Summary

The Dissemination of the Diversity Concept

The diversity concept comes to Sweden

The diversity concept (in Swedish: mångfald) entered the arena of Swedish socio-political debate in the mid-1990s. This development attracted mass-media attention and the publication of books, articles and reports advocating the concept or commenting on it. The concept, which discusses how life in the workplace can be organised more efficiently and has made its appearance in the United States, has also had effects on policymaking and various types of consultancy work. The present thesis focuses on studying the dissemination of the diversity concept, which is a way of describing how change takes place through the introduction of new ideas and practices and how various forces and obstacles influence this process. Since the diversity concept has been defined and used in a number of different ways and with the passage of time has come to connote an ever-broader conceptual field, some boundaries need to be set. The diversity concept is flexible and decentralised in character and may be defined as a so-called “essentially contested concept”, meaning that it is charged with positive values and that various actors dispute with one another over the preferential rights to its interpretation. In this dissertation it is the ethnic dimension of the diversity concept that is under the spotlight because this is the aspect which has claimed most attention in Sweden. Another limiting factor is that it is diversity as a question involving working life and organisation that forms the main object of interest, although the discussion sometimes goes beyond this framework. In this thesis the term “diversity” is used when there is an organisational perspective in combination with a perception along the lines that differences can be useful.

The concept of diversity in the United States and Europe

The first objective of the thesis is to describe the origin and historical development of the diversity concept in the United States and to discuss the extent to which conditions are ripe for dissemination of the concept in Europe. To this end a study has been made of the literature in the field. The
idea of diversity began to develop in the United States towards the end of the 1970s in the wake of *affirmative action* resulting from the emergence of arguments in favour of having a heterogeneous labour force via such channels as the case of *University of California v. Bakke* and the work done by personnel administrators. It is not until the end of the 1980s in connection with Johnston and Packer’s report under the title of *Workforce 2000* that the idea of diversity becomes a social movement in its own right. The report, which asserts that the labour force of the future will consist to a significantly higher extent of women and ethnic minorities, leads on to a discussion of the conditions prevailing in the organisation of life in the workplace. As a result of this debate, which is creating considerable interest among large firms and organisations, these questions are beginning to be discussed by authors, researchers and consultants. They set up conferences, write books and articles and are increasingly prone to claim that diversity is a perspective which can be distinguished from affirmative action by virtue of the fact that the former term focuses on utility and making more efficient use of the labour force while the latter is primarily concerned with redressing social injustices. The movement which is taking shape under names like *valuing diversity*, *managing diversity* and *diversity management* is gradually broadening the perspective by asserting that diversity does not concern itself only with categories which have attracted attention in the course of affirmative action. Instead, its advocates declare that diversity ought to deal with all inequalities. In practice gender and ethnicity continue to be the most important categories when diversity results in policy efforts among large firms and organisations. The diversity movement in the United States receives much attention, and many large corporations and organisations are adopting the rhetoric. However, critics allege that the various utilities or benefits which advocates claim seem to rely on a weak sub-structure of empirical research and that there are question marks hanging over which of the alleged changes the diversity programmes have really helped to bring about.

The concept of diversity was introduced during the 1990s in various parts of Europe but has not made the same impression as in the United States. According to Wrench, five economic and structural developmental trends form the foundation on which the diversity concept was built in the United States during the 1980s: demographic events, ethnic markets, expansion of the service sector, organisational changes and globalisation. These developmental trends suggest that there may be incentives for European firms and organisations to cultivate the concept of diversity as well. But there are considerable differences compared with the United
States, which means that the concept’s potential may be less in Europe. Among these differences it can be pointed out that the United States has experience of a long-term and comprehensive anti-discrimination policy buttressed by very strict legislation in that field. The exposed situation of black Americans is not the least of the factors encouraging people to seek solutions to compensate for historical injustices through affirmative action, and there has been a debate over multiculturalism. These developmental trends have provided a fertile ground for the diversity concept in the United States but have no real counterpart in the European reality. Some other important differences are that there are more large corporations in the United States, that minority groups are larger and more established and that the political discourse about immigration is different. Thus there are conditions favouring the spread of the diversity concept in Europe but there are also considerable obstacles.

Introduction and dissemination of the diversity concept in Sweden

The second aim of the thesis is to describe and analyse the introduction and dissemination of the diversity concept in Sweden during the period 1994-2000. To this end a series of interviews were conducted with the key actors who during this period were contributing to the introduction and dissemination, and in due time the gradual modification and adaptation, of the diversity concept in Sweden. A number of books, policy papers, reports and studies have also been consulted so as to learn more about how the idea came to be disseminated. Since the question of the diversity concept’s dissemination in Sweden can be very wide-ranging, some kind of demarcation lines have to be drawn. The time-demarcation decided upon is that the study begins in 1994 when some of the earliest actors were introducing their work on the diversity concept. The investigation concludes at the year 2000, the reason being that up to that time there are relatively few actors working on the diversity concept. After this point the word diversity becomes more associated with a different range of questions touching upon integration, anti-discrimination and comprehensive policy action in public organisations. It becomes difficult then to keep track of the concept itself.

So as to be able to understand and analyse the introduction and dissemination of the diversity concept in Sweden, a theoretical discussion has been borrowed from the literature on the dissemination of ideas and
innovation. This theoretical paradigm, which is present in a number of different disciplines, seeks to discuss how changes occur through the introduction of new ideas and techniques. The authors in this field believe that the factors which drive and influence the dissemination process are to be found partly among the characteristics inherent in the concept, and partly in the conditions prevailing in a given social context. Having regard to the vague and flexible character of the diversity concept and the contextual differences which exist between the United States and Sweden there is good theoretical reason to expect that the individuals and actors participating in the dissemination process modify and change the concept in different ways. This leads to its becoming possible to formulate three hypotheses concerning the introduction and dissemination of the diversity concept in Sweden.

One preliminary hypothesis is that dissemination of the diversity concept is dependent on individuals or other actors believing that there is a need for it. The actors who interested themselves early on in a diversity concept in Sweden were the Swedish Office of Science and Technology (Sveriges Tekniska Attchéeer), The Swedish Council for Working Life Research (RALF - Rådet för Arbetslivsforskning) and Eva Löfgren/International Engineers. The Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (DO), The Quintet (a cooperative project between DO and a number of private and public organisations and companies) and Sweden 2000 (Sverige 2000) are amalgamations of large public and private organisations employing a utility-driven diversity perspective. In the state domain we find some more actors introducing and disseminating the diversity concept in Sweden, viz The Swedish Agency for Government Employers (Arbetsgivarverket)/The Development Council for the Government Sector (Utvecklingsrådet för den statliga sektorn) and Ministry of Enterprise (Näringsdepartementet) which runs the project Alla lika olika. Not least, the various actors consider it important that a wide-ranging discussion is needed on how the conditions of working life are experienced by different groups. The concept of gender equality is regarded by the actors as too limited; and just as in the United States, discussion of a possible future labour shortage becomes a driving factor in the dissemination process. These actors consider the diversity concept as interesting, and as well as seeing the utility perspectives claimed by its advocates in the United States they also grasp that the concept provides a way of discussing the consequences of immigration in a more positive light. This happens most especially against the background of the social tensions which are exacerbated by the economic crisis of the 1990s.
A second hypothesis is that the actors who strove at an early stage to propagate the diversity concept in Sweden re-invent and apply the concept from the standpoints of the interests they represent and the problems which happen to be topical just then. Although some actors insist that the diversity concept comprises a different category of “differences”, in Sweden the concept becomes focused on the ethnicity aspect because for various reasons the “immigration question” became a burning social issue during the 1990s. One modification is that in many contexts diversity becomes a synonym for ethnic diversity. Some further modifications are made by the actors during the period. The way Eva Skog, Gabriella Fägerlind and Eva Löfgren use the term is close to the American models, with a strong utility emphasis and a broad conception of diversity but with a starting point in the conditions prevailing in Sweden. That they do not modify the concept to as great an extent as the other actors probably results from their having a more independent position. On the other hand in the Swedish organisations Sweden 2000 and The DO/The Quintet, there is a concentration from the outset on combating racism and discrimination by involving organisations and corporations on a voluntary basis. The utility aspect becomes a device for tempting organisations to work to this end internally and thus create a climate of opinion in favour of openness and respect for differences. A further modification therefore is to utilise the idea of diversity as a means of achieving integration and acceptance of social responsibility. The state is an actor which in various ways supports and finances a number of other actors and organisations disseminating and practising the diversity idea during the 1990s; all the early actors in this field receive finance from the state or else are a part of it at some point in time. However, it seems that the state’s policy has gradually shifted, attaching less weight to the utility perspective and more to equal treatment and anti-discrimination. Some utility arguments are presented but if so mainly from the perspective of recruitment and the labour force. The modified version of the government’s line on the diversity concept is to regard diversity as quantitative representativeness.

Another hypothesis is that re-invention and modification is also caused by contextual differences and the general vagueness of the concept. This leads two reinventions; that the utility aspect of the concept gets less support over time and that American methods are regarded with more scepticism. The essentially contested character of the concept enables it to be discussed, making it possible for it to be interpreted and modified in different ways, and secondly that the contextual differences existing between the United States and Sweden are important. Many of the actors make study visits to the United States and are both impressed and inspired by the work
done on diversity by the American organisations. At first there are great hopes that methods will be imported and lessons learnt from convincing examples. Then little by little the actors realise that the process is more complicated than they had believed at first. They become more and more aware that the differences existing between Sweden and the United States make it problematical to apply certain aspects of the diversity concept in Sweden. One such obstacle is that broadly speaking there is no personnel policy debate about ethnicity and discrimination and that it takes time and energy to launch one. Furthermore such a perspective is regarded by some to be competing with gender equality issues. Another reaction is that the concept of diversity is regarded as too American and that from the very start there is a degree of scepticism towards the idea that the utility-driven perspective could really be made to function in Sweden. Gradually, also, it dawns on some of the actors that the concept is affected by the fact of its having originated in large hierarchical organisations and that in the United States there has been an additional pressure on these organisations to take active steps against discrimination and in favour of increased representation of minorities through legislation and affirmative action. In addition, the American organisations are imbued with a more widespread tradition of acceptance of social responsibility. This means that some of the standard devices applied in American corporations and organisations, such as quantification of minority groups and the appointment of so-called diversity managers, cannot function in the same way in Sweden. Moreover legislation plays a contradictory role in this situation. Some of the actors declare that the issues are difficult to address, especially in the state sector before the law on discrimination was tightened in 1999. At the same time this increased legislative rigour results in the diversity concept being reduced to a subordinate perspective within a wider debate over discrimination, while the word diversity simply becomes associated with representational questions. The early link found to subsist in the utility-orientated idea becomes less apparent. Interest in learning from the experiences of other countries still exists throughout the period, but it shifts more towards European countries such as Great Britain and Holland.

The investigation into the dissemination of the diversity concept in Sweden reveals that despite its being disseminated via a number of different channels, there are indications that it has failed to achieve a strong position in any of them. The labour market parties do not regard it as important, and the existing anti-discrimination legislation is not strong enough to form a serious incentive for employers to work proactively for diversity. The utility
argument adduced by its advocates does not seem sufficiently strong to provide the diversity concept with any ground firm enough to stand on.

Dissemination of the diversity concept in the City of Malmö

The third aim is to analyse the dissemination of the diversity concept in the City of Malmö based on two different themes: leadership and strategy. Ever since the 1990s the City of Malmö has been cultivating the idea of a diversity concept, and this has manifested itself in the issue of a series of guidance documents. Malmö is a city characterised by economic change and large-scale immigration which the local authority believes have made necessary to devise a new perspective on the issues of integration and organisation. In order to study this process a series of interviews have been conducted with politicians, town district managers and operations managers and other employees based in or working at four work and development centres in various parts of the city. Various types of guidance documents containing directives enjoining local authority institutions to promote diversity principles in the way they function have also been studied.

Sundry different perspectives on organisational theory have been invoked in an attempt to analyse the diversity concept and its dissemination in Malmö City. This theoretical debate originated as a way of approaching the dissemination of concepts in organisations as translation. Researchers using this approach will maintain that disseminating ideas within organisations is a complicated and pragmatic process because a variety of different interests, ideas and directives are weighed against each other. This applies especially to political organisations with complicated decision-making structures and an array of different duties which have to be balanced against each other. This discussion leads on to a point where some hypotheses can be devised concerning the dissemination of the diversity concept in the City of Malmö.

One initial hypothesis concerning dissemination of the diversity concept in the City of Malmö is that the process is driven by actors at various levels accepting the view that there is a need for such a strategy in the organisation. In the City of Malmö the need for the diversity concept is accepted, but this happens in a number of different ways in different parts of the organisation. Among politicians and in various guidance documents we come across the concept of diversity and the view that increased
representation of persons with different ethnic backgrounds is valuable for development of the organisation’s activities. They believe that the organisation must adapt itself to the conditions prevailing in the surrounding community in order to be able to improve the services provided for citizens of the municipality. To be able to achieve this, the organisation must be more open and tolerant towards persons of different ethnic backgrounds. In this way the organisation can assimilate new opinions and influences, thus acquiring an increased understanding of the needs of its citizens. This view is shared by the head of the Work and Integration team and the former head of The Metropolitan Development Initiative, who believe that the skills question must be re-worded and that a discussion of the conditions prevailing in the organisation are important. The town district managers (stadsdelscheferna) share the view that increased representation of persons with an ethnic background other than Swedish gives better service but places less emphasis on organisational changes and discussions about the term skills or competence. The biggest differences are found between politicians and town district managers on the one hand and the operations managers on the other. The Employment and Development Centres (Arbets- och utvecklingscentra, AUC) management believe that there is value in having mixed teams of personnel but that this benefit is subordinate to the efficiency of the core activity. They believe it is important for the organisation to function in a multicultural society but that it is not necessary for the organisation to have mixed groups of personnel in order to achieve this. Only one of the four AUC managers shares the management’s view that an active diversity strategy is something which the organisation needs. This leads to different outcomes of the strategies and activities which are generated in association with the organisation’s official diversity policy.

The concept of diversity is thus translated in different ways, in different places and at different levels in The City of Malmö. A second hypothesis concerning the dissemination of the diversity concept is that the process is characterised by pragmatism and conflicts between different levels rather than the concept being disseminated top-down in accordance with the rational organisational perspective. By viewing the actions of higher management vis-à-vis the political level and the AUC managers it becomes clear that there is a conflict between the various domains over who is to be responsible for ensuring that the diversity concept is translated into practice. This results from the fact that different levels handle different types of problem and therefore approach the question in different ways. This becomes clear when the higher management of the organisation is studied, since it is they who will interpret the politicians’ directives, translate them
into concrete terms and pass them down to lower levels of the organisations concerned. Among politicians and in guidance documents there are currents of ideas to the effect that the local government machinery must cultivate a utility-orientated diversity perspective. There are numerous problems with the guidelines handed down by politicians. There is an ideological rift with regard to the benefits of diversity: on the one hand immigrants and ethnic heterogeneity in Malmö are described as a resource enriching both the city and the organisation; on the other hand it is described as a threat inasmuch as this heterogeneity in practice means segregation and social problems. In certain cases the guidance document is unclear because there is no clear dividing line between diversity as an organisational question and diversity as measures for reducing racism, segregation and social exclusion in the society. Yet another problem is that there are few directives and guidelines for the organisation’s internal work on the diversity question apart from the fact that the representation of persons with an ethnic background other than Swedish ought to increase. At the policy level it is established that there is a value in having employees of different backgrounds, but the skills question is left relatively open. When the higher management which exists between the political level and the various work and development centres has to translate the concept, it has to deal with different dilemmas, e.g. how the term skills should be interpreted, and the fact that the organisation’s different components have divided opinions about the benefits of diversity. The higher management adopts a fairly passive attitude to these dilemmas. Instead of conducting an active management drive for diversity as an internal organisational matter, they assert that it will resolve itself as time goes on. The other solution for managers is quite simply to point out the various steps which the municipality is undertaking so as to increase social and economic integration of immigrants into the municipality, and that efforts are being made to “mirror diversity” in the organisation. The mixture of the municipal organisations’ different identities as employer and administrator of welfare, which characterises the policy documents, is therefore to be found here as well. Thus far it can be argued that the higher management in one way or another does as the directive prescribes.

A third hypothesis is that leaders and managers have a significant role in the dissemination process but not to the same unambiguous extent as the normative diversity literature tries to make out. This applies not least to operative managers who have to handle every day a series of different questions and weigh them against each other. In the study of how the diversity concept is handled at the different Employment and Development Centres we can see how managers evaluate the question in different ways.
They devise various strategies for dealing with the question which may amount to open resistance on the part of one manager as well as a positive opinion on that of another. There is in certain cases a resistance against discussing ethnic diversity as a matter of personnel policy because it is considered that this may lead to reverse discrimination or to the question being “exaggerated”. While all managers consider that there is value in having mixed personnel groups they have very diverse opinions about how the question can be discussed and what measures can be applied. The different strategies and attitudes mean that the managers have a certain amount of power and scope to influence the question.

At the same time the differences in attitude of the managers show that the diversity concept has a tendency to become a “hypocritical question”, with ideas and practice contradicting one another. When managers are weighing the pros and cons of implementing an active strategy for diversity the majority of them assert that there is a difference between the efficiency of the core activity on the one hand and giving priority to the diversity problem on the other. The diversity problem does not weigh as heavily in this context, and some circumstances suggest that managers after all have a fairly limited room for manoeuvre. For AUC managers three rather important reasons weigh against investing too much energy on the diversity issue. In the first place, neither larger rewards nor harsher sanctions lie in wait for those parts of the organisation which achieve results or ignore the question. In the second place, managers see certain dangers in having an ethnically heterogeneous labour force, inasmuch as it may increase the likelihood of conflict or increased pressure on handling officers whose ethnic background is other than Swedish. Whether increased diversity really contributes to raising efficiency in the core activity is on the whole uncertain. In the third place, they believe that what is required to increase the representation of foreign-born persons in AUC is a broadening of the skills debate and acceptance of foreign qualifications. However, this involves a certain amount of risk for the organisation because it increases uncertainty about what skills are being incorporated.