

## **P5** Caerphilly Thursday 6 December 16.45-17.15

### ***Programme leaders' attitudes towards inclusion and diversity management – first results of an international survey (0393)***

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### **Programme leaders' attitudes towards inclusion and diversity management – first results of an international survey**

Student heterogeneity is growing: the “traditional” student entering tertiary education at the age of eighteen after graduating high-school and completing his or her full-time studies in three or four years is increasingly becoming the minority. In fact, the “new normal” are older students with family care or other professional obligations, international students, some with a migration background, students with disabilities, first-in-family students or those possessing no formal entry certificates/diplomas. In short: students with vastly different backgrounds, experiences, language skills or educational biographies.

HEI-leadership increasingly recognizes the importance of including these student populations and providing environments in which all students are able to thrive and develop their potential. This realization is ultimately driven by a rationale that, on the one hand, aims to attract new student populations and, on the other hand, seeks to reduce student drop out/increase retention by implementing inclusive policies.

While diversity management policies are in place, these policies need to be implemented and come to life on the level of the study programme. Yet what is going on in study programmes has remained a black-box for researchers and lawmakers alike. In fact, while the literature and body of research on diversity management at HEI is growing (for example, Vedder 2006, Aigare 2011, Krempkow et al. 2014), there is currently little to no analytical literature or existing empirical research focusing explicitly on the level of the study programme, despite the central position these academic middle managers occupy regarding access and retention of non-traditional students or underrepresented groups in tertiary education.

PLs supervise and regulate access to their programmes, they are responsible for the design and implementation of (inclusive, flexible) curricula, they retain personal contact with students and are aware of their problems in navigating the curriculum and in the classroom. Further, they act as supervisors to other teaching and administrative staff, dispose of formal and/or informal authority and are able to seek out and secure support for the implementation of diversity-sensitive practices at a faculty or institutional level. As a consequence, this group of academic middle managers has far-reaching potential to create more inclusive study environments.

Still, we only have limited knowledge how well equipped PLs are for this momentum task and how willing they are at all to take it on. To close this knowledge-gap an international study analysing PLs' perceptions and attitudes towards diversity management and inclusion (IDM) and their experiences and approaches in dealing with student diversity is currently being carried out. This contribution will present the first results of an online survey among more than 200 programme leaders at higher education institutions in the UK, Austria, Germany and Finland. The survey is part of an EU-project on promoting more inclusive practices and skills among programme leaders ([Enhance IDM](#)).

The following questions will be addressed:

- How do PLs perceive requirements for inclusion and the demands of diversity management? (as a chore, a helpful tool, a waste of time...): *Attitudes towards IDM*
- How well supported do they feel they are by their institution? *Perceptions of institutional support*
- What dimensions of diversity (for example: language skills, students' time constraints) are particularly challenging and/or rewarding in their work as PL? *Perceived Challenges*
- What *approach* towards diversity-related matters in teaching, leadership and as a curriculum designer do they take, how and to what extent are they able to integrate certain measures and to what extent do they reflect on student diversity in their work?
- In what areas (for example: inclusive teaching practices, diversity-sensitive curriculum design, attracting diverse, non-traditional students) do they feel they require further support? *Needs Assessment*

The survey explicitly favours a shift towards an “anti-categorical” approach in addressing diversity. Instead of perpetuating the same, mostly demographic categories such as age, gender or ethnicity, the focus is more on the actual, concrete challenges faced in dealing with a diverse student body.

While national differences will be addressed, the results will be analysed across disciplines, also taking into account generational effects (testing, for example, the hypothesis that younger PLs will be more open to new, inclusive teaching and assessments practices). Ultimately, the positions on and perceptions of IDM will be reflected against PLs' personal diverse backgrounds.

The results will shed light on PLs practical experiences and expertise and illuminate their stance towards inclusion and diversity management. For example, participating PLs were asked to indicate their level of agreement to such statements as “I am worried that academic standards drop by catering to learners' different backgrounds and abilities” or “Inclusive practice benefits all students”.

Results will serve as an indicator for the status quo regarding the implementation of IDM measures at HEI and can contribute to the identification of perceived challenges. Ultimately, the findings elucidate how and to what extent policies of inclusion and diversity management can be translated onto the organisational level.

#### References:

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