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Diversity and Inclusion at German Public Universities: An Inventory of Strategies, Structures and Perceptions (Survey and Website Data, 2021-2023)

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Executive Summary

Diversity and inclusion have become strategic priorities for universities, both in institutional policies and public communication. While institution-wide diversity strategies are increasingly common, many institutions report substantial challenges related to their implementation, including limited resources, data gaps, unclear allocation of responsibilities, and limited student awareness.

The data suggests that students attach considerable importance to the advancement of diversity and inclusion at their universities. Moreover, students tend to assess their universities' experience with diversity and inclusion more positively than the universities themselves. However, many students in our sample know little about the specific strategies and support structures that already exist at their university as well as the challenges their university faces regarding implementation.

Background

Universities play a central role in shaping socially responsible and future-oriented societies (Barnett, 2010). Mirroring the aspirational values of the society they are situated in, universities are expected to reflect the plurality of the stakeholder base and actively contribute to knowledge generation, innovation, as well as social responsibility and sustainability. In this context, diversity and inclusion have become key reference points in higher education policy and institutional self-understanding. Accordingly, many universities have publicly committed themselves to fostering diversity and creating inclusive work and learning environments (Siri et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is little knowledge about how diversity and inclusion are institutionally embedded at public universities in Germany, particularly with regard to universities' strategies, the establishment of organizational structures, responsibilities, and the students' perceptions of the implemented measures.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to provide an inventory of diversity and inclusion at public universities in Germany. By combining survey data from administration and leadership as well as students with an analysis of institutional communication via university websites, it seeks to capture both individual perceptions and structural approaches to diversity and inclusion in German higher education. In doing so, this study examines how universities anchor these topics institutionally.

Scope and Methodological Approach

This study focuses on 76 public universities in Germany. We conducted a standardized online survey among university administrators and leadership teams between July and September 2021. We received responses from universities in 10 different German federal states (response rate: 21%). To incorporate the student perspective, a second web-based survey was conducted among students at the considered universities. Data collection took place from August to November 2021 and again from December 2021 to January 2022. 153 students from 59 of the 76 universities participated in the survey. Participants were recruited randomly via an online survey exchange platform.

To complement the survey data, we conducted a web-based analysis of the institutions' public communication for all 76 public universities. The data is based on publicly available information retrieved from university websites, reflecting two points in time: September/October 2021 and February/March 2023. This allowed us to go beyond a mere snapshot and observe developments over time.

Findings

Universities express their commitment to diversity and inclusion on their websites

Every university in the sample expresses its commitment to diversity and to fostering an inclusive work and learning environment on their websites. Moreover, 61 out of the 76 universities also reference diversity in their mission statements or institutional profiles. Among these universities, some explicitly use terms such as diversity, variety, or heterogeneity, while others refer to diversity more implicitly, for example, by highlighting equal opportunity and fairness, or by acknowledging the diverse life situations of their university members.

Across the universities in our sample, diversity is frequently presented as an institutional value and as part of the universities' broader social responsibility. This self-conception is also reflected in the survey results: 63% of participating universities selected social responsibility

as one of their three most relevant motivations for engaging in diversity and inclusion (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Reasons indicated by universities to engage in diversity and inclusion (multiple responses possible)

In line with these findings, most universities in our sample consider diversity as well as an inclusive work and learning environment to be of high importance (see Figure 2). Overall, most of the surveyed universities describe their experience with diversity as moderate. Around 20% of these universities state having little experience, and an even smaller proportion describes themselves as highly experienced (see Figure 2).

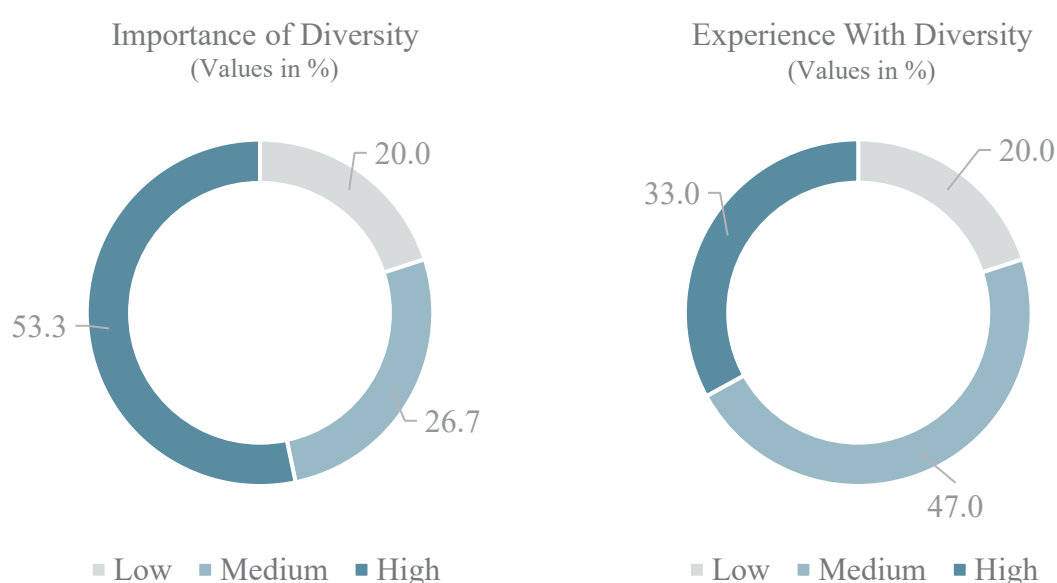


Figure 2: Universities' assessment of the importance of diversity and inclusion and their general experience with diversity

Not all dimensions of diversity are considered as equally relevant by universities (see Figure 3).

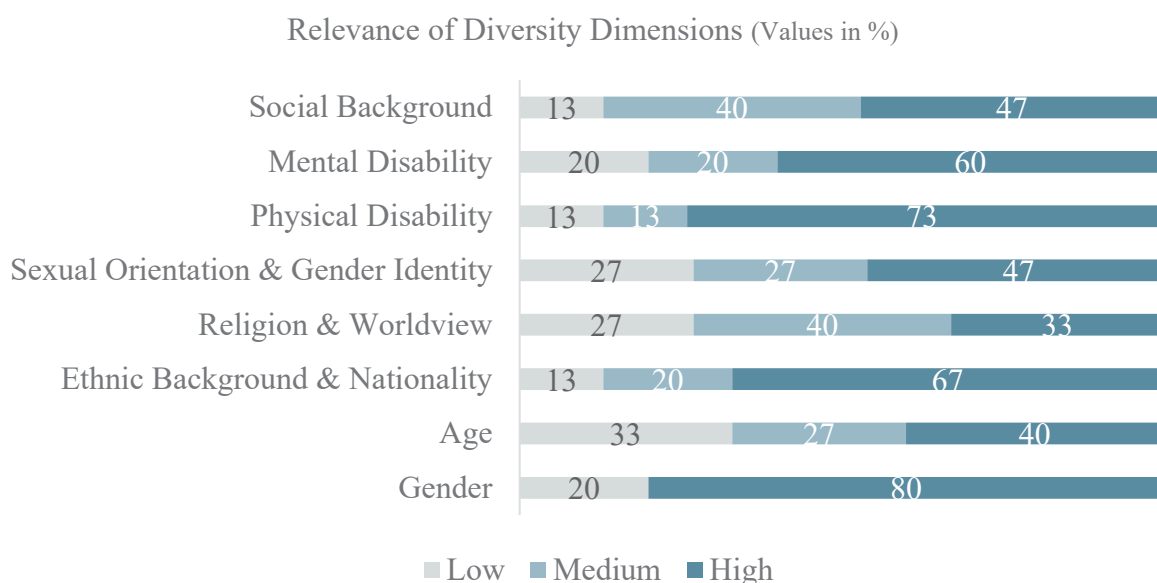


Figure 3: Universities' perceived relevance of specific diversity dimensions

Universities use diversity strategies as implementation tools

To translate their mission of fostering diversity and an inclusive work and learning environment into everyday university life, institutions develop diversity strategies and concepts. As of the first data collection period in late 2021, information about such strategies was available on the websites of all but six of the 76 universities in our sample. 88% of the universities reported that they formally approved a diversity strategy, while an additional 4% had drafted such a strategy and were preparing for formal approval from the senate/rectorate. However, the design and scope of these diversity strategies vary considerably. Among the 70 universities that had either approved or were planning to approve a diversity strategy, almost half reported a dedicated development plan for diversity and inclusion on their websites. Another 21% integrated diversity aspects into general institutional development plans, while 33% focused on a gender equality plan. By 2023, all but two of the examined universities had documented their commitment to diversity and inclusion through such strategic frameworks. Notably, the format of general development plans gained popularity compared to stand-alone gender equality strategies.

Personnel structures are widely established, but their resources and scope remain unclear

The study also examined the personnel resources and responsibilities associated with the implementation of diversity strategies, including designated officers, organizational units and formally assigned responsibilities.

By the end of 2021, all but one of the examined universities provided publicly accessible information on a designated diversity unit or some other form of personnel structure related to diversity on their websites (see Figure 4). At roughly half of these universities, such units were formally established as either a staff office (“Referat” in German) or administrative division (“Stabsstelle” in German). About one-third of the institutions combined diversity and gender equality work within a single unit. In these cases, it remains unclear whether the focus is solely on gender equality, which is often interpreted as the equal professional advancement of women, or whether they address a broader spectrum of diversity dimensions. An additional 15% of the universities organize diversity and inclusion work within informal networks or working groups (“Arbeitskreis” in German). However, in such arrangements, it is difficult to assess the extent of dedicated personnel resources, as the individuals involved often simultaneously fulfil other roles, which are not related to the topic. By early 2023, four universities had restructured their diversity efforts by establishing formal staff units, according to updated website information.

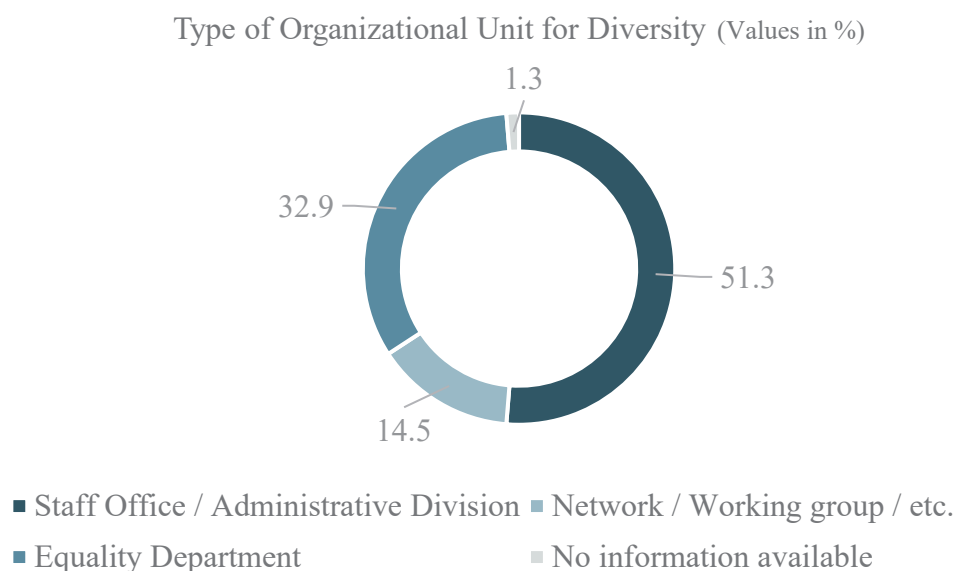


Figure 4: Type of designated units for diversity (university websites, as of 2021)

In addition to establishing formal organizational units, appointing a dedicated person responsible for diversity and inclusion represents another way to anchor personnel resources within the institution. While almost all universities list designated contact persons for gender equality, only about half of the universities have also appointed a person specifically responsible for diversity, according to their websites by the end of 2021. One and a half years later, in 2023, this figure had increased to three quarters of the universities in our sample. A growing number of universities have embedded responsibility for diversity at the executive level, for instance, by assigning a dedicated Vice-Rector or Vice-President. In 2021, about a quarter of the universities had implemented such a leadership-level responsibility; by 2023, six additional universities had followed.

The study also examined the amount of working time allocated to designated diversity and inclusion responsibilities. One third of the participating universities reported that their designated person for diversity and inclusion is employed full-time in this capacity. At 40% of universities, only half of the working time is allocated to diversity-related responsibilities. One in five universities was unable to provide any information on this matter (see Figure 5).

Thus, although personnel structures for diversity appear to be formally in place at the majority of the universities in our sample, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the actual scope and setup of these roles and units.

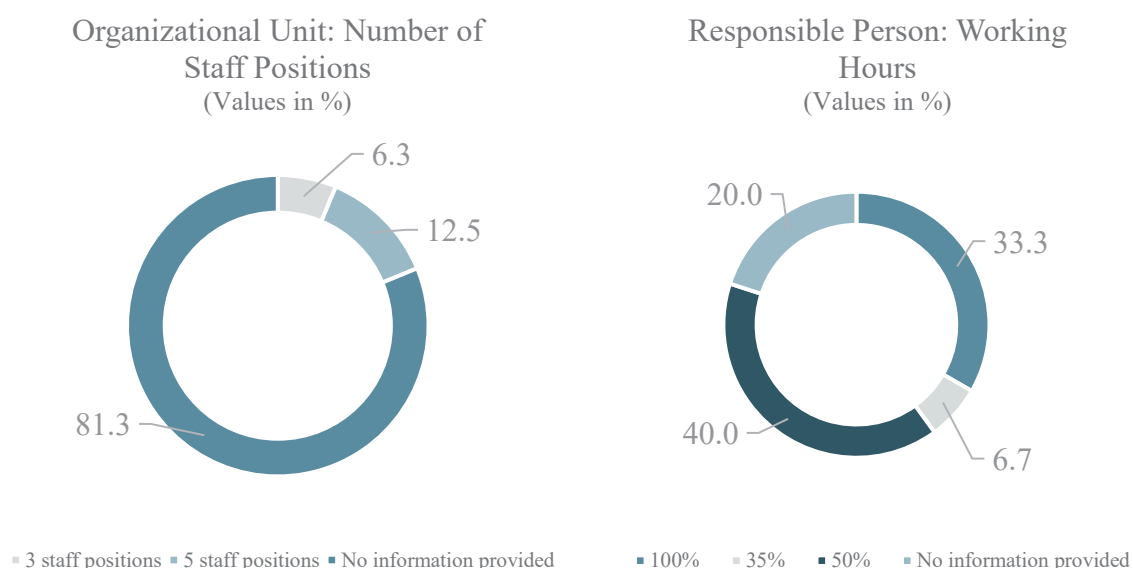


Figure 5: Universities' assessment of the number of staff positions within the organizational unit for diversity and the percentage of working time the responsible person dedicates to the topic of diversity and an inclusive working and learning environment

University leadership teams remain partly gender-homogeneous, but there is limited information on other diversity dimensions

As of late 2021, 22 out of the 76 universities in our sample had appointed a woman to the position of rector or president, which makes up a proportion of 29%. Over the following 18 months, the proportion changed: By spring 2023, seven additional universities had appointed a female rector or president, raising the share to 38%. Another key leadership role, especially for administrative staff, is the chancellor. In 2021, 28% of chancellor positions were held by women. This figure increased slightly to 29% by 2023. The number of both leadership positions (president/rector and chancellor) being held by men slightly decreased from 39 universities in 2021 to 31 universities in 2023, while both leadership positions held by women increased from six universities in 2021 to 10 universities in 2023.

On average, university leadership teams, i.e., rectorates or presidiums, consist of six individuals, of whom two are women, i.e., 37% on average in 2021. While 51 of the universities had a male majority in their leadership teams, there were 12 universities, in which women made up more than 50% of the leadership team. At 15 of the examined universities, the proportion of women was below 25%, while two universities recorded a female share of over 70%. By 2023, the average female share had increased to 39%, while the number of universities with less than 25% female representation decreased to nine. It is important to point out that leadership teams with a strong majority of either women or men remain relatively homogeneous in terms of gender.

Information on demographic diversity beyond gender remains scarce at the leadership level of universities. Among the 429 members of university executive boards, age was disclosed in 35% of cases, and cultural background in 22%, according to the information available on university websites. Similarly, universities report limited knowledge of non-visible diversity characteristics among members of their leadership teams (see Figure 6). As a result, it is currently not possible to comprehensively assess the diversity of university leadership teams.

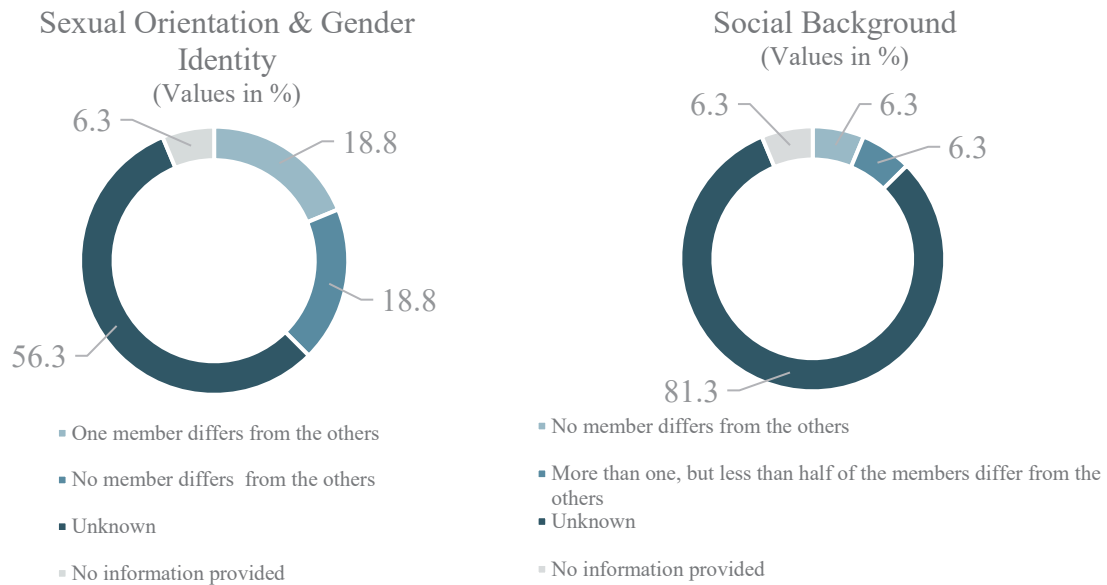


Figure 6: Knowledge of diversity in rectorates and presidencies in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, and social background

Universities face resource and data gaps in implementing diversity and inclusion measures

80% of the surveyed universities report facing obstacles in establishing an inclusive work and study environment. The majority cite a lack of financial, time, or human resources as key barriers to implementing targeted measures. The reported budgets available for diversity and inclusion initiatives vary considerably, ranging from €5,000 to €1.5 million.

Also, many universities in our sample lack a clear picture of how diverse they actually are, primarily due to missing data. Depending on the stakeholder group and diversity dimension, up to 25% of universities are planning to establish corresponding data management systems. However, the planned approaches also differ considerably across diversity dimensions and stakeholder groups. For instance, 19% and 25% of the universities plan to collect data on the cultural background of professors and staff, respectively. Other diversity dimensions receive even less attention. One in four universities currently had no systematic diversity data management in place for any group or dimension, and do not plan to implement one.

Systematic data on diversity and inclusion may give universities information about the composition of different stakeholder groups and may help to identify group specific needs. In our sample, however, such data remain limited and unevenly available across diversity dimensions and stakeholder groups.

Despite limited data on the actual diversity within universities, the surveyed universities tend to differentiate their efforts based on stakeholder groups. This is particularly evident when

examining support measures for sexual orientation and gender identity (see Figure 7).
 Networks and specific campaigns are mainly directed at students rather than faculty or staff.

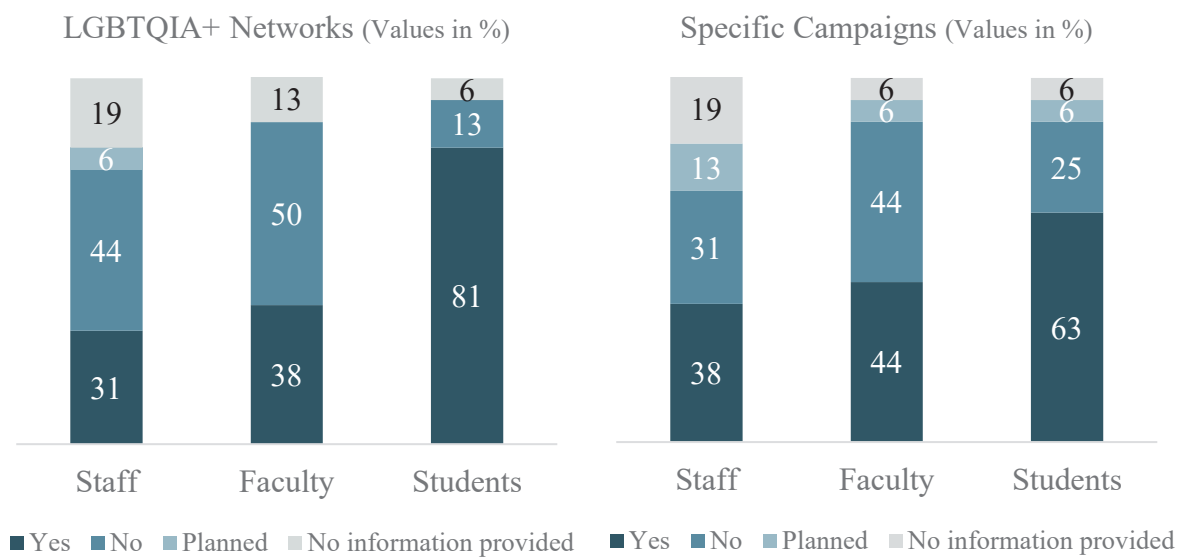


Figure 7: Comparison of stakeholder groups with regard to the existence of select measures to support the LGBTQIA+ community

Students have limited awareness of specific diversity structures, yet perceive their universities as relatively experienced

Approximately three-quarters of the surveyed students state that diversity is generally important to them. However, only 14% of students state that a university’s diversity efforts significantly influenced their choice of institution (see Figure 8).

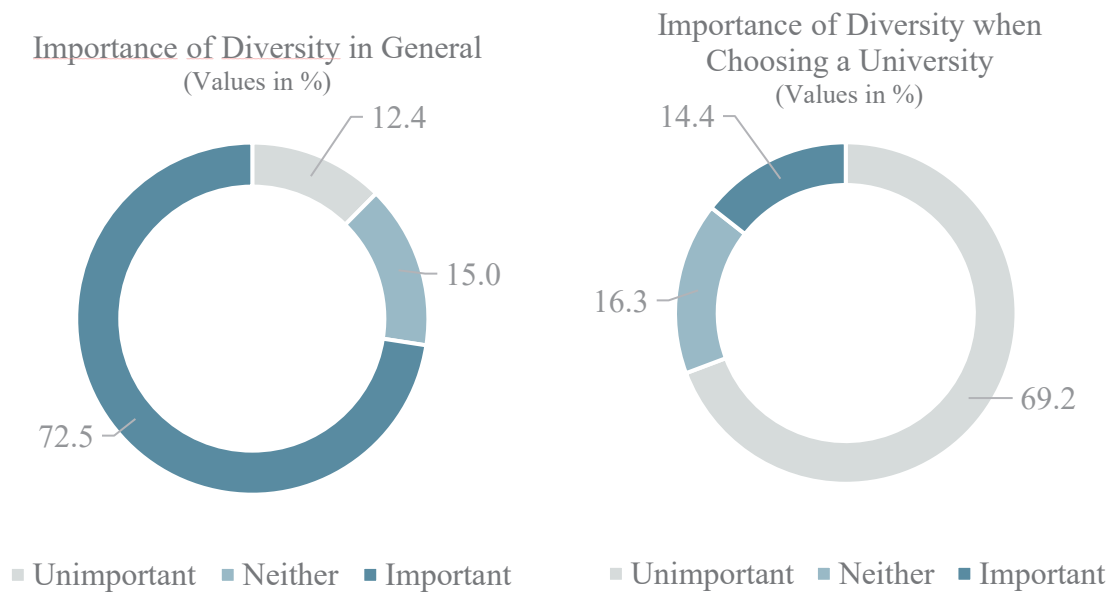


Figure 8: Importance of diversity in general and in the university choice of the students

During their studies, 18% of students report having experienced discrimination or exclusion within the university context. 16% of respondents even perceive diversity to hold little importance at their university. A voice from the student body summarizes:

“Fundamental attitudes and ways of thinking within universities must change. There should be no room for prejudice and stereotypical thinking. To reach this state, much more education and awareness-raising is needed. This is something that is increasingly present among students, but in my experience still largely absent among teaching staff and university employees.”

Although voices from the student body are calling for a shift in mindset and concrete action plans to establish an inclusive environment, the majority of surveyed students perceive diversity and inclusion to be of high importance at their universities. The majority of students appear to be aware of their university’s general engagement with diversity and inclusion, while their knowledge of specific structures and measures remains limited.

As such, nearly half of the surveyed students report that diversity and an inclusive environment are values that are explicitly stated and part of their university’s understanding of social responsibility. According to students, these two aspects represent the most relevant motivations for universities to implement diversity and inclusion measures. In addition, students perceive the fulfilment of diversity quotas and the use of diversity in student recruitment strategies as key drivers behind institutional engagement. These findings indicate that students attribute universities’ engagement with diversity and inclusion to both social responsibility and strategic considerations such as student recruitment.

However, students show limited awareness regarding the initiatives and support measures available to foster diversity and an inclusive environment at their universities. For instance, 60% of respondents were unable to state whether their university has a designated position for diversity management. A lack of awareness is even more pronounced regarding the question of whether their university has a strategy or concept aimed at promoting diversity and establishing an inclusive work and learning environment, to which 77% of students could not provide an answer. These findings indicate limited student perception of the formal structures and strategies that universities communicate publicly.

In addition, universities in our sample rate their own experience with diversity and inclusion far more critically than students do. While 58% of students consider their university to have a

high level of experience with diversity and an inclusive environment, only 33% of universities rate themselves accordingly (see Figure 9).

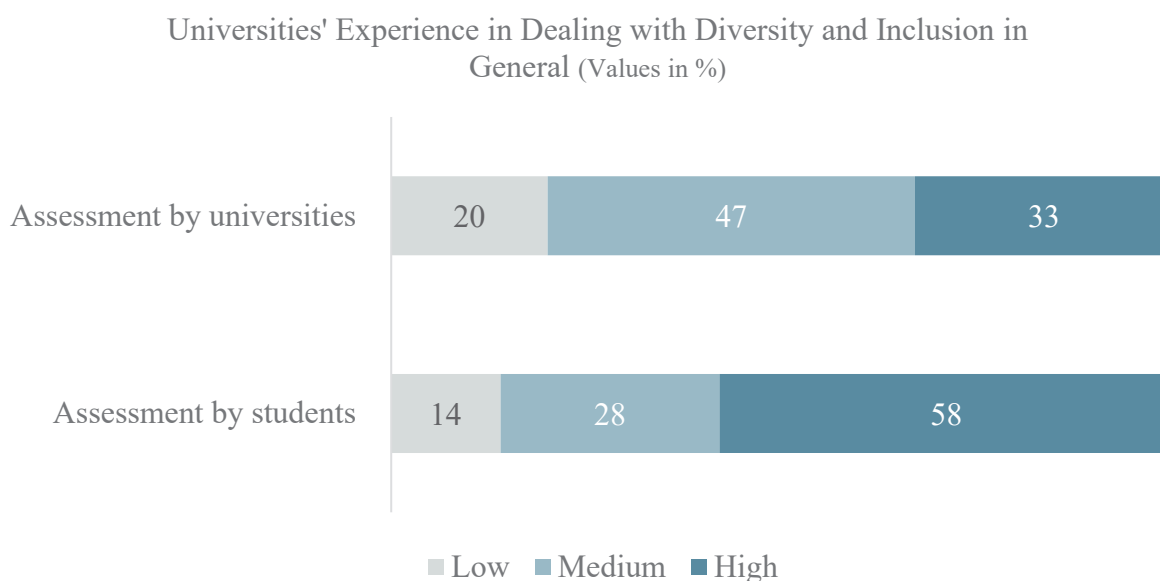


Figure 9: Assessments of universities' experience in dealing with diversity and an inclusive work and study environment

Also, students perceive fewer difficulties than universities in establishing inclusive work and learning environments (Figure 10).

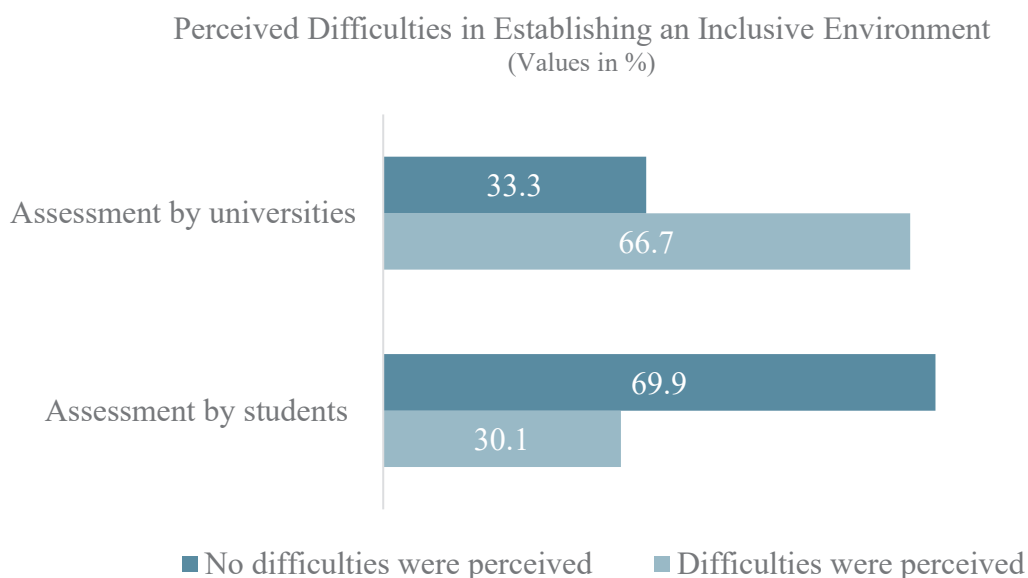


Figure 10: Assessment of the difficulties in establishing an inclusive study environment

Conclusion

In general, the findings show that the universities in our sample have broadly embedded diversity and inclusion into their strategies, established organizational structures, and public communication, while there is considerable variation in resources, data availability and the visibility of existing efforts. The results thus provide a descriptive basis for assessing how diversity and inclusion were institutionally addressed at German public universities during the period studied.

Our study has several limitations: First, neither our university sample nor our student sample is representative of the entire German higher education sector, as our study focuses exclusively on public universities. Second, participation in the surveys was voluntary, and not all participants answered every question. Third, the information gathered from university websites reflects what universities publicly communicate, but does not provide evidence that these structures and commitments are part of everyday university life.

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