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

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Abstract
Student heterogeneity is continuously growing and HEI are asked to shift their focus to accommodate new and different demands. But how well equipped are study programme leaders (PLs) as those responsible for curriculum design, teaching and access to their programmes, to handle this momentum task? Despite PLs' central role in the implementation of inclusive policies, existing research on the level of programme leaders is slim. In order to close this knowledge-gap an international survey was recently carried out analyzing PLs' attitudes and approach towards inclusion and diversity management (IDM). This contribution will present the first findings of this survey.

DRAFT WORKING PAPER

1. Introduction and Methodology

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.

Programme Leaders (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 was recently undertaken. 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, which was carried out in March 2018. The survey is part of an EU-project on promoting more inclusive practices and skills among programme leaders (Enhance_IDM: enhanced programme leadership for inclusion and diversity management in higher education).

The choice of institutions was not coincidental. Universities of Applied Sciences play an important role in integrating non-traditional students into the realm of tertiary education. As previous research has shown, non-traditional students are more likely to enter these institutions than, for example, research universities (see Zaussinger et al. 2016). Thus, programme leaders at UAS represented an ideal target group.

The survey items were developed jointly by the four national teams, also drawing on previously existing surveys in the field, most notably a survey developed by the National Association of Disability Practitioners and the FSSE survey in the US. Regarding the latter, three survey items developed by Thomas Nelson Laird (see Nelson Laird, 2011) were adapted for use in the survey.

The following presents a first analysis of programme leaders' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion and diversity management as evidenced in the survey.

2. "Measuring" and conceptualising student diversity

In the first section of the survey the composition of PLs' student populations was assessed alongside "traditional" demographic categories, such as age, gender, disabilities (both physical and mental), part-time status or care responsibilities. Responding PLs were asked to give a "rough estimate" of students in their programme fulfilling the respective demographic criteria. This question originated in the traditional approach towards measuring and conceptualizing diversity by relying on – mostly demographic – categories and characteristics. Ultimately, the question did not intend to gauge a precise or accurate account of the composition of PLs' student populations; rather, it served as an entry point into the topic by asking participating PLs to reflect on the heterogeneity of their student groups. Ultimately, this battery yielded subjective impressions, not factual accounts of the composition of student populations.

Developing this battery jointly among four international teams and agreeing on a common set of demographic criteria, showed that these categories differ depending on the national contexts leading the project team to reflect on the cultural diversity within the project and between projects partners. For example, whereas considering oneself as a "member of a black minority ethnic group/BME" is

not problematic in the UK, asking for "race" or "ethnicity" in a survey is almost impossible in the German speaking regions. The same is true – albeit with a slightly different focus – for religion. On the other hand, the concept of a "migration background" which is often used to delineate "immigrant or foreigner status" in Germany and Austria, is not widely understood in the UK context. In Finland, on the other hand, both concepts are used.

Results in this first battery served mostly as a cross reference to programme leaders' attitudes and perceptions of diversity management and inclusion. Do attitudes change with a higher degree of student diversity, i.e. with higher amounts of students with "diverse" backgrounds? This article also attempts to test the general hypothesis that programme leaders with more exposure to students from various backgrounds will generally have a more positive view of IDM and will be more experienced and at-ease in implementing and applying IDM-measures in their programmes.

While relying on traditional indicators of diversity in Question 1, the survey explicitly favoured and intended to contribute to a shift towards a more "anti-categorial" approach in addressing and conceptualising diversity. Instead of repeating and thus perpetuating the same, mostly demographic categories such as age, gender or ethnicity, the focus in Question 2 on "Dimensions of Diversity" was more on the actual, concrete challenges in dealing with a diverse student body and the various demands associated with it. Translating (or rather, moving beyond) demographic criteria and characteristics into actual issues that have to be dealt with in the programme: from disability to accessibility; seen in this way, first in family student (as the demographic category) could be translated to lack of academic literacy/difficulties with academic language as the actual issue. Focussing more on relevant issues in the programme rather than personal traits and characteristics of people in the programme.

Respondents were asked to identify the most relevant issues related to student diversity in their programmes such as students' time constraints due to work obligations or care responsibilities, providing accessible learning environments, language issues and students' different modes and speeds of learning. In addition, different value structures, motivations and levels of participation were addressed.

The most relevant or important issue identified by PLs was "students' time constraints due to work obligations, commuting" with around 75% of PLs agreeing that this issue was important in their programmes. Also, language issues, especially difficulties with academic language seemed to play an important role (see Table 2) as well as differences in educational biographies and participation in classroom activities. Disciplinary and cultural differences were deemed less pertinent to running the programme. Interestingly, the least relevant issue (with only about 14,7% of PLs claiming it was important) was accessibility. This core dimension of diversity which is central to the entire IDM discourse apparently did not register as important as other issues, possibly because comparatively few cases are affected (on average, PLs claimed to have 10% disabled students in their programmes, as opposed to around 40% of first-in-the-family students).

3. Attitudes towards Inclusion and Diversity Management

In Section 3 of the survey respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions and attitudes towards diversity management and inclusion and the respective policies. To what extent and how are the concepts of inclusion and diversity management understood – and accepted – by programme leaders? More than gauging a general attitude, this section asked respondents to give an idea of the difficulties in implementing policies of diversity management and inclusion, for example in the classroom or on the programme level. How useful do they find certain measures?

3.1 Familiarity with Concepts

The discourse on diversity management and inclusion can be difficult to pin down and opaque at times. Even for those working in the field, it is often hard to exactly delineate concepts and to clearly

define what is meant by certain notions. The concepts in this discourse have blurry boundaries and encompass broad, varying and shifting notions that often depend on the context (see Barrak 2014, Gotsis/Kortezi 2015). Nonetheless, PLs appear rather confident regarding their self-professed understanding and familiarity with the concepts of inclusion and diversity management. Almost three quarters (72%) of PLs agreed to the statement "I clearly understand what diversity management is", with men taking an even more confident stance than their female counterparts (78% vs 69%). However, they were less familiar with the concept of "inclusive practice", with only 65% concurring that they "have a clear understanding of what inclusive practice actually means".

Stronger demands for inclusion and diversity management are a relatively new phenomenon in higher education. The discourse on IDM generally gained traction in the late 1990ies and early 2000s. Thus, the hypothesis can be set up that younger programme leaders who grew up with these concepts will be more familiar with them than colleagues that were socialized academically in a previous era.

The data seem to support this hypothesis: 93% of the age group from 30-39 years claim to clearly understand what diversity management is as opposed to only 64% of 50-59 year olds (83% of 40-49 year olds). The same pattern holds true for familiarity with the concept of inclusive practice. Here, understanding of the concept linearly decreases with age (30-39 year olds: 85%; 40-49 year olds 69%; 50-59 year olds 63%; 60-69 year olds: 60%).

Another hypothesis to be tested was the notion that PLs with a "diverse" personal background who possibly experienced marginalisation themselves will be more familiar with or aware of diversity management than PLs representing the social norm or majority population. For example, PLs were asked to claim if they had a "migration background", i.e. if they or one of their parents were not born in the country they were currently working in.

Again, the hypothesis is supported by the data: 87% of PLs with migration background claim to understand what diversity management is, as opposed to only 69% of those without a migration background. (93% and 61% on inclusive practice respectively, this item is also statistically significant, p value: 0,039).

3.2 Implementation of IDM measures on the programme level

It is one thing to claim to understand what diversity management and inclusive practice are, and quite another to know how to implement these concepts on the programme level: While around three quarters of PLs agree to understand what diversity management is (see above), only a third of PLs (36%) claims to "know how to implement IDM-measures on the programme level." This disparity needs to be addressed by the project and the concrete tools to be developed in its course.

There is also a split between institutions: Only 15% of PLs from the Austrian institution agreed to this statement, whereas in the UK and Finland the numbers are much higher (at 44 and 43% respectively).

On a more concrete level, around 40% of PLs think that "implementing inclusive teaching and learning practices is difficult" and roughly a third (31%) of participating PLs find it "hard to make adjustments for individual students with special needs". Regarding adjustments for students with special needs, the split between respondents from the UK and the Austrian institution can be observed yet again: only 16% of UK respondents find it hard to make adjustments, while 53% of Austrian respondents agree to this notion. The same split continues in other items as well, with the UK emerging as the most "progressive" or "in-tune" with the demands of IDM, while the two German-speaking institutions often take a more critical view. There is an impression that the discourse on IDM in the UK is already more mature than in other countries and has become routine , to a certain extent, whereas it is relatively new(er) in the German-speaking regions. Further research is required to clarify this point, however.

Another example: when asked about their perception of the added value of IDM measures in their programme 84% of UK respondents agreed to the statement "I clearly see the added value of implementing IDM-related measures for my study programme" as opposed to only 37% of Austrian respondents. It is important to noted that this does not (only) represent a national or institutional difference in the "maturity" of the diversity discourse in the respective systems. There is (also) a strong gender and disciplinary bias in the data/between the institutions: The UK institution has a strong focus on nursing programmes (40% male) while the Austrian PLs (90% male) come from more technical disciplinary fields.

While Austrian PLs apparently find it harder to make adjustments to students with special needs, do PLs with more exposure to students with special needs then find it easier to make adjustments? Addressing this article's more general hypothesis that "more exposure equals less problems": For instance, having higher rates of disabled students in the programme would increases PLs ability to handle issues related to accessibility. The hypothesis seems to be preliminarily supported by the data. There is a statistically significant correlation (Spearman rho=0,034) between the amount of disabled students in the programme and "finding it hard to make adjustments for students with special needs": The more disabled students in the programme, the less hard it is for PLs to make adjustments for these students.

In turn, PLs with more disabled students in their programmes also find it less difficult to implement inclusive teaching and learning practices and also perceive IDM as less of a workload (correlation is not statistically significant, however).

3.3 Values regarding IDM
The survey also asked general value questions, for example, to what extent PLs agreed to the statement that "inclusive practice benefits all students." Overall, two thirds (66%, 64% weighted) of responding PLs said they agreed to this – rather philosophical – notion. Female PLs showed much higher rates of agreement than their male counterparts on this item (91% vs. 44%). Again, a split between the Austrian participating institution and respondents from the UK (AT: 37%, UK: 80%) could be observed.

Do PLs with more heterogeneous student populations show different, maybe more positive attitudes towards IDM as it can be assumed that they have to deal with diverse student demands on a more regular basis? Are they in fact convinced to larger degree that inclusive practice is beneficial to all students rather than just a few?

The data provide preliminary evidence that this is the case. There is a positive correlation between agreement to "inclusive practice benefits all students" and almost all demographic categories (one exception: alternative entry paths). The more students with the respective characteristics (older than 25, female, migration background, first-in-family, part-time, international, BME) a programme leader has (or claims to have) in his or her programme, the more he or she is inclined to agree that inclusive practice benefits all students. However, results are inconclusive regarding PLs personal backgrounds and their stance on this item (for example PL's age-group or own migration background).

Programme leaders were also asked to indicate their agreement to the statement "I am worried that academic standards drop by catering to learners' different backgrounds and abilities." Again, women are less worried that this is the case than men (91%, 44%, weighted: 92%, 40%).

The hypothesis that older PLs will generally be more worried that academic standards drop does not hold, however: In fact, the oldest group above 60 is – surprisingly - least worried, whereas the middle aged group between 40-49 is the most worried.

The degree of worry that academic standards drop is also closely related to the disciplinary focus of the study programme. As could be expected from the gender distribution, PLs from engineering,

interdisciplinary programmes (which were in this case mostly technical programmes), physical sciences and mathematics are the most fearful about upholding academic standards; on the other hand, PLs least worried about academic standards came from programmes in the social sciences and social services, the life sciences and teacher training.

There is also a strong split on this issue between the two German speaking institutions and the Finnish and British HEI.

It can be argued that handling a relatively homogenous group of students is easier and less demanding than dealing with the diverse demands of students coming from an array of different backgrounds. Participating PLs were thus asked to indicate whether they were at all "interested in having a more diverse range of students on their programmes".

Regarding the amount of students with certain demographic characteristics in their programmes, there are three statistically significant correlations on this item: English/German/Finnish as a Second Language, international degree-seeking students and migration background. The more students with these characteristics a PL has, the more he or she will be inclined to welcome a more diverse range of students.

This positive correlation pattern - although no longer statistically significant - holds for all but two demographic categories, confirming the general hypothesis that more exposure results in a more positive attitude towards student diversity and IDM. However, in two (out of 12) cases, this does not apply: first, in the case of mature students above the age of 25 and, second, for part-time students whose primary occupation is work. In both cases the correlation is reversed/negative: PLs with higher rates of part-time or mature students in their programmes are less inclined to welcome more diverse student populations. I can be argued that there is a connection between these two items, as mature students tend to be part-time students.[1]

5. Conclusion and further outlook

The first results of this survey among programme leaders in four European countries seem to point toward a more general hypothesis whereby the attitudes towards inclusion and diversity management change with the degree of exposure to heterogeneous student groups. Along the lines of: more exposure, less problems. This counteracts the intuitive notion that the workload increases with an increase in different demands by students coming from various backgrounds. PLs who experience the challenges and requirements of dealing with a diverse student body on a day to day basis, for whom dealing with student diversity has become the norm, rather than the occasional exception, are – in this view - more at-ease and, ultimately, more confident in applying IDM-measures on the programme level. They also value diversity management offerings more highly as they are able to put them to use more regularly, and they generally seem to have a more positive view of IDM. A next step in the research process will be to extend and test this hypothesis in more detail. On the other hand, the survey results seem to point to a more "progressive" and "routine" treatment of IDM-related issues in the UK than, for example, in the German-speaking countries which generally took a more critical stance toward IDM in the survey. Further research is required to clarify this point, possibly by integrating other higher education institutions.

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[1] Double-checking this finding with the item on "students time-constraints due to work, commuting" as a relevant issue, we only find this pattern at the two German-speaking institutions: those PLs that claim students' time constraints in their programme were an issue, are more open to having a more diverse range of students (mean quoted: 2,89; not quoted: 2,67), although not statistically significant. with UK and FIN means turn to 2,39 quoted, 2,55 not quoted) here difference between UK and German speaking!

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