GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT GÖTTINGEN IN PUBLICA COMMODA SEIT 1737

GÖTTINGEN CAMPUS INSTITUTE FOR DYNAMICS OF BIOLOGICAL NETWORKS

Diversity and Equal Opportunities in Doctoral Education: Perspectives and Recommendations from Everyday Practice

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Based on the results of the German-wide work group within the German University Association of Advanced Graduate Training (UniWiND/GUAT)

- “Diversity and Equal Opportunities in Doctoral Education: Diversity Sensible Support for Researchers in Training”
- work group 2019-2023
- 18 members from 14 different German universities
- most of us are working in graduate schools or similar units

UniWiND GUAT

→ perspective from daily practice

Doctoral education: life on the threshold

- Doctoral thesis: first independent scientific work
- still a (PhD)student and being supervised and graded, still collecting credits in a study program; at the same time supervising students
- Germany: PhD students very much depend on their supervisor (despite Thesis Advisory Committee)
- high pressure
- fixed term contracts, funding (esp. in Germany: difference between PhD financing, e.g. scholarships, position as research assistant with teaching duties, position in third-party funded project)
- financial resources of different faculties and disciplines or institutions
- not always transparent application procedures

What is a scientist? A glance at a stereotype

- a person living only for science and research
- passionate and obsessed
- willing to suffer lonely
- Only results count
- Good grades will open every door on the way to a career in academia

- No longer valid (if it ever was)
- Societies are highly diverse. This has to be reflected in higher education, too.
- Innovation and research need different perspectives
- Justice, inclusion and participation build the foundation of a functioning society

- Diversity is normal!

Diversity: A glance at the various dimensions

- gender, sexual orientation, religion / worldview, disability / chronic disease (visible / invisible), ethnicity, social background, internationality, migration background / migration experience, care responsibilities, …

- Also important: research field / academic discipline, financing of doctoral studies, research institution, private life, …

Diversity from an intersectional perspective

- diversity aspects interact
- hardly ever only one aspect relevant
- The interaction among the various dimensions leads to both **discrimination** and **privilege** also based on labelling (unconscious bias).
- e.g.:

PhD student in third year, international (non-EU), female, single mother, 2 kids, scholarship still for the next 6 months

PhD student in second year, white male, academic family background, employed as research assistant contract for the next 2 yrs

Discrimination happens every day

- based on intersectional effects of diversity aspects
- Discrimination is also about the small or implicit things, e.g. a broken lift blocking barrier free access to office, a meeting scheduled at 6pm excludes persons caring for small children, administrative or technical staff might not be fluent in English,…
- Repeating incidents might lead to pulling back and resulting even in anxiety and other mental health problems.

What can we do?

- Independent anti-discrimination counselling, visible counselling offer by graduate school (confidentiality!)
- transparent application processes
- include diversity as a topic in your qualification program at the graduate school (explicit AND implicit), e.g.:
  - “Leadership and Diversity”
  - “Introduction to (German) Academic Culture”
  - “Presenting & Networking: Tools for the first Conference”

Furthermore…

- Support programs for certain target groups:
  - mentoring programs
  - empowerment workshops
  - bilingual offers, (help with administrative aspects)

- Make diversity visible (role models: “If they can do it, I can do it, too!”)
  - panel discussion
  - round table

- Be aware of your own unconscious bias.
- **Talk to the PhD students at your institution, ask them what they need.**

Arrival in the Scientific Community

- PhD students need to build their own network
- And learn the (implicit) rules of the community

Intersectional effects of diversity aspects may lead to feeling alienated and not fitting in resulting in doubt.

what graduate schools can do

- Socializing events for PhD students in less formal settings, e.g. welcome day, culture days with cooking, film discussions,…
- “Together we are less lonely.”
- foster personal contact between peers

Main challenges

- create low-threshold offers
- “one fits all” does not work
- avoid (positive) discrimination and labelling
- look at diversity positively
- develop measures beyond individual disadvantage compensation
- financing of measures
- not everything is in our hands

Main goals

- find structural solutions not individual ones
- Lay the foundation for a diversity sensible scientific community far away from ancient stereotypes

Good news:

You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Other institutions might have established measures that are interesting for yours, too...

Thank you!

And thanks to my colleagues from the work group at UniWiND:
Jana F. Bauer (U Cologne), Diana Ebersberger (U Bremen), Susanne Elpers (U Oldenburg), Andrea George (HU Berlin), Susanne Groth (U Cologne), Ann-Kristin Kolwes (U Cologne), Simon Kresmann (U Duisburg-Essen), Kerstin Lange (Hamburg Research Academy), Christina Lipka (Fernuni Hagen), Sabine Mehlmann (U Osnabrück), Juliane Müller (U Halle), Sabine Pankuweit (U Marburg), Hannah Schürenberg-Frosch (Fernuni Hagen), Stephanie Sera (U Duisburg-Essen), Katharina Völsch (U Marburg), Corina Wolfermann (TU Dresden)