented to support disabled colleagues or students. The advent of a hybrid higher education with a stronger (but not exclusive) digital element has the potential to improve accessibility; however, ableist dynamics can still remain pervasive (Fernandez, 2021). Finally – and calling back to Buser and Koch (2014) – disabled students may have already been conditioned to be marginalized before arriving at the university, due to factors like lack of parental support and class and economic insecurity (Taneja-Johansson, 2021).

As such, the literature shows that the perpetual reproduction of minority discrimination in the construction sector (including construction management) can also stem from discriminations still existing in academic institutions and the classroom itself, where the future professionals are being shaped. Consequently, tackling such discrimination in higher education can help ameliorate the situation in the professional field. Moreover, the studied efforts on diversity management, critical diversity theory, and discrimination due to ethnic background, multiculturalism, gender, and disability, while not exhausting all possible types of discrimination, do show that the responsibility of tackling those issues should not fall

solely on teachers but rather emanate from the full program curricula and university policies at large.

3.4 Empirical Part

After years of nondiscrimination policy (i.e., directing no initiatives to support minority representation in the institution, as those had been claimed to reinforce and legitimize existing discriminations), the Swedish university in the current study has made a 180° turn and is expected to spend 300 MSEK (ca. 30 million €) in 2019–2029 to strengthen the representation of minorities in its faculties. The employees are targeted first, as the institution aims at transforming the academic culture, system, and procedures including recruitment. However, such a mobilization is also reaching education. As such, fair treatment of diversity (in particular gender equality) is to be integrated into curricula to improve quality and increase the students' relevant knowledge by adding specific learning goals related to the course topics. Lecturers are to be given different types of support to be able to review and potentially make changes to their courses, in terms of both content and design and in case they have a particular interest in doing so. The focus is on the various ways that traditional professional engineering roles and values are perpetuated, create artifacts, and affect society. In that vein, teachers are expected to assess their course content and education practices and incorporate a higher reflexivity toward the consequences of their subject matter for equality and inclusion (Grzelec, 2021).

The appreciation and efficiency of these measures can primarily be regarded upon the traditional division of gender – and even then, there are shortcomings, as instead of making the education attractive beyond heteronormative male students, relevant projects mostly attempt a quite shallow and not integral “queerification” of engineering education. Statistics show that in the studied MSc program, the representation of female students is not an issue, as they represent on average 43% of the classroom population (see Table 3.1), but there is still a gender division in group work and tasks. Moreover, female students have been reported to express a lack of confidence in their competences, doubts, and insecurity, much more than male students.

However, going beyond gender is even more difficult, as the students' ethnicity, background, or religion cannot be identified according to the Discrimination Act (2008, amended in 2014). As such, we are facing a problem that we cannot properly describe and measure, and the results of the proposed solutions are, accordingly, hard to assess. Nonetheless, to aid such results and assessment, a toolbox aiming at

Table 3.1 Statistics of acceptance of female students in the MSc program

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Women/total number of students	27/65	20/65	39/75	35/74	33/75
Women in %	41%	30%	52%	47%	44%

educational settings is proposed to the teachers. In the department accommodating the MSc program in construction management, this toolbox includes classroom initiatives for guided integration through work in mixed groups, introduction to cultural relativity, diversity in the education team, and lectures and exercises in conflict negotiation. Alarming, those do not always bear fruit. There has been documentation of mixed group integration being perceived as “forced” – with students preferring to revert to a Swedish/non-Swedish division, and given the chance, choosing a homogenous grouping. There is an apparent mistrust toward “foreigners” (a “we-them” mentality), and emerging conflicts are taken at the level of nationality instead of differences between individuals. “It is difficult to work with the foreigners” is often quoted in the students’ assessment of groups that have met difficulty. On the other hand, international students may complain about local students’ lack of motivation and commitment, as “they don’t care about the grades.” Some local students do express a clear hostility to the presence of international ones as written by a Swedish student: “The foreigners should not think that they will have a free ride in our education and steal our jobs afterwards,” in a statement that can be characterized as racist. The attribution of identity as a minority is not only exercised by the dominant groups (Swedish and/or male) but is also mobilized by local students to account for problematic situations. Students who face collaboration issues may attribute the situation to the minority they feel they belong. For example, in the case of a five-person group consisting of a subgroup of two Swedish female students and a subgroup of three second-generation male immigrants, the teachers were contacted separately by each subgroup for complaints against the other, correspondingly, for being victims of sexism or racist discrimination. The insights also underline the experiences of second-generation immigrants with displayed language and cultural affinities who, although schooled in Sweden before entering the university, often prefer to work together, rather than with Swedish students having no apparent immigration background.

Such perceptions, related to either preconceived conditioning and/or lived experiences, are held not only by Swedish-educated students but also by newcomers belonging to national, ethnic, and racial minorities (as those are realized in the context of current MSc program). However, whereas the local students have the possibility to verbalize and act upon what they perceive as segregation, the international students may not share the same opportunity.

A foreign student arriving in Sweden at the start of the program’s first course stated: “I become more compromised when working with new people, esp. when they have unfamiliar cultural backgrounds to me. For several times, I spent time figuring out some suggestions on modifying project process and results, but eventually I gave them up, because I do not want to be hated for giving too much pressure on my team members. But when I worked with my country classmates before, I usually stick to my ideas unless there are more convincing ways to do.” Another international student arriving at the start of an 8-week course has shared: “Every meeting was an exciting time and a new attempt to communicate and learn more Swedish language for communication. [...] The most exciting aspect of our meetings for me was always practicing speaking Swedish ... then I was able to learn

critical thinking, how to objectively question myself, and ask questions were confused amidst my colleagues, esp. those moments when they unconsciously switch to talk in Swedish on a fast mode and I am not able to follow the conversation. [...] Our team meetings were practically the only times I had during the week to bond with people, so I think I made judicious use of that time. [...] I had a view to doing more, adding more elements to the slides also, but it was not generally agreed. Thence, I obliged to my colleagues' preference and built on it and it all eventually worked well." Language is a discrimination factor for international students who feel excluded whenever the interactions are taking place in Swedish.

It should be noted that there are shades in those perceptions, and the students are often conscious about them – as described in another personal note by a student of an explicitly stated mixed Swedish and French background: "The first day we met, I detected directly distinctive ways of communications to each other. One member of our group couldn't speak Swedish at all and had some difficulties to talk in English fluently. The other two members seemed to know each other from the past which created some kind of close bond between them. This made an invisible communication wall between them, and it didn't help when they, sometimes, only talked in Swedish. Personally, being half French, half Swedish, I'm very used to these kinds of gaps of communication. What I began to do is to always respond in English when they tried to talk to me in Swedish. Therefore, without having to force the two Swedish members, I gave them a social pressure to continue the conversation in English, which I think the third non-Swedish-speaking member enjoyed. It usually worked. The two Swedish members were very used to work in one way, by taking the assignment task more as a direction giver for the project, whereas the non-Swedish was used to follow the exact words by the letter of the task."

Situations where more than one minority attributes are in place (e.g., gender and ethnicity) can be even more complicated. In such a case, an uneven number of groups had to pair to review the results of their project work, and a group of two foreign female students was left aside – even after the teacher openly asked bigger groups to divide and work with one or both of them. Eventually, one of the two students said loudly: "If they feel uneasy about working with us, they should not be forced to do so." Eventually, one of the mixed groups invited them to join.

Such situations and established perceptions among the students seem to also have their counterparts in the teachers. As shown in Table 3.2, more than half of the courses are homogeneously taught by Swedish teachers, while mixed teaching teams in the rest of the courses include almost exclusively Europeans. The students, both local and international, recognize a difference in treatment according to the use of language. Swedish teachers tend to build their course on Swedish case studies

Table 3.2 Gender and ethnic distribution of teachers in the MSc program

MSc program	Swedish only	Mixed (European)	Male only	Mostly male (>75%)	Gender-mixed	Mostly female (>75%)
9 courses	5	4	2	4	1	2

referring to Swedish texts, slides, and vocabulary, which favors local students and demotivates the international ones – especially when they are told that they “can find the translation by using their mobile phones!” Moreover, the courses’ teaching staff still consists of primarily men. This solidified teacher representation of mainly Swedish male colleagues makes it hard to propose minority-aware role models and convincing examples of a diverse gender or cultural background. This can create a self-feeding cycle, especially between Swedish students and Swedish teachers – regardless of honest tries by some teachers to tackle this. However, it has to be said that during course evaluations, the students have not been able to find examples of gender discrimination attributed to the teaching staff.

3.5 Discussion

The insights gained by the literature and the empirical investigation show that integrating awareness and preparing soon-to-be professionals in construction management for adequately responding to gender – and other minority-based challenges need to be first tackled during their education – in the level of the classroom, syllabi, curricula, and even university policies.

The local students seem to be able to identify and act upon discriminating behaviors, at least when they feel they are victims of such (micro)aggressions. However, at least part of them does not mobilize this knowledge to analyze and solve discrimination issues when they are part of such interactions with international students. The local students are embedded in the institution culture and routines, which gives them a clear advantage when interacting with the teaching staff or planning and executing project work. But this is not the case of the new international students who do not feel legitimized to act upon such treatments.

So, the efficiency of the actually proposed and implemented methods is lacking. Even if learning goals on ethics and discrimination are added to the curriculum, there is no follow-up, reflection, or assessment of these goals in term of the students’ classroom behavior and practices. Whereas awareness is being created around minority discrimination (e.g., with teachers trained to use gender-neutral vocabulary), microaggressions are still part of the daily life for the international students. Such microaggressions can be defined as minor and delicate instances of marginalization, conveying negative messages toward minorities and gradually building up a negative attitude (Ogunyemi et al., 2020). Underlining a foreigner’s “good” language mastering or commenting on one’s achievements by referring to their country of origin is microaggressively perpetuating stereotypes, even if expressed as compliments; such perpetuations are worsened when ignoring or dismissing an idea, question, or student’s presence (Hinton Jr. et al., 2020). Even more alarming, there can be instances of “diversity washing” through relevant low-budgeted programs, which may serve more as an extraction for underperforming managers rather than serious initiatives. In this context, university-proposed

solutions are bound to fail, as the organizational structure does not seriously support them.

Lastly, other minorities (e.g., LGBTQI+ people) should also be benefitted from nondiscrimination policies, practices, and measures. Tackling such issues has still a long way to go even in the most “aware” higher education institutions, and continuous work is needed.

3.6 Conclusions

In engineering (and specifically construction management) higher education and its reflection into the student's future professional career, the notions of minority integration, and developing consciousness on diversity presupposed a movement from outside the minorities themselves – with the minority members having to move into the majority groups. This approach focuses on the problem met by the minorities and renders the behavior of the majorities invisible. This can embed another type of segregation in the classroom (even for, e.g., second-generation immigrants), where disengagement appears to be a coping strategy.

The lacking efficiency of measures against minority discrimination in education is evident, while awareness is being created, discrimination from students and microaggressions from teachers are still part of the international students' daily life. Not following up on the development of the students' awareness and surface-level “diversity washing” through relevant low-budgeted programs may trivialize the importance of these topics. Pushing the responsibility of implementing some of the relevant tools on the levels of the university classroom and the teachers is evidently a shortcoming – even if such a responsibility is claimed to be on an institutional level, with policies implemented in syllabi and curricula. Therefore, broader initiatives with a strong reflection in praxis should be implemented, such as following up on students' classroom behavior or examining not only the way foreigners can be integrated but also the way the majority is blindly maintaining and reproducing its privilege.

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