

**“An investigation of the experiences of culturally diverse employees in an  
Irish Civil Service organisation”**

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# Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine cultural diversity within a Civil Service context, exploring the experiences of employees from diverse cultural backgrounds with diversity and inclusion (D&I). This will allow for a better understanding of whether central Civil Service policies and strategies on D&I are being effectively implemented at organisation level. The research was conducted in a Civil Service Department with over 600 employees based in Dublin. This organisation has recently progressed their D&I function through the establishment of a dedicated working group who organise events and initiatives to raise awareness of diversity in the organisation.

Through the review of relevant research, this study discovered that previous studies present diversity as both positive and negative for an organisation, and it is argued that diversity management is key in an organisation for the benefits of diversity to be seen. In the literature to date, quantitative research dominates but this study adopts a qualitative method through five semi-structured interviews to dig deeper into the experiences of the individual.

This study found that D&I initiatives are having a positive impact on culturally diverse employees, as they view diversity as beneficial and have responded well to inclusion initiatives. However, experiences of this within the wider Civil Service vary as some individuals discuss more negative experiences in other organisations. While the research indicates that central policies and strategies are being implemented successfully in this case, it is limited to the diversity group and organisation of this study alone. Further research is recommended on other diversity groups and organisations to gain a more thorough understanding of D&I across Civil Service organisations.

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# 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine cultural diversity within a Civil Service context, exploring the experiences of employees from diverse cultural backgrounds with diversity and inclusion (D&I). The research will be conducted in a Civil Service department, which will remain unnamed in this study for the purpose of anonymity. The organisation has over 600 employees in one base in Dublin and has set up a D&I working group within the last two years. This section will provide a background to the study, present the research question, and set out an overview of the chapters which follow.

In the past two decades, Ireland has become increasingly multicultural due to globalisation. Census data in 2016 indicated that there were over half a million non-Irish Nationals living in Ireland in 2016 (CSO, 2023). Estimated data from the 2022 Census indicates that this figure has now risen to over 700,000 (CSO, 2023). On the back of such diversification of the population, a stronger legislative, business, and moral case now exists for building inclusive and fair workplaces which allow all employees an equal opportunity to develop to their full potential (CIPD, 2021).

The early decades of the 21st century saw a shift towards anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation which followed on from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An increasing number of countries all over the world developed legislation which provided greater protection from workplace harassment and discrimination (Mor Barak, 2022). The Irish Employment Equality Acts (1998-2015) aim to promote equality, ban harassment and victimisation, ensure those with disabilities have the facilities to gain equal access to employment, and ensure equality across the nine grounds (IHREC, 2023). The nine grounds are as follows: gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, religious orientation, age, disability, race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origins and membership of the traveller community (WRC, 2023). Civil Service organisations face further obligations under the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act. All public bodies in Ireland are required by Section 42 of this act to promote diversity and inclusion among both employees and those who use their service (IHREC, 2023).

The Irish Civil Service, while bound by the discussed legal obligations, have also incorporated D&I into both staff policies and strategic plans, understanding the importance of both recognising and valuing a workforce that is representative of the population that it serves

(PAS, 2021). In 2002, the Irish Civil Service, through the Department of Finance, published their Equality of Opportunity Policy. This set out to assert the Civil Service commitment to equality of opportunity across all employment practices and to fulfil their obligations under equality legislation. Despite this policy being developed centrally, it states that responsibility for its implementation lies with each individual Department (DOF, 2002)

The Public Appointments Service (PAS), the central recruitment body for the Civil Service, published an Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategy for the Civil Service in 2021. Within this, it is recognised that a focus on D&I is important, particularly with the growing diversification of the population in Ireland, and that an inclusive workplace culture is key in attracting and retaining talent and driving business and team performance (PAS, 2021). In order to achieve some of the goals set out in this strategy, it was recognised that developing data on the diversity profile of those entering the Civil Service was key. PAS published an Equality Monitoring Data Review in 2023 which provided diversity statistics at both application and assignment stage of recruitment. This review indicated that, despite key efforts to improve this, diversity in the Civil Service is not aligned with that in the wider population (PAS, 2023).

## 1.1 Research Aims and Objectives

This study aims to explore the previous policy and strategy in practice through the experience of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds working in a single Civil Service organisation. As both the Equality of Opportunity Policy and the EDI Strategy were developed centrally for the entire Civil Service, this study is interested in examining their impact and how well they are being implemented within an individual organisation from the perspective of employees from diverse cultural backgrounds. While much of the focus of D&I is usually through the context of the organisation, this research will focus on the individual, exploring their experiences of D&I in the workplace. It aims to understand their perception of D&I in their organisation, investigating their experience from recruitment to present.

This study has several objectives which will be explored through five semi-structured interviews:

1. To understand the meaning of cultural diversity in the workplace

2. To identify the associated benefits and challenges of diversity
3. To assess the organisation's performance in the area of D&I through the perception of diverse employees
4. To establish the relationship between inclusion initiatives and employee wellbeing
5. To explore the experience of culturally diverse employees with Civil Service recruitment

## 1.2 Significance of the study

With the growing diversification of the Irish population, it is key to understand how the modern organisation can adapt to ensure that their workforce is reflective of the population it represents and fosters a culture of inclusion. As the organisation in this study has recently established a dedicated working group to improve D&I, it is valuable to evaluate how the initiatives arising from this are perceived by employees from culturally diverse backgrounds. Success of such initiatives is usually defined by improved business performance, but this study will alternatively place value on the experience of the individual, including their wellbeing and sense of belonging in the workplace.

## 1.3 Outline of the study

This study will begin with a comprehensive review of the related literature, identifying key topics which will be addressed throughout the research. The research aims and objectives will emerge from this, followed by a discussion of the methodological approach which will be taken to both collect and analyse the data. The findings and analysis will be both presented and discussed, while relating back to the literature on the topic to date. Finally, the study will form a conclusion, with limitations and recommendations discussed.

## 2. Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to review and evaluate the relevant literature to this study, assessing the previous findings on the topic. This study sets out to explore the experiences of culturally diverse employees in the Civil Service and aims to gain an understanding of their perception and experiences of D&I both in their organisation and the wider Civil Service. Therefore, this chapter will explore literature which will set the foundation for the research. It will focus on providing a comparative analysis of different studies, discussing multiple perspectives to gain a broad understanding of diversity and its many related topics. Beginning with diversity, this section will progress through cultural diversity, exploring both the context in Ireland and in organisations, analysing the various positions on whether diversity is positive or negative for an organisation. From here, diversity management with a focus on inclusion initiatives will be discussed, examining both the positive associations that inclusion can have and the various issues which may be presented in its absence. Finally, D&I will be examined through the lens of the individual, exploring the effect inclusion has on wellbeing and the employee's sense of belonging.

### 2.1 Cultural Diversity

#### 2.1.1 What is Diversity?

The term diversity has changeable definitions, never fully acquiring a precise meaning throughout decades of literature and varying from author to author and place to place. Simply put, diversity refers to differences in a person's gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religious or political beliefs, physical abilities, or socio-economic status (Volckman, 2012). It involves being a part of a group that is different from what is considered to be "mainstream" in society (Mor Barak, 2022). Fleury (1999) echoes this by defining diversity as a mix of individuals with different group identities within the same social system.

While this study will examine diversity primarily in a workplace context, the term was originally used in relation to natural systems and only became widely used regarding workplaces in the 1980s and 1990s in research conducted in the US (Kramer, 2012). In the workplace context, diversity involves awareness of the benefit of having a range of perspectives in decision-making (CIPD 2021). It is a context where all employees are valued and respected for what makes them different from other colleagues (Pilbeam and

Corbridge, 2010).

As the many definitions of diversity are well reported across the literature, the multiple types of diversity are also commonly considered. Mor Barak (2022) distinguishes between visible and invisible types of diversity. Visible refers to diversity attributes which are easily detectable or observable, such as race, physical disability, or gender. Invisible diversity refers to underlying and undetectable attributes such as tenure in the organisation, religion, or education. Jackson and Joshi (2011) further explore the dimensions of diversity, differentiating between relations-oriented and task-related diversity. Relations-oriented refers to diversity characteristics which are key to shaping interpersonal relationships but do not impact on the ability to perform a task, e.g., age and gender. Task-oriented refers to attributes which potentially impact on work performance, e.g., workplace tenure and education. Pelled (1996) simplifies this distinction and defines diversity variables based on two properties: visibility and job-relatedness. Age, gender, and race are deemed high in visibility but low in job relatedness, as they do not reflect skills and task perspectives as directly as education and workplace tenure, which are considered low in visibility and high in job-relatedness.

### 2.1.2 What is Culture?

The focus of this research is on the cultural aspect of diversity, but culture is a multi-dimensional term. Culture can be defined as a collective phenomenon which distinguishes members of one category of people from another. It is learned, and not obtained from genetics but rather one's social environment (Hofstede, 1991). According to Hofstede, this involves patterns of thinking which have become learned, which he calls mental programmes. This programming of the mind is determined by one's social environment and life experiences, starting with the family, school, youth groups etc. He refers to such mental programmes as culture (Hofstede, 1991).

According to Trompenaar and Hampden-Turner (2022), culture presents itself on different levels. National or regional culture is perceived to be on the highest level, followed by organisational culture and finally the culture of individual functions within an organisation, for example personnel. Distinguishing between culture inside and outside of a working environment is important, as culture outside of the organisation relates to social norms in a group obtained by life experience (Hofstede, 1991), whereas within an organisation, culture

is more concerned with overall company values or the expectation of its employees (Maran and Soro, 2010).

### 2.1.3 Cultural Diversity in Ireland and the Civil Service

As the world market has become increasingly integrated as a result of globalisation, Ireland has experienced substantial demographic changes in recent decades, particularly around population diversity. While previously known as a country of emigration, economic prosperity has recently seen rapid immigration leading to a corresponding increase in ethnic and national diversity (McGinnity et al, 2017). It is estimated that in 2022, there were 703,700 non-Irish nationals, i.e., those born outside of Ireland, living in Ireland, which amounts to 13.8% of the resident population (CSO, 2022). When speaking of cultural diversity, ethnicity should be considered alongside nationality. Ethnicity is usually self-defined by an individual and is concerned with classing groups of people based on their common cultural origin or background (Blakemore, 2019). The 2006 Census was first to capture data on ethnicity, allowing for statistics on those born in Ireland but who are from ethnic minority groups, including Irish travellers (McGinnity et al, 2021).

In the Irish Civil Service, PAS have begun to monitor data on diversity at both application and assessment stage of recruitment. An Equality Monitoring Data Review was published in March 2023 and provides useful data on multiple aspects of diversity in the Civil Service (PAS, 2023). Key to this study, cultural diversity is examined, and some interesting statistics are presented around ethnicity of those who apply for the Civil Service and those who are appointed into positions. It was revealed that individuals who present as White Irish are overrepresented in the application stage, comprising 88% of all applications. Black or Black Irish applications (1.3%) were similarly aligned with the representation of this group in the population (1.4%). In contrast, those from White Irish Traveller, Asian or Asian Irish, and White Other are generally underrepresented when compared to the ratio of submitted applications. At assignment stage, the representation of ethnicities was similar to that at application stage. 89% of assignments were given to White Irish individuals, and just 1.3% allocation to Black or Black Irish applicants (PAS, 2023). This study highlights how White Irish individuals are overrepresented both in applications and assignments to the Irish Civil Service.

#### 2.1.4 Cultural diversity in organisations

The previously discussed demographic changes can naturally lead to workplaces becoming more diverse. However, diversity is rising on the agenda of many businesses today. There is a strong business case for diversity in the modern organisation, with many researchers proving that diversity can improve team performance (Adler, 2002; Köppel et al, 2007), echoing the “value in diversity hypothesis” (McLeod et al, 1991). This hypothesis discusses diversity as a source of competitive advantage, and states that diversity, when managed effectively, produces positive organisational outcomes.

Stahl et al (2010) discusses a positive relationship between organisational diversity and creativity and innovation, with teams with higher cultural diversity proven to be more creative and innovative than those with low cultural diversity. Creativity involves the generation of ideas, whereas innovation is concerned both with idea generation and its subsequent implementation (Wang et al 2019). Bell et al (2011) attributes this to the ability of a diverse team to draw on a different range of knowledge and experience. This allows teams to analyse issues from a variety of perspectives, often coming up with creative and innovative solutions. In a study by McLeod and Lobel (1992), groups that were heterogeneous regarding their ethnic background were found during a brainstorming exercise to produce higher quality ideas than groups that were more homogenous. In this study, an experimental examination took place where groups comprising all Anglo individuals were compared to groups with a cultural mix of people throughout a series of brainstorming tasks. While there was no major difference in the volume of ideas produced by both groups, there was a significant difference in the quality of the ideas. The ideas produced by the culturally diverse group were rated as more effective and more feasible to implement than the ideas produced by the other group. This result suggests that teams with increased cultural diversity can create more creative solutions to problems.

However, simply increasing the diversity in teams may not always present positive results. Cox and Blake (1991) discuss the steps which need to be taken for diversity in groups to translate into creative and innovative solutions. Team members must be aware of the differences in attitudes among individuals and made aware of the cultural differences.

Other research also discusses the disadvantages to diversity within teams, particularly when not managed effectively. One of the main drawbacks of cultural diversity can be

miscommunication, often stemming from language barriers, which can lead to misunderstanding and tension in the workplace (Velten and Lashley, 2008). Milliken and Martens (1996) concluded that diversity is a 'double-edged sword', offering both a great opportunity for organisations while also presenting a challenge. However, there is evidence to suggest that the perception of cultural diversity in organisations is improving in more recent studies. In a study by Stahl and Tung (2015) an analysis of 255 papers revealed that there was a 17:1 ratio of studies with negative assumptions of cultural diversity versus papers with more positive assumptions. They also found that the date of publication had an impact on this, with newer articles likely to have fewer negative assumptions than older articles. 86% of articles published between 1989 and 1996 were found to have negative assumptions about cultural differences, as opposed to just 57% between 2005 and 2012.

Discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of diversity are ripe with references to the importance of effective diversity management, highlighting the critical role that diversity and inclusion initiatives can play in the modern organisation.

## 2.2 Diversity Management

Diversity, when mismanaged, can negatively impact an organisation's success. When managed well, it provides benefits which can improve performance (Gardenswarz and Rowe, 2003). This alone sets out a compelling case for diversity management in the workplace. Diversity management refers to the obligation of an organisation to recruit, select, promote, and retain a diverse mix of employees while valuing their unique attributes (Samuel and Odor, 2018). Central to diversity management is inclusion, which involves valuing differences by creating an inclusive working environment where everybody can thrive and work together effectively (CIPD, 2021). Mor Barak et. al (2016) conducted an analysis of 30 studies over 2 decades which strongly indicates that diversity management which promotes inclusion is consistently associated with positive results. Benefits were found to include improved organisational commitment, job satisfaction and access to a more diverse customer base. Findings of this study also suggest that organisations need to focus not only on diversifying their workforce but also developing both policies and practices which harness a climate of inclusion.

Diversity management practices which primarily aim to diversify the workforce are usually related to the recruitment process. This involves recruiting the candidate which is the best

fit for the role, however, it is not always clear which candidate is the most suitable and often bias is present during the process (CIPD, 2022). There are many actions organisations can take to reduce the risk of bias while recruiting and diversify their workforce through this process. For example, research has shown that depicting racial diversity in photographs for job advertisements and having a diverse recruitment team are ways that can attract candidates from minority groups to apply for a role (McKay and Avery, 2005).

One of the most prominent barriers to diversity in recruitment is unconscious bias.

Unconscious bias, or implicit bias, is a negative concept whereby individuals subconsciously make associations and judgements during a decision-making process. It is not intentional or controllable, and often results in misguided decision making (Suveren, 2022). Unconscious bias training has played a central role in efforts to combat this, with organisations using the training to raise awareness of the shortcuts in the mind that can lead to judgments on people's character, often based on race or gender (Gino and Coffman, 2021). This training can come in a variety of forms, such as cooperative learning or perspective-taking exercises, but ultimately focuses on awareness of prejudice and the practice of self-regulation techniques (Kim and Roberson, 2022). However, some studies have challenged the effectiveness of unconscious bias training, with Forscher et al. (2019) finding that any positive changes to bias were often weak and only prevalent in the short term. Kalev et al. (2006) established that initiatives to challenge bias and stereotypes were not followed by increases in diversity. For unconscious bias training to be effective in the long term, it must involve a longer journey, allowing individuals to change their behaviour and monitor their progress while connecting with people with different experiences than their own (Kim and Roberson, 2022).

Diversity management throughout recruitment is critical for attracting a diverse workforce, but retention of that workforce is dependent on the inclusion initiatives set into practice by the organisation. Ensuring that everybody is treated equally, with respect and has equality of opportunity is not only the right thing to do but is key to both attracting and retaining a diverse group of employees (CIPD, 2018). To achieve this, inclusivity must be embedded in the organisation from the top down. Martins (2020) argues that the organisation's leaders must create a vision for diversity for D&I to be embedded and produce positive outcomes. He states that need to be engaged with the processes which take place to achieve this and should not delegate responsibility to areas like HR. This can be through attending D&I

events and initiatives, public support for minorities and avoiding silence and inaction, which can signal a lack of support (Martins, 2020). Bishop-Monroe et al (2010) recommend that organisations employ a designated D&I representative who works to ensure that it is integrated into the culture and core business activities. However, for inclusion to be a reality, it needs to become a priority for senior leaders in the organisation. Inclusive leadership is also key, which involves a leadership approach which looks to ensure all team members are treated equally, with respect, and are a valued member of the organisation. This is known to translate positively to both employee wellbeing and performance (Katsoras, 2022).

Another common inclusion initiative which has risen in popularity in recent years is diversity training. Diversity training is directed towards employees and is usually linked to specific organisational goals or training needs, typically involving awareness, knowledge, and skills of various aspects of diversity (Alhejji and Garavan, 2013). Lai and Kleiner (2001) argue that, for diversity training to be effective, organisations must have clear policies, procedures, and strategies in place around diversity. Consulting external training providers is also advised, in the absence of an internal subject matter expert. Thirdly, a system should also be established to evaluate how effective the training was (Lai and Kleiner, 2001). However, despite widespread use of diversity training, questions about its effectiveness remain. Like unconscious bias training, diversity training primarily observes improvements in the short term, and lacks long term effectiveness. It also focuses on individual learning outcomes, neglecting collective and group learning (Roberson et al., 2013).

As well as undertaking various initiatives which promote D&I, an organisation should establish a clear and guided approach to how they manage diversity. Thomas and Ely (1996) discuss the existing diversity approaches; assimilation involves the approach that everybody is the same and encourages uniform behaviour, whereas differentiation celebrates difference and encourages staff to be themselves. They recommend transcending both paradigms and instead focusing on integration, which blends the positives of both assimilation and differentiation by promoting equal opportunities while valuing differences in culture.

There is a strong business case for such actions and initiatives, with McKinsey reporting that diverse businesses are more likely than ever to perform better in profitability than their less diverse peers (2020). However, there is also an undeniable moral case, where fostering a

culture of inclusion is simply the right thing to do for the employees in an organisation. The next section of this review will shift to a more introspective focus of D&I, examining the relationship between D&I and the individual.

## 2.3 Diversity and Inclusion and the Employee

There is a danger in developing D&I programmes primarily because it makes business sense to do so. This unwillingly makes D&I co-dependent on business goals and limits the ethical elements which should be considered (Mor Barak, 2022). Much of the research to date examines D&I from the perspective of the impact on organisational performance, with fewer studies examining the relationship between a diverse and inclusive workforce and employee wellbeing. However, there is evidence to suggest a link between the two.

### 2.3.1 Wellbeing and Inclusion

While there is no agreed single definition of wellbeing, most definitions agree that it involves some aspect of feeling good and functioning well. Many definitions use health and wellbeing interchangeably, with the World Health Organisation defining health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2022). For the purpose of this study, wellbeing is defined as a person’s positive physical, mental, and social state (Robertson and Cooper, 2010).

A person’s wellbeing has multiple dimensions, such as physical, social, psychological, emotional, and occupational. Since people spend a large percentage of time at work, workplace wellbeing is central to overall wellbeing (Haile, 2012). Mor Barak et al (2016), in their analysis of 30 qualified studies, found that employee experience of inclusion can improve their wellbeing at work through improved job satisfaction and organisational commitment. According to Abu Bakar et al. (2018), ethical behaviour among colleagues also has a crucial effect on employee wellbeing. Similarly, they discuss how the workplace has multiple factors which could impact on wellbeing, including unethical behaviour and discrimination. This has been demonstrated in various studies where a connection between diversity and wellbeing is established in individuals from multiple diverse backgrounds. Meyer (2003) conducted a study which demonstrated the prevalence of mental health issues in LGBTQ individuals. This was owed to stress processes such as expectation of rejection, prejudice and homophobia which was directly related to their sexuality. Similarly, in a study conducted among LGBTQ Australian people, it was found that there is significant

difference in workplace wellbeing among different employee groups (Donaghy and Perales, 2022). Triana et al. (2010) highlighted how the commitment of employees from minority backgrounds were negatively affected by perceptions of ethnic dissimilarities.

Why is this the case? One theory which explains this well is the social categorisation theory, which explains that people naturally categorise those similar to them as “us” and those dissimilar as “them” (Jaiswal and Dyaram, 2018). This creates an in/out group and those in the in-group are considered trustworthy and dependable, compared to those in the out-group (Williams and O’Reilly, 1998). Prejudices and stereotypes can emerge, leading to decreased communication and cohesion among employees, thus lowering individual’s feelings of inclusion, acceptance and ultimately, wellbeing (Jaisel and Dyaram, 2018). In this sense, inclusion is dependent on whether people feel that they have a place in a group (belonging) while being themselves and sharing their whole identity (CIPD, 2019).

Belonging is a term which refers to a person’s perception of the level of acceptance or support they receive from others (Keene, 2023). It has also been defined as forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships that are both strong and stable in nature (Shore et al. 2011). Throughout past research, inclusion and belonging have often been grouped together, but there are clear distinctions between both terms. Slepian (2020) distinguishes between negative connotations of belonging and inclusion, with reduced belonging associated with feelings of inauthenticity and exclusion connected with negative feelings such as sadness and anger. What is key for organisations now is that individuals feel that they belong, without having to conform (CIPD, 2021).

## 2.4 Literature Gap

Having undertaken a broad investigation into literature on cultural diversity and related topics for this study, it is evident that there are few studies on the topic which conduct a qualitative research method. Stahl et al (2015) examined 136 papers on culture in their study and found that of these 136, only 2 were qualitative in nature. They recommend that qualitative become a more widely used approach in future research to gain a fuller understanding of cross-cultural dynamics. Birkenshaw et al (2011) echo this position and argue that qualitative research can take us further in our understanding of complex cultural phenomena and provide a deeper understanding of the individual which has been previously eluded by organisational process scholars. Through a qualitative study where 19

semi-structured interviews were conducted, Granow and Asbrook (2021) succeeded in analysing the positive impact of cultural diversity within a team setting. It is clear that, despite the dominance of quantitative research in this field, that there is a growing need for further qualitative studies to be conducted to delve deeper into the insights and perspectives of the individual in relation to cultural diversity.

Also, the researcher found no studies of this nature conducted within the context of the Irish Civil Service. Given the recent publication of the Civil Service EDI Strategy, this research will hopefully work towards evaluating the effect of this strategy on both an individual organisation within the Civil Service and the individual's from diverse backgrounds which the strategy seeks to protect.

## 2.5 Conclusion

It is clear from this review that, while cultural diversity is a commonly discussed topic across the literature, there are a lot of contrasting opinions on its definition, characteristics, and benefits. Some authors advocate a strong business case for diversity in an organisation (e.g., Adler, 2002; Köppel et al, 2007, McLeod et al, 1991), whereas others are less convinced and highlight the issues which may present in diverse teams (e.g., Velten and Lashley, 2008). Whether diversity is positive, negative, or a 'double-edged sword' (Milliken and Martens, 1996), it is evident that managing diversity is crucial for every organisation as Ireland's cultural landscape evolves. However, there are both opportunities and challenges with the inclusion initiatives discussed, with different approaches to diversity training proving to be effective only in the short term. Regardless of the initiatives implemented, a successful D&I approach must be embedded into the culture of an organisation and implemented through inclusive leadership (Katsoras, 2022).

Through much of the literature, D&I was explored through the lens of the organisation, with most studies examining advantages and disadvantages from a business perspective. The final part of this review approached D&I from the perspective of the individual, discussing the moral case for inclusion alongside the benefit of inclusion initiatives on a person's wellbeing and the negative impact that the absence of such initiatives in an organisation can have on employees.

This review has succeeded in identifying a literature gap within this topic, highlighting that there are both few qualitative studies and few set within the context of the Irish Civil Service

This establishes the foundation for the next stage of this study. While D&I in the organisational context will play a part, the research will ultimately centre around the experience of the individual.

### 3 Research Aim

*To explore the experiences of culturally diverse employees in a Civil Service organisation.*

This aim of this study is to qualitatively explore the workplace experiences of culturally diverse employees in a Civil Service department. This will allow for an understanding of whether central policies and strategies on D&I are being effectively implemented at organisation level. There is a lack of research in this area so far, and studies of this nature would allow for evaluation of such policies and strategies to identify the need for any future changes and improvements. The research will be divided into a series of objectives and questions which have developed from the review of previous literature on the subject.

#### 3.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are gain a further understanding of some of the key topics in past literature on cultural diversity in the workplace in relation to the chosen Civil Service organisation. They are broken down as follows:

RO1: To understand the meaning of cultural diversity in the workplace

RO2: To identify the associated benefits and challenges of diversity

RO3: To assess the organisation's performance in the area of D&I through the perception of diverse employees

RO4: To establish the relationship between inclusion initiatives and employee wellbeing

RO5: To explore the experience of culturally diverse employees with Civil Service recruitment

#### 3.3 Research Questions

To deliver on the previous set out research objectives, a series of research questions have been developed which the researcher will aim to answer throughout the interviews conducted:

1. What does the term cultural diversity mean to the employees interviewed?
2. Do the employees interviewed believe diversity is positive or negative for an organisation overall?
3. Are there any ways in which the D&I function could be improved within this organisation?

4. What is the relationship between inclusion initiatives and the wellbeing of culturally diverse employees?
5. Are there ways which the Civil Service recruitment process could be improved to support employees from culturally diverse backgrounds?

## 4. Methodology

This section sets out to establish how the previous research aims, objectives and questions will be answered. It will provide an in-depth discussion of the foundations of research, including the chosen research methods, data collection and analysis methods and the logic for applying them to this study. Ethical considerations and limitations of the research are also set out below, followed by a discussion of the data analysis process.

### 4.1 Research methodology

Research refers to the process of seeking the answer to questions that have not yet been answered. It involves finding a solution to a problem through collecting, analysing and interpreting data (Singh, 2006). Saunders et al (2019) argue that this process must be undertaken in a systematic way, with a clear purpose, followed by interpretation of the data, to be considered research.

Within research, two methodology approaches are mostly used. Qualitative research involves the use of unstructured data to gain insights into the behaviours of both individuals and organisations (Turner et al, 2021). Barnham (2015) states that qualitative research is used to gain an in-depth understanding of individual's perceptions, motivations, and behaviours. In contrast, quantitative research is concerned with structured data that can be measured and represented numerically (Goertzen, 2017). Findings from quantitative research are useful for uncovering trends and behaviours, but do not deliver any insight on the motivation behind these observed behaviours. Qualitative studies are useful for filling in these gaps (Goertzen, 2017).

While many relevant studies on D&I have used quantitative methodology (Donaghy and Perales, 2022., Jaiswal and Dyrham, 2019), these are conducted with large sample sizes, with the former study completed by over 33,000 individuals. They are also primarily concerned with measuring performance and impact of D&I initiatives, and not delving deeper into everyone's experience. As discussed in the previous chapter, there is significantly fewer studies on cultural diversity conducted using qualitative research, and ample benefits for selecting this type of research. As this study will be limited to culturally diverse employees within a Civil Service organisation, it will be naturally conducted among a small group. A qualitative method will allow for more in-depth knowledge to be received from a fewer

number of respondents, gaining valuable perspectives and individual experiences for analysis.

#### 4.1.1 Research Paradigms

A paradigm is a way of thinking about the world involving a basic set of beliefs which must be accepted as they cannot be proven (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Killam (2013) presents an analogy which likens a research paradigm to the lens on a pair of glasses. For example, looking through a red lens would cause you to see the world as red, therefore the paradigm chosen changes how we view the world and ultimately shapes the research.

To select the most appropriate research paradigm for the study, it was first important to understand the three pillars; Ontology is concerned with reality, and researchers must adopt a position on what their perception is of how things really are (Scotland, 2012).

Epistemology is more concerned with facts and constitutes what is considered to be acceptable knowledge in a particular field (Saunders et al, 2019). Methodology refers to the strategy or reasoning behind choosing a particular method and is concerned with how the information is found and analysed (Scotland, 2012).

Before the study began, the researcher examined the below paradigms to assess which best suited the nature of this study:

<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
When broadly defined, positivism is the approach of the natural sciences and is used widely among researchers and within the philosophy of science. Positivist researchers prefer precise data and are known to use quantitative research, often with surveys, statistics, and experiments (Neuman, 2014). The research is factual and descriptive, and directly explains the relationship between variables (Scotland, 2012).	In contrast, interpretivism essentially rules out the natural sciences, and looks for meanings and motives for people's actions (Chowdhury, 2014). Originating from sociology and psychology, it assumes that social reality is shaped by both social context and individual experiences (Willig, 2013). It considers the complexity of each individual and emphasizes that generalisations of patterns should not obscure the complexity of society as a

While some researchers state that positivism views scientific knowledge as the superior form of knowledge (Moore, 2010), others believe that many researchers wish to avoid the 'positivist' label completely (Turner, 1992).	whole (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). However, despite growth in popularity in recent times, interpretivism is commonly criticised. In particular, there is considered to be more room for bias in interpretivist research as it typically receives the influence of the personal values and beliefs of the researcher (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022).
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Having considered both paradigms at length, it was clear to the researcher that an interpretivist approach through qualitative research would be best suited to explore the experiences and perspectives of the individuals in the study. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were carried out.

## 4.2 Data Collection

Data collection is a systematic approach to gathering the data needed to answer a research question. When not done correctly, it may fail to answer the research question, making the selection of a data collection method one of the most important decisions for the researcher to make (Mwita, 2022). There are many methods of collecting data in qualitative research which are supported by theoretical or methodological frameworks. These can include in-depth structured, unstructured, or semi-structured interviews, group discussions, observational studies, and focus groups (Carter and Henderson, 2005).

### 4.2.1. Interviews

An interview in research involves a purposeful conversation between two or more people. The interviewer must establish rapport, ask clear and concise questions, and listen actively (Saunders et al, 2019). Seidman (2006) describes the purpose of interviewing as to gain an understanding of the lived experience of people and recognising that the stories of other's are of great worth. He goes on to say that interviews are not, however, an opportunity to get definite answers to questions or to test a hypothesis.

Interviews consist of three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. The researcher considered both structured and semi-structured interviews for this study, but

semi-structured was ultimately chosen so that the researcher can adapt the line of questioning to each individual and interview. Semi-structured interviews usually consist of a conversation between the researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview structure which includes follow-up questions and probes. This method allows for open-ended data to be collected and to delve deeper into personal thoughts and feelings on a topic (Dejonckheere and Vaughn, 2019).

#### 4.2.2 Sampling

Sampling refers to the process employed by a researcher to systematically choose a subset of individuals or items to serve as the subjects of a study. While the ideal scenario for validity would be to test everybody to which the study applies, this is often not a practical option therefore sampling techniques are usually used (Sharma, 2017). This study was conducted with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in a Civil Service organisation. As the data on nationality and ethnicity was not readily available to the researcher, a sampling technique was applied.

##### 4.2.2.1 Sampling Method

Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for selecting information-rich cases to gain an in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). It involves selecting individuals or groups that have knowledge or experience within a topic of interest. Availability and willingness to participate are also key to this method (Palinkas, 2016). As this study is centred around individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, purposeful sampling was used to gain access to interviewees from alternative ethnic or international backgrounds within the chosen organisation. As this information on employees was not readily available to the researcher, snowball sampling was used. This involves identifying potential subjects from people who have already participated in the study, often people who have similar characteristics to them (Palinkas, 2016). The researcher had knowledge of a small number of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, who then recommended others that they knew from similar backgrounds who could be asked to participate.

##### 4.2.2.2 Sample Size

According to Patton (2002), the sample size of a study depends on the research question(s)

and objectives, including the resources available. He also states that the insights and understandings gained from the sample are more relation to the data collection and analysis and not the sample size. Saunders et al (2019) recommends that for semi-structured interview, the minimum sample size should be 5, and the maximum be 25. Fugard and Potts (2015) state that for small projects, 6-10 interviews should be conducted. The researcher balanced this advice with their knowledge that access to a large sample was not feasible in the chosen organisation and decided that a sample of 6-8 for this study would be suitable.

#### 4.2.3 Interview Process

Once the data collection method was identified, it was recognised that the design of the interview and structure of questions was critical in maximising the validity of the study. Saunders et al (2019) believe that planning is key to in gaining the confidence of those being interviewed. Throughout the literature review process, common topics were identified and recorded, with emerging questions noted. To help establish the final questions, a pilot interview was arranged to test the flow of the questions and identify any confusing or triggering topics. The interviewee pointed out that a couple of the questions lacked clarity, and one or more sought to obtain duplicate information. This was resolved, and the final questions were decided. Interviews were originally arranged with six participants, but one individual decided to not participate at a late stage. Five interviews were then conducted via Microsoft Teams. Although the researcher recognised that more in-depth conversations could be had in-person, the organisation are trialling hybrid working so this was difficult to arrange.

#### 4.3 Research Ethics

Before beginning the study, the NCI Ethical Review form was completed by the researcher and returned to NCI. The NCI research ethics guidelines were consulted and applied throughout the research process.

One of the most important ethical considerations that the researcher must be aware of is the participants right to informed consent, including their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Saunders et al, 2019). The first step was to consult with the head of Learning and Development in the chosen organisation regarding the relevant permissions that were required to interview the employees. Once the required protocols were in place, and the researcher was aware of the steps that needed to be taken, ten individuals were contacted

from the sample obtained. An information booklet was provided (Appendix A) detailing further information on the study, including the measures being taken to ensure anonymity and the protection of data throughout the process. One participant had several concerns around steps to ensure anonymity, and the researcher met with them in advance to provide further clarity. In the end, just five participants agreed to interview, and a consent form was circulated to each (Appendix B). Each interviewee was told both in the information sheet and before the interview that they had a right to withdraw consent at any stage.

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and kept, alongside the consent forms, in an encrypted folder on the researcher's laptop. A backup of both was kept on an encrypted memory key also. The researcher was the only one with physical access to both, as well as the only person who knew both passwords. The name of each participant was removed, and they were categorised by number instead, to ensure anonymity.

#### 4.4. Limitations

Any research study will inevitably have limitations, and researchers need to be aware of what they are and address them early in the research process (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). Limitations represent a weakness within the design of the research which can potentially influence the outcome or conclusion of the study (Ross and Bibler Zaidi, 2019). It involves a systematic bias which is beyond the control of the researcher (Price and Murnan, 2004).

The first limitation of this study is associated with insider research. This involves conducting research in an organisation in which the researcher belongs (Hewitt-Taylor, 2013). As the researcher is also a member of the D&I working group in the chosen organisation, they were familiar with both the research topic and the organisation in question. According to McClintock et al (2003), research provides opportunities for self-development and a researcher would benefit more in this case from choosing an area that they are familiar with. Tolhurst (2002) believes that in doing so, they would have a better understanding of the issue and would save time due to prior knowledge of the topic. However, there are many challenges associated with insider research, particularly surrounding objectivity. It has been argued that the researcher can make assumptions due to their prior knowledge or experience. Similarly, familiarity with both the issue and participants can limit the analysis of

key cultural and social patterns which emerge in the study (Greene, 2014). The researcher was conscious throughout the process of remaining objective, continuously checking all work for signs of assumptions or bias.

Another key limitation was accessing enough interviewees for the study. This was partially related to the researcher's position on the D&I working group, with some individuals expressing concern over speaking openly regarding the topic with somebody who works in the area in their organisation. Also, the researcher was aware in advance that there would be problems associated with accessing interviewees, as there appeared to be a limited number of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in the organisation. While this made it difficult to conduct more than a small number of interviews, it was one of the reasons the organisation was chosen as the researcher was keen to select an organisation with limited cultural diversity. A potential solution considered was to conduct the study across several Civil Service organisations, but this was decided against as different organisations have different approaches to D&I.

The final limitation was the timeframe. Due to the researcher taking on the programme in a part-time capacity, time to conduct research was limited to outside of working hours. This posed issues when it came to arranging interviews, as participants were often only available throughout the working day. This delayed the interview process substantially, which meant that the time for data analysis was limited.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

After the data collection process, each interview was transcribed into a word document and saved in an encrypted folder. Following the initial transcription, the researcher listened to each interview two more times to ensure that the transcript was accurate, and no paraphrasing or substitutions were used. The data collected in each interview was then examined using thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. The goal was to identify patterns of data and use them to address the research, interpreting and making sense of the information collected rather than merely summarising it (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

To conduct thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke's six step framework (2006) was used and has been deemed the most influential approach by many, offering a clear framework for

administering thematic analysis (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The six phases are as follows:

- 1) Familiarisation with the data:** The researcher should be fully familiar with, and immerse themselves in, their data.
- 2) Coding:** This involves creating pithy labels for data that is most relevance to the research question.
- 3) Searching for themes:** This is an active process where themes are constructed by the researcher.
- 4) Reviewing themes:** The researcher reflects on the story the themes tell about the data, the nature of each theme and how they interact with each other.
- 5) Defining and naming themes:** The researcher analyses each theme in detail and naming them with a concise and informative name.
- 6) Writing up:** This is the process of communicating the analysis to the reader and putting the finding in context with existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

#### 4.6 Conclusion

The above chapter has provided an in-depth account of the methodological approach taken by the researcher both to collect and analyse data in this study. A qualitative approach was deemed the most appropriate given the nature of the study, and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews. A snowball sampling technique was used to source participants for the study, and while the ideal number of participants for this study was higher, five individuals were selected to take part. Limitations of the study were identified, with insider research, access to participants and the timeframe for the study among the biggest issues. Finally, a thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data.

## 5. Research Findings

This chapter will present and discuss the data obtained throughout the semi-structured interviews conducted, using this information to explore the experiences of culturally diverse employees working in a Civil Service organisation and gain an understanding of their experience of D&I. The researcher, as a member of the D&I working group in the selected organisation, had previously met a small number of employees from diverse cultural backgrounds and contacted them with both a request to interview them for the study and to recommend any other potential participants which may be suitable. The researcher understood that culturally diverse employees were a small minority in this organisation and was interested in exploring their experiences in this regard.

Those interviewed did not consent to much demographic information being published in the study as they feared that they may be identifiable by process of elimination. The only description which was permitted is the grade of each participant. The researcher felt this was important to include to explore if there was a perception gap between those at lower grades versus those at more senior grades. A total of five interviews were conducted between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2023 on Microsoft Teams.

Interviewee	Grade
Participant 1	Executive Officer
Participant 2	Higher Executive Officer
Participant 3	Principal Officer
Participant 4	Executive Officer
Participant 5	Higher Executive Officer

Table 1: Grade Details of Interviewees

As shown in Table 1, the different levels of management are represented in those chosen for interview. Executive officer is a junior management grade, higher executive officer is middle management and principal officer is senior management.

## 5.1 Findings and Analysis

The guiding questions for the interviews were developed to explore some of the key topics which appeared across the literature review. Within these subject areas, five dominant themes emerged throughout the interviews conducted:

1. Culture as a socially constructed phenomenon
2. How diversity can drive creativity and innovation
3. The importance of senior leadership buy in for an inclusive workplace
4. The relationship between D&I initiatives and belonging of diverse employee
5. Negative perceptions of the recruitment process for culturally diverse applicants

### 5.1.1 Culture as a socially constructed phenomenon

Given that both culture and diversity have proven quite difficult to define across literature, it was the intention of the researcher to establish what the term cultural diversity meant to each participant from the onset of the interview. Overall, all interviewees had displayed a strong knowledge of the term diversity, with everybody agreeing that it involves bringing people together from multiple different backgrounds. A key theme emerged in relation to culture, as the understanding of the term varied from person to person and even was shown to change through time, supporting Hofstede's theory that culture is socially constructed (1991). Four individuals felt that culture was bigger than just nationality and ethnicity and refers to an overall structure of values, beliefs, and identity. One respondent related culture to multiple aspects of diversity, and states that it extends to:

*"Older, younger...age, sex, and gender for example. It's multiple types of backgrounds, socio economic for example. Education. Everything"* – Participant 2

Another participant echoes this and believes that culture refers to different backgrounds. However, they do accept that the assumption when talking about cultural diversity it is referring to people from different nationalities:

*"Generally speaking, if you have cultural diversity, you'd be associating with those from minority groups. But it is more broadly assumed that you are talking about people from*

*foreign countries” – Participant 3*

While perceptions of culture vary across the group, there is also evidence to suggest that this can change over time, depending on the social situation of the individual. One participant admitted that their understanding of culture and what it means has changed. They first associated the term culture with things like art, literature, and music, as this was what was presented to them through non-academic books and mainstream media. This is in line with Hofstede’s description of culture as “refinement of the mind” and that art and literature are the products of such refinement (1991). This shifted some time later to values and life principles and changed again when they studied business, and they studied different aspects of culture such as organisational culture. Their understanding of culture has also broadened, and they now believe it to mean the following:

*“Culture simply means the way that we do things around here” – Participant 5*

The researcher was not surprised to learn that understanding and perception of cultural diversity varied from case to case, as this is similar to how it was presented in literature across the years. It was interesting to learn that the knowledge and experience of culture can change, depending on the context that the individual finds themselves in. Culture does not appear to be a fixed concept and is instead one that can evolve and be redefined over time, constructed by the social environment of the individual.

### 5.1.2 The link between diversity and creativity and innovation

Heavy debates exist across diversity literature as to whether it has a positive or negative impact on organisation and team performance. Balancing perspectives on this, many would agree with Millikin and Martens (1996) description of diversity as a “double-edged sword”. When discussing the benefits and challenges of diversity, all participants viewed diversity positively and outlined many associated benefits. One of the most common benefits identified was that diversity has the potential to develop a creative and innovative working environment for several reasons. Firstly, diverse groups can examine issues through multiple lenses when compared to homogenous groups.

Four participants felt that this was due to colleagues from diverse backgrounds bringing different experiences and knowledge which can help to bring an alternative perspective to issues:

*“(Diversity) can benefit the organisation because of course there is people bringing different perspectives and diversity when starting a project. This can create creativity and innovation in the organisation” – Participant 1*

*“People from various cultural backgrounds are likely to come up with faster, with more and with better solutions to any set of given problems because each of them thinks differently to the other” Participant 5*

In line with this, three participants also spoke about how the capacity for creativity and innovation can be further improved as colleagues from less diverse backgrounds can learn from their diverse peers:

*“Learn other experiences. Expand think space. People from other countries can share their expertise and how they do things...which can help to improve processes” – Participant 2*

One individual explored this on a larger scale, looking at how this relationship between diversity and enhanced creativity and innovation can have an impact on the citizen of Ireland. They spoke about how having employees who reflect the composition of the population can help find processes and solutions to better serve the whole population:

*“I think the organisation needs to reflect the composition of the population that it needs to serve. And in order to serve that population, it needs to understand it. There is something about the lived experience that is really important” – Participant 3*

Although all participants identified enhanced creativity and innovation as a benefit of diversity, Participant 3, a Principal Officer, was the only one to explore this beyond the organisation itself and relate this to improved service delivery to the citizen. This suggests that those at more junior grades look at creativity and innovation in relation to improving

the organisation, whereas the view from senior management may be of the bigger picture and realise the impact that enhanced creativity and innovation at team level can have on the service provided to the citizen.

Individuals did not come up with many challenges with diversity, with just one participant associating the use of appropriate language and the risk of offending somebody as a disadvantage. This contradicted the balance of the literature to date, presenting diversity as mostly positive and failing to identify many associated challenges.

### 5.1.3 The importance of senior leadership buy in for an inclusive workplace

The area of the interview where participants were the most positive was around the performance of the organisation in relation to D&I. Individuals felt that there were visible improvements in recent years in this area, and the organisation was progressing well, particularly compared to their experience in other organisations within the Civil Service. A prominent theme in this section of the interview was around the key role that senior leaders play in developing an inclusive workplace. Despite positive views on organisation performance in the area, some participants felt that senior leaders were not playing an adequate role in D&I. Three out of five participants felt that they have not seen evidence that D&I is a priority of senior leaders in the organisation:

*“I’m over two years in the Department and I haven’t seen any evidence to suggest that the higher ups are involved in any processes related to this. I have no idea if they are, but if this is the case, we should see more evidence and efforts from them” – Participant 4*

Two participants mentioned that senior leadership involvement was not important during the development stage of the D&I working group and feel that the group being formed from the ground up may have been a positive thing, as it was something that was grown from the bottom up rather than imposed by management:

*“This was not something that was imposed from the top and is building from the bottom. In this sense, it will have more impact as more people will get involved. It is a more gentle approach” – Participant 1*

Despite this being identified as a positive now, there is an understanding that this can't continue for long for D&I to be embedded in the culture of the organisation. Two participants expressed doubts as to whether the D&I function will last and have a significant impact without senior leadership involvement. Participant 3 believes that change is needed soon, and D&I needs to be embedded in strategies across the organisation from the top down for any lasting change to be seen. Without this, there is a danger of losing focus once key individuals move on from the department:

*"I would query how effective the longer it is a group. I wouldn't say it is a priority of senior leaders, but the group is a good steppingstone for this to happen. You don't often go from zero to embedded in the system without a few stepping-stones. There are phases, and this is a positive first phase, but it needs to move into a new phase soon and become embedded in the culture so that the focus does not leave with the people who started it"* – Participant 3

In this sense, it is evident that, while D&I is viewed positively and the organisation is seen to be performing well in this area, there are ways in which it could be strengthened further through the involvement of senior leaders working to embed D&I into the culture of the organisation.

#### 5.1.4 The relationship between D&I initiatives and belonging of diverse employees

One of the objectives of this study is to explore whether D&I initiatives contribute to the wellbeing of individuals from diverse backgrounds. The literature reviewed on this highlighted a connection between employee experience of inclusion and wellbeing. The researcher asked several questions to explore the perception of the recently introduced D&I initiatives from the perspective of those from culturally diverse backgrounds to understand if there is a relationship between D&I initiatives and wellbeing in this organisation. Two participants believed there to be a positive relationship between the two, particularly in the sense of the term belonging. Participant 1 spoke about previously feeling inadequate when compared to other employees due to English not being their first language, and felt they needed to hide the diverse part of their identity to fit in:

*"You have to hide a part of yourself...and kind of feel that you are something less and that*

*your English is broken English compared to some of your colleagues” – Participant 5*

They went on to say how this has improved with the introduction of D&I initiatives, as it makes them feel like their diversity is valued as they now have the opportunity to interact with people that are from similar backgrounds to them without having to hide any part of themselves. This improved sense of belonging was shared by participant 5, who felt that the initiatives gave them a chance to feel that they were a part of a group that has similarities to them and would recommend for others to get involved to experience this positive effect:

*“It gave me an opportunity to be a part of a group that was also similar to me in more ways than one. I feel more included myself being a part of it. And I wish I could tell more people here; this Department has foreign nationals and new Irish and I wonder how many have doubts about getting involved. I would like to say, it’s good for you and it’s good for everybody” – Participant 5*

While two other individuals felt positively in relation to D&I initiatives, they did not feel that they had an impact on their wellbeing as they always felt included in the department, regardless of their cultural identity. Participant 3 spoke about how they always felt welcome, and even represented Ireland on an EU committee, despite being a foreign national. However, they did acknowledge that the initiatives are positive for those new entrants to both the department and wider Civil Service as they help them learn that there are others from similar backgrounds:

*“I think the last few years with the initiatives that you are saying, that has been really good for new people to see that there are lots of people who come from different countries. It can give people the sense of belonging and hope and opportunity” – Participant 3*

Despite most individuals agreeing that these initiatives were positive and identifying the connection between D&I initiatives and belonging, one participant did not share this view. While they did say that it was nice to meet people through the events who were of similar backgrounds, they did not deem them necessary and were sceptical of why they were introduced in the organisation:

*“I find it all funny. It’s nice to go in and have a look around and talk to, let’s say, Slavic cousins and other kind of nationalities like those. I don’t feel like it is need to kind of be focused on this because let’s say we have to fill some inappropriate kind of gaps, or somebody does. I don’t take it as offensive, but I don’t feel like it is a necessity” – Participant 4*

This perception was evidently a minority among the group interviewed, and the initiatives were viewed positively by the others with clear links established between D&I initiatives, wellbeing and belonging. Within the group interviewed, two individuals suggested an improved sense of wellbeing as the initiatives organised provided them with the opportunity to get to know colleagues from similar backgrounds as themselves, whereas four out of five witnessed the benefits of D&I initiatives in the organisation through enhanced connection with those from similar backgrounds. This highlights that individuals felt a stronger sense of belonging with those from similar backgrounds to them, suggesting that inclusion initiatives can play a role in connecting people from similar backgrounds and enhancing the sense of belonging among these groups.

#### 5.1.5 Negative perceptions of the recruitment process for culturally diverse applicants

Recruitment appeared as a recurring issue across D&I literature and plays a key role in attracting and maintaining a diverse workforce. The researcher was keen to explore recruitment in the Civil Service and understand the experiences that culturally diverse colleagues had with the process, and whether there was a need for this process to change to become more accessible for colleagues from diverse backgrounds.

Firstly, all participants did not speak very positively about recruitment competitions held through PAS, whether this be the process they went through entering the Civil Service or a competition for promotion later on. One individual likened the experience to torture:

*“The actual process, the steps, the hooks, it was horrendous. I mean, that’s the only way to describe it. It’s like torture” – Participant 3*

Despite the reported difficult process, just one participant reported encountering a difficulty with this which could be associated with their diverse background:

*“I had difficulties with the language throughout the application process and sought help with this from my line manager” – Participant 2.*

The rest of the interviewees instead described the multiple stages of recruitment and the duration of time involved as being their main problem with the process. They had no issues with the language used throughout, and felt that it was instead important for candidates to be tested on their command of the English language before being appointed as having a good degree of English is important when working in the Civil Service:

*“If you are going to join the Civil Service, your English needs to be really good. If you are going to be out there signing off on things and speaking on behalf of your department, it’s okay to have accents but you need to be in command” – Participant 3*

While negative perceptions of the recruitment process were not commonly associated with participant’s diversity, four out of five felt that there were actions which could be taken to improve it. Three participants felt that there was inadequate communication from PAS about recruitment competitions. They felt that there was often a mixed understanding from people coming into the country about the barriers to joining the Civil Service, with people often assuming it is difficult to access:

*“To make it better, maybe just try to get the message down that it is not impossible to get in” – Participant 4*

*“They have a job to. Raise awareness to the whole population – there is a place for you...And I think it is not known like that anybody can apply through PAS...you don’t have to be an Irish citizen and you don’t have to speak Irish” – Participant 3*

In addition to communication, two individuals also identified ways that the testing process could improve to become more accessible to those from diverse backgrounds. Participant 4

suggested removing situational judgement testing, as those from different cultures could potentially react different to Irish people, putting them at a disadvantage:

*“In different cultures you could react differently on the job to something like that. So basically, you get a lot less points than let’s say an Irish person that is more in tune with these little nuances. It basically puts that person in the back of the line”* – Participant 4

Participant 5 discussed amending the testing so that it is not used to eliminate candidates automatically and could instead be utilised as a shortlisting tool. They feel that PAS are “foregoing lots of talent” as often the abilities of people differ, and one person who is naturally good with numbers may struggle in other areas:

*“Some people are naturally inclined with numbers and others with thoughts put in a different way. And each of these groups have to struggle preparing for the other side and people might slip through the gaps. Not many of them will come back the second or third time”* – Participant 5

It is evident that, while overall the participant’s did not have a positive experience with recruitment in the Civil Service, most of the reported issues were not directly related to their background. However, they did feel that there were ways in which the process could improve, particularly through improved communication to reach diverse groups and clarify misconceptions and restructuring the testing process so that diverse candidates are not disadvantaged or slipping through the cracks.

## 6. Discussion

The previous chapter presented the findings from the research process, discussing the information gathered throughout the interview process and identifying key themes in relation to the experience of the culturally diverse employees interviewed. It is now important to position this research in the context of the wider literature, understanding the findings in relation to the research objectives and both where it complements past studies and contradicts them.

The first objective was to assess the understanding of cultural diversity from those interviewed. While diversity has proven to be difficult to define across past literature, the participants of this study shared a common understanding of what the term meant and agreed that it involves people coming together from various backgrounds. This is similar to many definitions which exist, particularly Fleury (1999) who defines diversity as a mix of individuals with different group identities within the same social system. In relation to culture, this meant something different to each person, but reflected Hofstede's definition (1991) that it is a collective phenomenon that differentiates one group from another. Hofstede's assertion that culture is socially constructed was also supported, as one individual discussed how their knowledge and understanding of culture changed over time, reinforcing the theory presented by Hofstede that it is learned through the social situation of an individual. Overall, the understanding displayed by the participants of cultural diversity was reflective of that in past studies reviewed by the researcher, and no new definitions or understandings were present.

Next, the researcher wished to explore what the participants considered to be the benefits and challenges of diversity in an organisation. While previous studies presented both advantages and disadvantages to diversity, echoing Milliken and Martens' description of it as a "double-edged sword" (1996), this study was treated to a more positive opinion of diversity instead. All participants supported the value in diversity hypothesis (McLeod 1991) and were able to discuss multiple benefits of diversity which were reflective of the past literature on the subject. Creativity and innovation were identified, alongside the benefit to the individual of learning from the experiences of diverse peers, reinforcing findings of previous studies (Bell et al. 2011, Stahl et al. 2010). However, this study did not discover many challenges associated with diversity as participants struggled to identify

disadvantages. Just one individual spoke about sensitivity and the risk associated with using the wrong terminology, but overall, there was an imbalance with higher perceived benefits to diversity than challenges. While it is not clear to the researcher why this may be the case, it may be due to the study being conducted in 2023 as the perception of diversity grows more positive over time. As discussed in the literature review chapter, there is evidence to suggest that negative assumptions about diversity are decreasing steadily throughout time (Stahl and Tung 2015).

Given the growing importance the Civil Service is placing on D&I, this research also set out to explore this in practice in an individual organisation through the experiences of colleagues from culturally diverse backgrounds. Are central policies and strategies being implemented at organisational level effectively? Overall, it was felt that the organisation in this study is performing well in relation to D&I and participants appeared to have a positive experience working here. The organisation was viewed as diverse by all, particularly in relation to other areas of the Civil Service, although overall opinion on D&I varied within the group. This indicates that, while colleagues are having a positive experience in relation to D&I in this organisation, this may not be the case in other areas of the Civil Service. Varying experiences of this in the Civil Service suggests that D&I policies are perhaps not being implemented effectively in a consistent way, and success varies from department to department.

Although the experience of D&I was positive by all interviewed, there is a recognition that the role of senior leaders needs to improve. This somewhat aligns with theories presented by Martens (2020) on the role of senior leaders in D&I. He believes that for the benefits of diversity to be seen in organisation, senior leaders must create a vision for diversity and actively participate in the initiatives and actions which arise from this. However, in contrast to Martens, participants of this study did not place importance on senior leaders being the ones to create this vision and were content that D&I was being developed from the ground up. They instead believed that senior leaders had to become involved in this at some point, as opposed to creating it in the first place.

As this study focuses primarily on the individual and their experiences, the researcher next chose to investigate if there is a visible connection between the inclusion initiatives implemented and their wellbeing. Within the group interviewed, two out of five observed improvements to their wellbeing because of D&I initiatives in the organisation. This was

primarily due to them experiencing an improved sense of belonging as the initiatives organised provided them with the opportunity to get to know colleagues from similar backgrounds as themselves. This is in line with the social categorisation theory, as previously discussed, which explains that people categorise those similar to them as “us”, creating an in/out group where those in the in-group are considered trustworthy and dependable (Williams and O’Reilly, 1998). Individuals in this study felt a stronger sense of belonging with their “in- group” i.e., people from similar backgrounds to them, which they were introduced to through inclusion initiatives. This establishes that the initiatives played a role in connecting people from similar backgrounds and enhancing the sense of belonging among these groups.

The final part of the study focuses on the experience of the individuals with the recruitment process in the Civil Service. PAS, the central recruitment body for the Civil Service, are developing their recruitment and selection processes to attract and welcome candidates from diverse backgrounds. They recognise that a public service which has the contribution of those from all sectors of society will better serve the population (PAS, 2021). While all participants did not report a positive experience in the recruitment process, there was little evidence to relate this to their background. However, this was just in relation to their personal experience, as individuals were able to identify areas which may be disadvantageous for diverse applicants, such as the testing phase of the application or inadequate communication. The ED&I Strategy, published by PAS in 2021, sets out to reform recruitment and appears to address some of the issues identified by those interviewed. Some initiatives set out in this strategy include a targeted programme to engage with relevant bodies to further reach diverse candidates, as well as the launch of a new ED&I focused social media and electronic campaign (PAS, 2021). This highlights that the Civil Service, through PAS, are working to address areas of recruitment which may limit diversity in the sector. However, all participants of this study went through the recruitment process before the development of this strategy, so they have not experienced any of the changes introduced.

## 6.1 Recommendations

Overall, through the findings and analysis presented, it is evident that the experience of D&I in the chosen organisation was positive from those interviewed. However, there are areas

which the organisation could focus on to enhance this experience further and improve on their D&I function.

Firstly, there should be a focus on improving senior leadership involvement in the area of D&I. This is something which could be addressed straight away and was an area in which participants felt the organisation was performing poorly, and which was essential for the embedding of D&I in the workplace. Martens (2020) sets out a number of ways this could be achieved and argues that senior leaders can become more involved through attending D&I events, support minorities in public and avoid inaction on issues. In this organisation, senior leaders could become more involved in the recently established working group and visibly enhance their support for the function to ensure that it is embedded in the culture going forward. This would be a shared responsibility, where they work together to ensure that at least one senior leader supports each initiative, as available time for senior management is often limited.

Although there was just one challenge identified in relation to diversity, it is one which could easily be addressed. One participant spoke about the challenge around terminology and language, and how saying the wrong thing can unintentionally offend somebody. Diversity training could be a useful tool to help prevent this, and typically involves raising awareness and developing knowledge of various aspects of diversity (Alhejji and Garavan, 2013). In this case, training could be organised to enhance knowledge of the language around diversity and improve employee understanding of this. However, the development of such training can often take time and has high associated costs. Developing such training centrally and rolling out within a year across the whole Civil Service, would be the most resource efficient method.

A final area which could be actioned relates to the wider Civil Service and the recruitment process. Although some issues appear to have since been identified by PAS, such as communication, there is still scope to improve the process further in relation to the testing section. Two participants of the study mentioned how this area can prove to be a disadvantage for those from diverse cultural backgrounds, as different cultures may interpret information differently. Suggestions for how this could be improved include using testing as a shortlisting tool and eliminating situational testing completely. As PAS have outlined their intention to implement “recruitment and selection processes that encourage and enable access to candidates from diverse backgrounds” (2021), it is key that the testing

section of the process is adjusted to deliver on this strategic objective. However, adjusting the testing process and no longer having it as an elimination tool would mean that recruiters would have a higher volume of applications at the point of shortlisting. This would put pressure on those involved in the recruitment process and PAS would have to plan for this accordingly, perhaps seeking additional resources from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) or rearranging existing resources to account for this change.

## 7. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the experiences of culturally diverse employees in a Civil Service organisation to gain an understanding of how well central policy and strategy on D&I is being implemented within the Civil Service. The data was obtained from one diversity group in one Civil Service organisation. Culturally diverse employees were selected here as they are a small minority in this organisation and appear to be a small minority in the wider Civil Service also (PAS, 2023). The researcher believed their perspective would bring more value than a diverse group which comprised a higher population of employees.

Throughout the literature reviewed, it was clear that diversity brings both benefits and challenges to an organisation. Through the experiences of those interviewed, a positive perception of diversity was presented, with the group detailing many associated benefits but failing to identify many challenges. The benefits were in line with that presented in the literature to date, such as creativity and innovation, but their perspectives diverged from this as the diversity as a “double-edged sword” theory was contradicted (Milliken and Martens, 1996).

In relation to the organisation’s performance of D&I, the Civil Service Equality of Opportunity Policy sets out that each department is responsible for implementing such policy within their organisation (DOF, 2002). This poses the risk that the standard of implementation will vary from organisation to organisation. This study has shown that employees perceive their organisation to be performing well in terms of D&I, establishing links between organised initiatives and their sense of belonging, but have outlined that their experience has not always been this way in previous Civil Service organisations that they have worked in. This suggests that, while the organisation in this study is implementing such policies well, this standard may vary across the wider Civil Service.

Recruitment was identified throughout the literature reviewed as a key process in D&I. This study has found that there are areas in which recruitment for the Civil Service fall short and may act as a barrier to the attraction of candidates from diverse backgrounds. This relates to communications around the recruitment process, with a lack of clarity identified around entry requirements such as Irish language competency and citizenship. Issues around testing were also communicated, with concerns about the fairness of the testing process for diverse candidates noted.

## 7.1 Limitations

The most concerning limitation of this study for the researcher was the sample size. While some research indicated that five interviews would be sufficient (Saunders et al, 2019), it was felt that, in this study, 6-8 would be ideal to identify gain a more in depth understanding of the experiences of culturally diverse employees in the organisation. While the researcher was aware from an early stage that sample access may be an issue, whether it be due to the availability of participants or their willingness to take part, the value of conducting the research in an organisation where cultural diversity was minimal was deemed a priority over a larger volume of participants. If this study was to be repeated, the researcher would look into conducting it in a different Civil Service organisation with a similar diversity profile, where their membership on the D&I working group would not be an active barrier to participation.

Secondly, choosing one aspect of diversity may be too narrow of a focus to gain an overall perception of D&I in the chosen organisation. It is possible that some diversity groups may have a different experience, particularly in terms of inclusion and belonging. To have a full picture of how D&I is performing in the organisation, the experiences of employees from different diverse backgrounds, such as LGBTQ and people with disabilities, would have to have been explored.

The final limitation which the researcher views as key is the time at which those interviewed went through the recruitment process in the Civil Service. PAS published their EDI Strategy in 2021, with clear actions to improve the recruitment process for candidates from diverse backgrounds. Everybody interviewed does not have experience of Civil Service recruitment since this strategy was published, so this study cannot explore how effective any of the initiatives have been. To do so, individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds who have experience in some nature of this recruitment would have had to be included in the study.

## 7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

One of the central aims of this study was to explore how effectively Civil Services D&I policies and strategies were being implemented in an individual organisation. There is scope to extend this to other Civil Service organisations to gain a broader understanding of

whether the policies and strategies are being implemented effectively across the board, and not just in one organisation. The data collected could be used by PAS or other Civil Service bodies to shape future strategies, drawing on employee experiences and insight. Similarly, within the organisation studied, there is opportunity to interview employees from other diverse backgrounds, such as LGBTQ and those with disabilities. The present study, through focusing on just one diversity group, can induce that there is a positive experience of culturally diverse colleagues in relation to D&I in the organisation, but accepts that this experience may differ across those from other diverse backgrounds. Finally, the researcher would recommend that research is conducted which compares the experience of recruitment with diverse employees pre 2021 and after. This would allow for a comparative analysis of their experiences since the introduction of reforms to recruitment. Although, waiting for a number of years for any changes to become embedded would be advised. Overall, conducting similar research on a broader scale through the experiences of diverse employees in the Civil Service, could provide valuable data to help assess the effectiveness of existing policies and strategies and help to shape those of the future.

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## Appendix A: Information Booklet

### **Project Title:**

#### **Exploring the experiences of culturally diverse employees of diversity and inclusion in a Civil Service organisation**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

### **Who I am and what this study is about**

My name is Fauve Kenny, and I am a part-time student in Human Resource Management at the National College of Ireland. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation which aims to explore the experience of employees from diverse backgrounds of diversity and inclusion in the Civil Service. The aim is to examine the perception of diversity and inclusion initiatives from individuals from multicultural backgrounds and explore the connection between diversity, inclusion, and employee wellbeing. The information obtained in this study will be analysed as a part of the final dissertation for a Master of Arts (MA) in Human Resource Management.

### **What will taking part involve?**

Participation will involve a short semi-structured interview where the participant will be asked a number of questions exploring their understanding of diversity and inclusion and their experience in both their own organisation and wider Civil Service. The interview should take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

### **Why have you been invited to take part?**

The aim is to conduct this research among a sample of people from diverse cultural backgrounds working in the Civil Service. Therefore, invitations have been sent to colleagues meeting the criteria in the hope that they will share their experience and participate in the study.

### **Do you have to take part?**

Participation is completely voluntary, and participants have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

### **What are the possible risks and benefits of taking part?**

The Civil Service is not often associated with having a culturally diverse workforce, and this study will add to a growing number of studies which aim to delve deeper into diversity in this context. While the risks in participating are limited, it is important that participants are fully comfortable in discussing their personal experiences and recognise that the interview process can be paused or ceased completely if the individual feels they would rather not continue.

### **Will taking part be confidential?**

Care will be taken to ensure that questions asked in interviews do not request any information which has the potential to identify any participant. All interview transcripts will be anonymised, using numbers to differentiate between each participant instead of names. Non-anonymised data in the form of signed consent forms and audio recordings are collected as a part of the

research process but will be retained by the interviewer and school and will not feature in the final study. If the researcher has strong belief that there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either the participant or another individual (e.g., physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity) or if a serious crime has been committed, confidentiality may have to be broken to inform the relevant authorities.

**How will information you provide be recorded, stored and protected?**

The interview will be recorded via an audio recording device and stored in a password protected folder on the private laptop of the researcher and deleted once transcribed. Signed consent forms will be kept in the same location. Signed consent forms will be retained in this folder until after the degree has been conferred. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. Under freedom of information legalisation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of this study will be submitted as a part of the final dissertation for a Master's in Human Resource Management. There are no plans to progress this study any further, or for it to be published.

**Who should you contact for more information?**

Fauve Kenny  
National College of Ireland

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### Exploring the experiences of employees from culturally diverse backgrounds in a Civil Service organisation

Consent to take part in research

☐ I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

☐ I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

☐ I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

☐ I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

☐ I understand that participation involves a short semi-structured private interview where I will be asked a variety of questions around diversity, inclusion and wellbeing.

☐ I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

☐ I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

☐ I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

☐ I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

☐ I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the final dissertation of the researcher.

☐ I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

☐ I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in a password protected folder which only the researcher can access until dissertation results are confirmed by the exam board.

☐ I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.

☐ I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

☐ I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Fauve Kenny  
National College of Ireland

*Signature of research participant*

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Signature of participant Date:

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

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*Signature of researcher*

Signature of researcher Date:

## Appendix C: Guiding Questions for Interviews

(Transcripts available upon request)

### Question List for Interviews

1. What does the term “Cultural diversity in the workplace” mean to you?
2. Would you consider your organisation to be “Culturally diverse”? If so, how?
3. In what ways do you think cultural diversity might be important in the workplace?
4. What does the term "inclusion" mean to you?
5. Do you feel that inclusion is a priority of senior leaders in your organisation?
6. Do you feel that Diversity and Inclusion initiatives are viewed positively overall in your organisation?
7. Do you feel there are any issues associated with such diversity and inclusion?
8. Do you think that since these initiatives have been introduced in the organisation, they have had an impact on your wellbeing at work?
9. Do you feel that culture is sufficiently represented on the agenda for diversity and inclusion in your organisation?
10. How did you find the recruitment process when entering the Civil Service?
11. Can you suggest any ways in which the recruitment process for the Civil Service could be modified so that it is more accessible to applicants from diverse cultural backgrounds?
12. Is there anything you would like to add on the subject?

## CIPD Reflection Statement

Over the course of the research and writing of this dissertation, there are any things that I have learned from and perhaps would have done differently.

Firstly, I selected the earlier submission option with a view that the time would be sufficient. Looking back, I would have changed this and opted for the August submission date instead. I felt that the turnaround time was quite fast between receiving feedback from the proposal and final submission and this prevented me from delivering the highest quality of work that I know that I am capable of.

Secondly, I would have perhaps done things differently around selecting a topic. I struggled with this and went back and forward a lot when deciding on a research area. I should have decided earlier as this limited my time further.

Despite knowing that there are areas I could have done differently to improve the dissertation, I am still proud of the body of work that I submitted. I feel that this is an important subject area and deserves a lot of attention in the modern day, and I hope that I did it justice.