Intellectual Output 4 - Pilot Reports

MODERNISATION OF DIVERSITY MENTALITIES | LA BLANCA PALOMA VET CENTRE

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Illustration 1: © La Blanca Paloma

Fulfilling our founding mandate to "teach everyone"

The Organisation

The Blanca Paloma is a Concerted Vocational Training Centre that teaches Basic, Middle and Higher vocational training courses. The Foundation's action is based on respect for the other and on the consideration that everyone must be the protagonist of their own promotion.

Illustration 2: © Francisco Javier Hurtado Martinez

1. General Description of the Organisation

Fundacion Docete Omnes is a centre that is dedicated to the care and training of individuals with special needs. It is the main organisation to which "La Blanca Paloma" school belongs to. The name "Docete Omnes" is derived latin means to teach all. The name summarises the nature and philosophy of the foundation and all its different associated organisations.

La Blanca Paloma is a vocational school located 10km from Granada. The school was formed to help the local population who are generally involved in agriculture to learn different sets of skills and help them to improve their job prospects in the current job market. The demand for courses is high and the centre provides a wide range of vocational training courses such as pharmacy and first aid responders, hairdressing and aesthetics, social integration and care giving and tourism and socio-cultural animation.

The original mission statement was made in 1968 and as with anything things move forward and advance. Modern technology and the world wide web were concepts in their infancy when the mission statement was penned. The project DivCap served as a springboard to push the mission statement into the 21st century and add additional value and worth to an aging mission statement. The college is funded by Junta (local Andalusian government) which in turn is financed by the European Union. Having a policy that holds the values of diversity and equal opportunities for all is important. DivCap has played a role in consciously bringing those ideas and values into every level of the organisation starting from mission statement to the human resource policy and general day to day running of the institution.

The Blanca Paloma is comprised of 20+ teaching staff and 5 administrative staff. The teachers deal with a wide range of students and the level of diversity of the students was highlighted as a strong point for the centre and a starting point from which the centre could take certain learnings and good practices to then later been applied to other areas of the institution.

The students are from the surrounding areas in which there are high unemployment rates, and the most common occupation is that of agriculture. The Blanca Palomas mission statement was to give these students another trade or specialisation through both a solid theoretical foundation and hands-on practice. The centre was innovative in its time as it was one of the first schools to adopt a dual system. In this system students enrolling in their respective courses could both attend the school for the theoretical side of the diploma that they were doing, while doing their internships in companies such as hairdressers, pharmacies or hospitals or social care centres. This dual system has been put under massive strain with the current situation. COVID-19 has forced the digitalisation of the centre and the method that it usually used to carry out the function of vocational training for the people of all ages who would like to acquire a new skill and better job opportunities through the diplomas on offer at the centre.

2. Modernisation of Diversity Protocols in Blanca Paloma's Vocational Training Centre

2.1 The Centre

The Blanca Paloma is a Concerted Vocational Training Centre that teaches Basic, Middle and Higher vocational training courses. The Docete Omnes Foundation, since its creation in 1968, has had as its primary objective to offer help to people in need of training or support to follow their own self-improvement itineraries. As an institution based on the principles of Christianity, we start from the conviction that all people, by the mere fact of being so, are invested with two inalienable qualities: dignity and freedom.

Consequently, the Foundation's action is based on respect for the other and on the consideration that everyone must be the protagonist of their own promotion.

Therefore, to fulfil our founding mandate to "teach everyone", we will try to promote every one of the people who have approached the Foundation with the assurance that we contribute, even if in a minimal part, to the progress of humanity.

2.2 The Centre's Philosophy

From a firm commitment to Quality and Academic Excellence, we understand that our mission is to enable our students to work in the work environment with the greatest human and professional competence and in this way, they can reach the highest levels of self-realization. From La Blanca Paloma, we serve society in general, those who wish to train for the exercise of a profession in different branches of Vocational Training. As well as those that, having their profession, want to be recycled and updated; and others who, without professional qualification, or with poor preparation, want to train for the performance of an activity in certain sectors of labour market.

2.3 Key findings from research

The key findings from the case studied highlighted many issued that management agreed needed to be addressed. The Blanca Paloma school is located 10 kms from the city centre and so the issue of ethnic diversity and migration is not a dominant social issue. Diversity in the case of Blanca Paloma is found in the day care centre "Fundación Docete Omnes" to which the Blanca Paloma belongs.

There already exists a strong connection between the vocational centre and the foundation that promotes inclusive values and collaborative work with students and users in subjects that are compatible such as social integration and socio-cultural animation.

Impressions from the staff interviewed in the case study were positive. The management treats diversity in the centre in a holistic and humane fashion. There is shared working space and diverse group working within it is.

Another important finding is the lack of diversity in terms of staffing. There is only one foreign national working at the centre and after interviews with management some key reasons for this were highlighted. Job vacancies are offered through numerous channels of communication and they are mostly based in a provincial to regional level. The CVs received do not fit the legal requirements for working in an institution with public funding. It is easier from European citizens to get their qualifications recognised and homologised than those from outside the E.U. This is the case of the foreign national working at the centre.

2.4 Current situation and changes introduced

The age profile of the centre averages 50 years and upwards. This is even more prevalent now with COVID-19 and the need for digital competences and telematic teaching. The age profile would certainly help with the transition to digital media and teaching methods. In other terms, there has been a change in the age profile of new hires towards younger employees. And eventually when a level of normalcy returns, that this important tool of the modern age and the modern workplace is not discarded for more traditional methods.

The lessons learnt from the case study were that the centre needed to be modernised in many facets. The first facet was the centre's online presence needed a complete overhaul and to be brought into the 21st century. The webpage layout and design needed to be changed and an effort in incorporate SEO keywords and make the page more visible through the improvement of the social media channels in the centre.

This task needs to be spread among all the staff and the promotion and marketing of the centre needs quality content to be created by staff and students alike. Having an engaged and active social media presence is an important part of a bigger picture which is online presence and marketability. Having a young and enthusiastic age profile in the staff would be hugely beneficial in term of creating the content mentioned earlier.

Having a strong online presence will enable the centre to attract a diverse profile of professionals and open a bigger catchment area of students to the centre allow it to grow and prosper as a centre for inclusion and empowerment of people of all ages who wish to attend.

3. Getting to grips with the digital highway

3.1 Beginning of the process

The process started with individual interviews with all levels of staff from administration to upper management. The interviews were designed to allow the interviewee to feel comfortable and able to express their views clearly and without any fear of offending their colleagues or those in charge of the organisation. Interviews with management were essential to gage how much willingness there was on their part to accept that there is a need for change and embrace all critical feedback collection by the interview process. These interview techniques were practiced during one of the Transnational Project Meetings (TPMs) for DivCap. Having had practiced these techniques previously was important to help organise and guide the interview process for all participants. The age profile of the management is also quite young and so facilitated the process in terms of participation and acceptance of constructive criticism.

Important techniques for the creation of a safe and comfortable space for the interviewee were highlighted as it would eventually help to improve the level of sincerity and honesty in the feedback that would be collected through the interview process.

The interviews were held on different days and the whole process took various months as there were follow up interviews with staff that had already given feedback on certain topics. They were given lists of recommendations and possible improvements from upper management and then asked to discuss the viability and their personal thoughts on the measures. Having a good rapport with the interviewees was crucial to obtain a quality of constructive criticism and efficacy of putting new measures into motion. Having buy in cannot be underestimated in terms of long-term success. Staff were also aware that through this platform their feedback would reach upper management through the filter of the DivCap project, but they would remain anonymous during the process.

3.2 The interview process

The interviews of the teaching staff proved more challenging to organise with schedules being tighter and it being problematic for them to be able to dedicate enough time to the interview process allowing for the nature of teaching in the centre. The centre has a dual system that has students working in companies and organisations during a certain number of days and then the other days receiving more theoretical material. The feedback from the teachers was mixed and reflected age groups and teaching preferences. All staff were asking to be as honest as possible with every step of the process and in this way the feedback obtained could be a catalyst for change at the centre.

3.3 The professional profile

In general, teachers who worked with students on subjects such as social integration and socio-cultural aspects wanted to have workshops working with diversity training and management. Once there was interest identified in our interviews a second round of communication took place. Face to face meetings were organised with all interested teachers to organise time slots for workshops with both them and the students. The school has many different branches of vocational training and this project has a connection with the higher education courses such as socio-cultural animation and social integration. The other branches and their teachers were not as enthusiastic about the project for their subjects and their interviews in part reflected that. Other teachers were interested in the topic, however, did not wish to participate as they did not see any relevance to their own subject.

3.4 New hiring Mandate

Regarding new staff that have been hired over the course of the duration of the project. The age profile and linguistical ability of new staff can be clearly seen now as higher priorities. The new staff hired average in their late 20s, early 30s and all with proficient second language skills. This change is a welcome one for an organisation that clearly wants to modernise how it educates and who bears the responsibility of that education. The need for this change has also been highlighted by the current events of COVID and the need for teachers with digital competences to handle distance learning and online learning platforms due to the enforced situation experienced by all professionals all over the world.

There does remain a core element to the teaching staff that are not very adept with technology and digital competences. The centre has focused on helping to reskill and upskill its current staff and give them all the knowledge and tools they need to be able to carry out their jobs in the current situation. The centre has recently secured a g suite license so it now has access to all of googles apps and has the permission to use them for the center. The centre is in the process of providing all the students and staff with their own accounts. The process for the younger students has been straight forward as most of them already own a gmail account and understand how to set up another even using the same device their original account is on.

The management have clearly taken on board the topics highlighted by the first round of interviews and feedback obtained from them. As mentioned earlier, the profile of the teachers employed to cover the positions left vacant was in line with suggestions made to the management in the case study developed in the first phase of the DivCap project. Whether this would have happened in the same way if COVID had not of happened, we will never know. That is not important. The most important fact is that change had been identified, discussed, and debated and then implemented.

3.5 Adaption of current staff

The teaching staff has started the process of migrating all the material and other important information that they have uploaded onto their temporary school accounts they used with their students. Having this platform gives the centre not only the tools to allow for digital communication but also doing so in a legal framework as teachers and students alike do not use their own personal emails in the formal setting of school rather, they use the organisations email to communicative with other students and the staff. The GDPR provides strict guidelines for working with students under the age of 18. They are legally not allowed to use their own emails in a school setting. GDPR is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a legal framework that sets guidelines for the collection and processing of personal information from individuals who live in the European Union (EU).

3.6 Digitalisation and how it fits with the teaching methodology in the school

There have been enquiries on the part of staff about the digitalisation of certain projects that occur on an annual basis. The school employs a dual system that means students have both work placement outside and more traditional theoretic learning in the centre. The enquiries centred on logbooks and other evaluation tools traditionally used in a hard copy format now being converted into live online documents that can be edited by more than one user and even in a simultaneous time if needed. It takes time to adapt to new ways of doing things and the centre has been open about the need for change and modernisation.

3.7 Attrition and staff changes

The school has seen more changes to personnel this year than is the last 10 years combined. Many teachers have taken leave for numerous motives such as, rehabilitation from operations, sickness, and maternity leave. The centre was suddenly faced with four vacancies that would need to be filled immediately to cover the courses for the academic year 2020/2021. After the initial meetings held with management, administration staff and teachers, a draft of topics and possible work-ons was created and then presented to management. One of the topics highlighted was the age profile of the staff and also the lack of linguistical ability of staff at the centre keeping in mind that the funding the centre receives is through the local government which in turn is funded from the European Union.

3.8 The next steps to be taken

The process of digitalisation has been a long and sometimes frustrating one. Staff at our vocational training centre have been reluctant to embrace the change. There is also the question of funding that is a constant problem for the school. As the school is semi-private, the staff are paid through state funding, but the centre is privately financed. That means that teachers are obliged to provide their own computer equipment and other digital solutions. While all the classes have projectors, the school needs updating the general set up of the classrooms. Presently, the classrooms have chalk boards and projectors, however, many rooms do not have a deployable projector screen and rely on the wall to do the projecting. The acoustics for online classes have not been contemplated and it makes for an uncomfortable synchronised learning experience with excessive background noise and hindered communication.

Providing the teaching staff with digital whiteboards and an integrated computer system would have facilitate the digitalisation of the learning process in the school. To allow for a synchronised methodology of teaching each classroom would need a microphone installed. This would greatly facilitate communication between students in the class and students at home. Having these installations would allow the school to move into the digital era with the right foot forward. Allowing for current events, it is logical to think that we may one day find ourselves in the same situation as we have been in with COVID-19. But unlike last time, all the infrastructure and installations will be in place and that the school will be prepared for restricted movement of its students. Unfortunately, this is not likely to happen in the near future due to financial reasons, but management has accepted the proposal as necessary but unviable.

One of the key points in the DivCap project is diversity in the workplace. This was another issue highlighted after the interview and the case study phase of the project. There are some legal problems here that need to be addressed. The Blanca Paloma school is a privately run organisation and publicly funded. There are certain legal requirements that must be observed in regards who is eligible for selection and hiring.

If one wanted to become a teacher in the Blanca Paloma school, they would have to possess a university degree or the equivalent and a masters to be eligible for selection. This would be an automatic barrier to many foreign nationals living in Spain that might even possess both of those titles but do not have them homogenised. This is something that the E.U. have been working on to allow easier movement of labour across the eurozone but still requires a lot of bureaucratic savvy to navigate through the red tape and paperwork, well at least that is the case here in southern Spain.

E.U. citizens have the possibility and the theoretical backing to be able to avail of these types of opportunities. The Blanca Paloma has one foreign national currently working at the centre. If we look outside of the E.U. then the possibilities are reduced drastically and now depend on agreements between this country and the country of the possible candidate.

This reality plus the lack of qualified candidates makes the process of diversification of the workplace a difficult task. In the larger cities there would be much more possibilities to diversify staff as there would be a much more varied selection of applicants. The centre cannot change the location of the centre and the reality of the demographics and professional profiles available to the management. All job offers by the centre are offered through national media and in labour exchange. There must be clear and transparent offers to the public, although the management have the final say in the hiring process.

The centre has, as mentioned earlier, decided to look at diversity in terms of gender, age and overall experience and ability when considering new hires and taking into account the current situation and being well prepared for any possibility of a repeat in events in the future.

4. Aims and Approaches

4.1 Key aims

Modernize teaching and refocus on the current job market both nationally and internationally. The foundation was built with the aim of helping those most in need to become fully independent members of society. This focus was of course centered on the premise that we all have the right to work and be treated fairly and with respect. As mentioned in the summary of the organization, the center was created to provide all people from the local community skills and abilities that would help them in the professional careers and break with the cycle of unemployment experienced by people in risk of social exclusion and youngsters who aspire to more than a very tough living made through agriculture.

This vision is now a reality but like all things in lifetimes have changed and the need to complement the services given by the center is crucial to it remaining relevant in years to come. From the 60s onwards most of the western world has begun a process on digitalization and now that reality is here and students to be best prepared for their professional futures must be at least proficient in the use of basic digital tools such as word processors, spreadsheets, powerpoint presentations, email to mention but just a few.

Another vision that is central to our organization is providing students with opportunity to study and work abroad. Our center has been participating in Erasmus+ for over a decade. Giving students the possibility to study or work abroad is of great importance both for the individual and the local community. It helps to foster a deeper connection between citizens of the different nations of the E.U. and opens of the possibility of intercultural learning and can be a catalyst for change in terms of mentality and acceptance of diversity and realization of the great advantage of being a citizen of the E.U.

The aim of the center is to send more students abroad and to add help them in each step of the process while always being respectful in regards of their autonomy to organize their own travel and stay. One key factor to this are language levels in the school which is connected to one of the other recommendations made by the case study report. The recommendation stated that all new staff should have some skills in a second language.

Basing on aims on adding digital competences to all the subjects taught in the school Blanca Paloma has begun to train the current staff on how to use digital tools and has provided all the teaching staff and students with an official school account from google (G-suite). This was one of the recommendations made in after the initial round of interviews and then COVID-19 really changed everything for everyone. On a positive note, our recommendations almost instantly became priorities and so at least from the point of view of the project, COVID was the catalyst for change that although is not an easy process, will leave the center in a better situation afterwards.

Improve the technological infrastructure and digital competences in the center

This is one of the final aims set by our recommendations guide to upper management. To be able to allow for digitalization it goes without saying, that you must have the tools necessary to be able to make that a reality. The school relies heavily on teachers providing their own materials, be it hardware or software. The installations are still quite basic, but there is a functioning wireless network now in the center, capable of handling multiple video calls at the same time. This opens the door to important European endeavors such as E-Twinning, online learning, and many other possibilities.

The cost of modernizing the installations in the center are quite high and management has agreed that there is a need for it, however budget restraints make this a difficult one to calculate just when this can happen.

The focus of our work must implement change when possible and provide a strong support system to all those involved in the process. The means to do so have been varied according to the task that it corresponded to. Our team managed to receive a grant from Google allowing us to use the G-Suite for our center. This process took a lot of time and effort on the part of our I.T. specialist and through his hard work the center now has a platform from which it can start to digitalize its methodology. The reward for this hard work came just in time.

Provision of an official school account for every student and teacher allows for a safe and full communication with students and teachers alike.

5. Activities

5.1 Interviews

The interviews were done over a long period. Thankfully, as mentioned before, we had a training session during one of the TPMs and that helped serve as a template to be used with all the management and staff that we would be interviewing. Having a platform which allowed for open and honest dialogue between the staff and ourselves, was vital to undercovering any perceived problems at all levels of the organisation.

Recording the interviews, with the permission of the participants was also invaluable for the creation of a working plan for management to revise and have their input on the following steps that should be taken.

This trend is becoming even more common with younger generations who take to social media such as YouTube to resolve their doubts or just want to have a visual explanation to the task or problem they are having and that they can control the speed at which they use the information.

5.2 Piloting with Students

The piloting sessions with the students was over a period of months and the emphasis was on qualitive marks instead of quantitative. The goal was to get feedback from the students on the material created by the project and have them test it with collectives also. The collectives mentioned are PWDs people with disabilities. This highlighted the need for case studies and practical application guidelines for the students.

5.3 Piloting with Teachers

The piloting with the teachers was straight forward. The teachers who had subjects which highlighted the need for attention to diversity were quick to accept the invitation to participate in the project. The feedback from the teachers was that to incorporate the material into their class planning, further didactic documents needed to be created so that they could tie them in with their own curricula.

Transition phases with digital technology

Identifying the need to communicate to collectives such as the student body and collectives in risk of social exclusion was a technical and technological problem that the organisation had from the start. The centre was not prepared, as was the case in many centres for distance learning. The process of creating school accounts took over 2 months to complete and there were many teething problems along the way.

FAQs

✓ How can we work with different groups in a synchronic way?
✓ How can we communicate interpersonal skills and emotional competences, if there is distance between the students doing their practice and the target groups?
✓ How can we involve members of the collective that have been isolated due to Covid?
✓ Student is having problems making their account work, how can this be resolved?

Problems and solutions

Not all these problems have been resolved but step by step the teachers and management have put a framework in place that will be especially useful going forward. Allowing teachers and administration staff to be involved in the process of change, also changes the focus of ownership for purely a managerial problem to an organisational problem. This makes for a more united front when the solutions to key issues are addressed and then resolved. The final word will and should always be with management but if change is to happen the more all members feel a part of the process the more likely for a successful outcome is.

6. Seat belts ready for the information highway

The piloting with both teachers and student served many functions. It was a constructive critical filter for us to have the material of the project looked at from a more objective point of view. The students over the space of numerous sessions worked through all the material on the webpage.

The following are the recommendations that came out of the whole process.

Management Recommendations

The recommendations for the management were based on four areas:

• hiring policy

• diversification awareness and analysis

• creation of digital infrastructure and

• finally the digitalisation of the company especially focused on the teaching process carried out in the centre.

Hiring policy was the first highlighted issue addressed after the first round of interviews. The profile of the staff was discussed and a clear need to improve certain areas was analysed. The age profile of the employees was at the forefront of the issues discussed and that the hiring policy needed to take that into account when new staff were to be interviewed. The average age of current employees at the centre was over 50. If the centre was serious about improving all aspects of its teaching and general methodology at the centre, then this was something that would be necessary to facilitate that. Language skills was also highlighted as a positive added value for all new hires and that those candidates with higher language skills would be given priority over less qualified applicants.

Due to the COVID situation this recommendation was implemented quickly, and all the new hires were in their late 20s or early 30s. All the new hires had at least a B2 level of English.

Diversification awareness was something that management was aware of already, but the project helped to link the ideas of diversification and productivity in way, that had not been explained before. The term diversity is very general and, in our centre, it was focused on a few major areas; age profile, ethnicity and finally language abilities.

The creation of a digital infrastructure was another recommendation made to management; however, this requires a substantial economic investment that the centre cannot afford. A compromise between the staff and management was reached, that staff would use their own devices while teaching at the centre. Here the key was the dialogue between management and staff and all sides were willing to reach a compromise for the greater good.

The digitalisation process was the responsibility of the organisation's technician. He was able to get a grant from google allowing the centre to use G-suite for free. This hard work gave the centre a host of tools from which it could provide every student and teacher with their own google account and corporative email address. This is something the centre never had and signals a transition from the older ways of organising to becoming a modern centre ready to prepare students for the job market with all the skills they will need.

Staff Recommendations

Staff who were involved gave feedback to the project. Their students were positive about the own experience with the material and in particular the case studies. Having case studies according to the students helps to give practical examples of the material and main idea in action.

Staff were recommended to take their time with the process and many of them have taken parts of the material created by the project and added it to their own curricula. Staff have also been advised to use the new corporative email as the main via of communication with the students. Before obtaining the licence for GSuite the centre did not have an organised and formal way of getting in contact with the students.

Improvement of language skills is also another of the recommendations made to the teaching staff. If the centre tries to diversify its student profile some language knowledge would have facilitate the process of the students integrating into the school.

The last staff recommendation was to include a wider range of diversity in the curricula for the academic year. This is already compulsory by law with regulated teaching. The participants have will have access to the material created by the project and can use it freely and at their own discretion.

Student Recommendations

Students were given access to the material but not given any instructions at first. This was to test how accessible and logical the layout and organisation of the material was. After that process, the students were then guided by teachers through the material focusing on case studies and promoting of debates about the content and material created.

Students in the Blanca Paloma school will become future care workers and animation monitors, hairdressers, pharmacists, and auxiliary nurses. The topic and importance of diversity and how to deal and manage it will give them an added layer of knowledge when they begin their professional careers.

The idea of bi-yearly workshop was proposed by the students themselves and management has taken their suggestion on board. The workshop will be focused on dealing with diversity in the work environment and how to deal and management various different situations that may arise while working with a diverse collective.

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