

Inclusion and Diversity Management at the Programme Leader Level – 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? What are the problems they are confronted with in managing the diversity of student backgrounds?

Despite PLs' central role in the implementation of inclusive policies, existing research on the level of programme leaders is slim to non-existing. In order to close this knowledge-gap an international survey was carried out analyzing PLs' attitudes and approach towards inclusion and diversity management (IDM) and the challenges they face in dealing with student diversity in its various aspects. This contribution will present the first findings of this survey.

The survey was carried out within the framework of an Erasmus plus project "ENHANCE IDM – ENHANCED PROGRAMME LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION" which aims at developing tools and trainings for study programme leaders to improve their diversity competence and help them to foster diversity awareness of their staff and within their institution. The survey also served as a preliminary needs assessment for that group.

Introduction

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.

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.

Materials & Methods

Participants

Online Survey among more than 200 programme leaders at four higher education institutions in the UK, Finland, Austria and Germany.

Participating institutions:

- University of Applied Sciences, Upper Austria
- TH Köln, Germany
- Birmingham City University, UK
- Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland

The survey was carried out in March 2018.

Results

The survey explicitly advocated an "anticategorical approach" towards diversity, moving away from mostly demographic categories of age, gender or ethnicity to focusing on the actual, concrete challenges faced in dealing with a diverse student body.

Asked what "dimensions of diversity" were most relevant in their study programmes, PLs mentioned students' time constraints, different levels of participation in classroom activities and a lack of academic literacy as the most pressing issues (in that order). However, differences in disciplinary backgrounds or different cultural value structures seem to play a less important role in their everyday work.

While PLs claimed to have a solid understanding of "what diversity management is" (with 71% agreeing to this notion), only 36% claimed they "know how to apply IDM measures on the programme level". The practical implementation of IDM measures on the study programme thus seems to pose a challenge.

Also, PLs' own time constraints seem to play a considerable role: almost half (48%) of PLs claimed that IDM/inclusive practice represents an added workload to them.

Conclusion

The survey was ultimately carried out as a needs assessment to inform the further steps of the project to find out in what areas programme leaders perceive the need for further training and/or information.

While not surprisingly, "improving student success" is the top priority for most PLs (Question 5: how important would it be to you to receive further information and/or instruction on the following subjects) "reducing drop-out" and further trainings on "intercultural competence" both ranked second in importance. On the other hand, "access to higher education" and "inclusive curriculum design" were deemed somewhat less important.

In general, however, around 65% of respondents claim that they would like to learn more about IDM.

In conclusion, the project will have to focus at providing concrete, tangible advice on how to implement IDM-practices on the study programme level (for example by providing information on the application of flexible, diversity-sensitive assessment methods). Translating theory into practice regarding diversity management seems to be what PLs called for, both explicitly as well as through the indirect analysis of their attitudes and approaches towards IDM.

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