Frequently asked questions to Yasemin Karakaşoğlu, Vice Rector for International Affairs and Diversity, University of Bremen (2015)

1. Please tell us how long ago diversity management developed from being more of an “outsider issue” to a core point on the academic landscape and the strategy of your university?

   o It is only about five years ago that diversity management more and more became an important topic for German Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Universities started developing strategy papers and employing staff for Diversity Management.

   o It is especially in the light of the predicted demographic change which is expected to lead to a general shortage of enrolments at German universities in the next ten years that diverse students have become a sought-after target group as potential academic “newcomers”; for example: students with migration background. Accordingly, it was only in 2007 that the German State mentioned the “academic integration” of individuals from immigrant families in its “First National Integration Plan”. Politicians began talking about the “educational reserves” in the light of the expected skills shortage: the Equal Treatment Act since 2006, Charta of Diversity since 2006, German ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities in 2009.

   o At the University of Bremen, we initiated our diversity processes in 2009 by adopting the “Charter of Diversity”. From 2010 to 2012, we participated in two related projects; the Quality Audit “Shaping Diversity” in context of the Benchmarking Club Diversity conducted by the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft and “Diversity as a Chance”, which gave rise to the student survey QUEST. In 2011, the position of the Vice-Rector for International and Intercultural Affairs was established – now called International Affairs and Diversity – and in 2012 the first Diversity Strategy was adopted by the Academic Senate

   o This being said, DiM is still a very recent tradition in German HEI and most universities fail to regard it as a core strategic aspect.

2. Please tell us about the philosophy and the specifics of diversity management and equity at the HEI in your countries.

   o Compared to other countries like the U.S. or Great Britain, the gender equity approach has a long history in Germany. The requirement for a women’s representative or equal opportunities representative is embodied in all higher education acts passed by the German federal states. Moreover, besides these legal obligations we have a long tradition of support for socially deprived students in respect of enhancing their social mobility.

   o However, there are no measures in place concerning equity approaches with regard to ethnic groups. But more and more, the category of “migration background” is considered.

   o Diversity still seems to be something of an ambivalent matter for HEI in Germany. We want to adapt our structures to the differences and the diversity of our students without focusing too much attention on them. We would like to celebrate diversity but are still wary of making it headline news.

   o In general, most HEI in Germany see DiM as a wide range of measures and projects in support of specific target-groups.

   o Finally, it has to be said that there is no overall “German” approach to the issue; there is no consensus about what DiM means and implies. The Benchmarking Club of the Stifterverband “Shaping Diversity” has been an attempt to define common goals and approaches to DiM; to “rethink” Diversity Management.
3. Please tell us one or two things that you especially like about the approach universities in your country take towards diversity management and equity.

- Diversity as a norm that concerns all of us: for there is no “normal” student or employee. Diversity affects all of us – albeit in very different ways, depending on existing power structures and official representation. Therefore, DiM has to be considered as being part of an organizational change and an educational learning process.

- The intersectionally influenced perspective is focused on every individual and context-related entanglement or emphasis of the various dimensions of diversity and the resulting awareness of oneself and others. One must be aware that this consciousness of self and others is embedded in specific societal and institutional power structures, whose effectiveness must be critically examined when appropriate measures for the removal of discrimination and the increase of resources are being developed.

4. Please tell us about the biggest challenges that remain to be addressed when it comes to diversity management

- To combine the goal of excellence in higher education and research with the commitment to establish and maintain equal access to and success in the university for all students, in the sense of a widening participation.

- To transfer and adopt successful measures of gender equity to other dimensions of diversity.

- To develop a proactive approach to anti-racism and anti-discrimination in academic institutions in which colour-blindness is still understood as a fair approach to focus strictly on academic performance and outcome, and celebrating diversity is often misunderstood as essentializing dimensions of diversity.

- To make a shift from project-based diversity measures to a sustainable implementation of diversity management in all layers of the institution, conceptualized as an integral strategy.

- Missing data/ monitoring: In Germany, we are rather sceptical about collecting personal data on students, so we know little about the diversity of our students, and still less about the study success of different groups. This implies a big challenge for the creation of adequate measures and a quality management that takes into consideration diversity aspects.

- To critically reflect to what extent unequal divisions of power are reflected in the academic institution. Thus, in the core of DiM, we have to pose the question of the academic normativity: we have to take into account the political implications of the term “Diversity”, meaning questions of representation, hierarchies and power structures in the academic field or the “reproduction of sameness”

- Finally, Diversity Management also implies and involves engagement and considerable effort
Admission

What does “student success mean?”

- With regard to admission procedures, equity policies must ensure that university registration is possible irrespective of the main diversity dimensions (gender, age, (dis)abilities, ethnic background, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic background). Thus, those students who did not have the same chances to achieve a good performance need a targeted address, support, empowerment, compensations.

- Currently, universities in Germany accept about 50% of high school graduates each year. Universities have thus long since left the niche of “elite education” for top positions in research, administration, education and culture, industry and business, and have become a primary societal locus of education and training. Nevertheless: the chance to take off a study program at a University, in Germany, is three times higher for those whose parents have studies as well as students with a non-academic background.

- In this role as one of a society’s important loci of education and training, and in light of the decreasing birth rate, universities have a greater social mandate than ever before to help as many young people as possible complete their studies successfully by developing their specific personal potential and by the approach of widening participation.

- But there is also a new kind of concurrence between universities, universities of applied sciences, and institutions of dual vocational training that did not exist before. Today, we all address the same young people, wanting to attract them as students in our respective systems. A medium-term yardstick will be whether diversity policies merely represent a means of attracting latent pools of talent (in the sense of competition for the best minds) or a seriously intended development strategy.

- (new universities attract more diverse students than traditional ones)

- Nevertheless, we have to underline that, in Germany, it is already a formidable achievement for a young person to enter higher education as selection mechanisms already exist upstream from universities (see next point). However, the creation of more university places in the framework of the “Hochschulpakt” has facilitated university access for many “non-traditional” students.

What are the institutional challenges and demands?

- In Germany, we have a highly selective school system and a very early school tracking. Schools in Germany, to a great extent, follow the principle of selection by socioeconomic class rather than the meritocratic principle of selection based on “performance”: Relevant comparative studies of performance indicate that in Germany in particular, compared with other OECD countries, social capital or a lack (for example due to immigration status) of the cultural capital required to meet the demands the monocultural and monolingual institution that is school are implicitly included in the evaluation whenever student performance and potential are assessed. That means: students from families who have immigrated in the past and whose cultural capital is not “valid” in this society have less chance to obtain a university entrance certificate than others who have been here for generations. This is also true for families from the lower social strata without an academic background.

- In Germany, we have no (longer) admission fees, only a comparatively low so-called semester contribution. But nevertheless: the alternative choice of a dual vocational training, where in Germany you are mostly able to earn money already while studying, often remains more attractive and “secure” than investing money in a long period of studies where you
earn nothing, especially for students from families without an academic background. As in Germany costs and duration are more difficult to predict, and due to the lack of a broad culture of scholarships and a rather low student grant, it remains a risk to engage in a study program.

- Concerning formal criteria of admission: The credo of wanting to open universities to capable candidates who have not taken the conventional path to higher learning (like the “open university” concept, at UB the project “Aufstieg durch Bildung: Offene Hochschule”) notwithstanding, so far very few (at UB only 1%) students enter university by routes other than the “Abitur” (high school graduation certificate). There is a gulf between the expectation and the reality.

- Displaced persons: considering formal admission requirements, displaced persons who have lost their high-school graduation certificate or even university degrees cannot normally be admitted to university studies. Accordingly, German politics, hand in hand with HEI have to find unconventional and proactive solutions in order to push the academic integration of those people.

What are the institutional strategies and concrete toolboxes in place?

- We’ve established different measures in order to remove obstacles; for instance:
- Mentoring programs to encourage future students to take up studies, especially for: “First generation students” (i.a. “Arbeiterkind”), students with migration background, women in the STEM fields ...
- Intercultural trainings for the administrative staff working in the student advisory centre and the admissions and registrar’s office.
- Awarding the “Deutschland Stipendium” as a scholarship of diversity.

- Displaced persons: At the University of Bremen, we’ve created a program called “IN-Touch”: Regardless of the kind of refugee-status - displaced persons who have already been students in another country can join regular lectures and be awarded with a certificate. Participants of the IN-Touch program will have the opportunity to experience a German university from the inside, take part in lectures or seminars delivered in German or English and join study groups. In this way, they can make use of their qualification and improve their German language skills. At the same time, the university benefits from their knowledge.

How can the national frameworks and political agenda be interlinked with the institutional goals in a purposeful way?

- By strengthening the cooperation between universities and schools, mentoring programs could be integrated in a system of supporting talents and fostering social mobility.
- Displaced persons: National politics have to pave the way for the academic integration of displaced persons with academic background or high-school graduation certificate.
II Being in the study program and experiences with all aspects of teaching, learning, being mentored, taking exams, social services etc.

What does “student success” mean?

- Equity policies must ensure that an equal participation and success is possible in classes, social services, and campus life – regardless of the main diversity dimensions.
- The question is: What does “success” mean? Is it to advance in the prescribed time with good results? If “student success” includes personal development, it can also be considered as a success if students become aware that either studying at (this) university or on a particular program is not the right thing.
- And: if personal development and self-reflection is also considered to be a factor that contributes to a student’s success, in the today’s world we should include competencies in the field of diversity. It must therefore be embedded in the curricula.

What are the institutional challenges and demands?

- Missing data: We know little about the diversity of our students, and still less about the study success of different groups: meaning study success correlated with diversity dimensions like for instance the ethnic background. This implies a big challenge for the creation of adequate measures and a quality management that takes into consideration diversity aspects.
- Thus, the aim must be to consolidate and analyse existing, diversity-relevant data and facts as a foundation for an evaluation of the Diversity Strategy and a reporting culture about diversity, monitoring university-wide elevation of the awareness of various diversity dimensions. Only such action will make possible the comparability of data and monitoring, the use of coordinated, homogeneous indices and items for the elevation of diversity dimensions in the university’s own reports and questionnaires. This, in turn, will make possible the comparability of data in a longitudinal and cross-sectional perspective and maintain a secured data basis.
- We have to ensure both quality and quantity of the consulting structures. Concerning the quality, intercultural or diversity competences are required.
- Being part of the DiM entails the empowerment and support of students to be independent and able to shape, not only to participate in, the structures and measures. Activating and linking student activities and initiatives becomes an important part of DiM.
- Diversity competences of the advisory and teaching staff? BUT: if trainings are voluntary for university professors, how can they be motivated to participate?
- We also have to ask ourselves about the curriculum; if there is diversity “inside”?
- The biggest challenge, because it’s “invisible”, is the indirectly required academic habitus. Studies following Tinto show that compatibility between one’s own lifestyle and the way of life required in the academic milieu is constitutive for both access to studies and academic success.
- Finally, and most important: Questions of power structures and representation, meaning: What about the representation of diversity among the staff of the faculties, both at the teaching and the administration level? Who is speaking and taking decisions for whom, with which legitimation and with which kind of power? Who is allowed to define contents and procedures – and for whom? These questions are crucial for the academic context because
also the science system and universities as organisations of science act within of structures of
power and dominance.

What are the institutional strategies and concrete toolboxes in place?

- It is necessary to identify particular student groups’ specific needs for funding, support or
  empowerment in order to implement measures that enable their success. These student
groups may include those from educationally disadvantaged families/ “First Generation
Students”, those for whom German is a foreign or second language, students with
transnational migration experiences, students with mental or physical impairments, students
whose family members need care, or students in financial difficulty.

- Mentoring programs for diverse student groups.

- Scholarships are set up for specific target groups, such as socioeconomically disadvantaged young
  people.

- Flexible study structures for students who have further responsibilities like caring for children or
  family members.

- “Buddy programs” for international students.

- Consulting structures and compensatory measures for students with disabilities and
  chronical diseases.

- Ideally, these measures serve the purpose of securing equal opportunities for all students
despite their differing circumstances.

- Extra support is provided for developing academic language skills in German or English to
  students whose parents received little formal education or international students.

- BUT: These are compensatory measures. They do not change structures of the institution but
  rather improve the “fit” of the people in question (who in some way do not match the
  institution’s expectations of individuals) with the mainstream. This deviates from the goal of
  educational equality and orientation according to individual potential.

- In the sense of an organizational change, trainings, workshops and coaching must be
  integrated and embedded into an integral Diversity Strategy that considers all levels of study,
teaching, administration and decision-making governance.

- To ensure the diversity competences of the teaching and administrative staff, not only ad hoc
  trainings must be established: the aforementioned aspects must be integrated into
  assessment procedures at all levels.

- Functional and symbolic recognition: to further the symbolic recognition and to give the
  opportunity to further develop that capital and make productive use of it both at university
  and with regard to expanded professional prospects. At the University of Bremen, this
  objective is being pursued primarily by means of the “Academic Multilingualism” pilot
  project, encompassing Turkish, Russian and Polish, the three immigrant languages that are
  most strongly represented among students in Bremen. Attendance of these courses is free
  and, because it is part of General Studies, also academically relevant. The provision of this
  increasingly popular program is not a generous gesture; rather, it is in the interest of the
  university itself, which wants to maintain or further develop its members’ linguistic potential
  in order to continue building up international relationships and agreements on binding
  responsibilities.

- We have to create settings to make visible the diversity of students and staff.
How can the national frameworks and political agenda be interlinked with the institutional goals in a purposeful way?

- Considering the whole system of (professional) education, the goal must be to create permeability or mobility / interchange and good cooperation in the system between universities, universities of applied sciences, and institutions of dual vocational training.

III Graduating and leaving university and entering the labour market

What does “student success” mean?

- The question is: What should be the “outcome”? Is it to conclude the study program successfully, in the envisaged time and with an excellent grade? Or is it also a question of personal development and self-reflection that contributes to a student’s success? If yes, in today’s world it should also include competencies in the field of diversity that must be embedded in the curricula to strengthen self-reflective learning processes.
- The fact that twice as many international students than “native” students abandon their studies is another indication that the claim of international and intercultural opening, the “worldwide competition for the best minds”, and the reality of the attention given to the general conditions necessary for this at universities diverge markedly from one another.

What are the institutional challenges and demands?

- For young (future) scientists: the informal culture of assistance: who is introduced to important networks of the scientific communities, who is invited to publish in high-ranked journals, participate at conferences to foster networking, who is getting letters of recommendation? This creates powerful mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.
- For international students: Lack of German language skills, not being familiar with the German university system and teaching and learning conventions, and lack of information about the German labor market and application procedures.
- Universities face the task of bringing their commitment to the Humboldtian tradition of providing academic knowledge for its own sake rather than for utilitarian ends into balance with market interests (employability being the key word here) in training specialised workers for industry and trade; such interests are also articulated by the students themselves.

What are the institutional strategies and concrete toolboxes in place?

- To improve employability, so called “Career Centers” offer a broad range of workshops.
- Projects like “enter science” for students with a non-academic background: research as a prospective field of work.
- For junior scientists: mentoring programs, graduate schools offering support (i.a. the “ProUB”)
- For international students: special German language trainings, job application trainings for the German labour market.
- Round tables / networking between actors / players
How can the national frameworks and political agenda can be interlinked with the institutional goals in a purposeful way?

- We cannot afford to lose people in the system; neither from a moral nor an economic point of view. Particularly in the context of the skills shortage and university studies that are tuition free, there is a big public interest in ensuring that students are successful.

- Support / funding for the integration of international students in the German labor market.

- To recognize Germany as an immigration country; building a welcoming culture that facilitates finding work in Germany after successful studies.

- Central national associations, like HRK (Rectors’ Conference), have the task to highlight the issue; to communicate a clear commitment to Diversity at German HEI.

- Diversity Management should be embedded in the Higher Education Acts of the federal states. It should not become a kind of “appendix” to the briefs of gender equal opportunity representatives but a strategic topic at management level.

- DiM is a task for the management level. The rectorates have the great responsibility to continuously communicate and question the university’s general attitude and practical approach to diversity and difference, and assess themselves and the HEI as systems in matters of diversity.

- The focus of DiM should be organizational change, including questions of representation and decision-making, not so much “target group specific measures” for its students. We have to reflect more deeply the causes of inequalities.