

LET'S TALK ABOUT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



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INTRODUCTION

As a future-oriented institution, the University of Passau strives to make a significant contribution to addressing current and future challenges. In this context, the acknowledgement, appreciation and consideration of diversity is of utmost importance. For this reason, the University of Passau wants to establish diversity as part of its identity and has been addressing the topic at a structural level since 2015.

For us, promoting diversity means to become more open, cosmopolitan and just. Differences in terms of gender, language, ethnicity, origin, ideological or religious orientation, political conviction, age, sexual orientation, physical and mental capacity as well as extraordinary personal and professional paths in life challenge customary perspectives and provide impulses for academic creativity and innovation.

In 2020, the University of Passau signed the Diversity Charta and thus committed itself to create an organisational culture characterised by mutual respect and appreciation of each individual person. Now, by participating in the audit "Vielfalt gestalten" (Shaping Diversity), this process of organisational development is to be continued and intensified. There is still a lot to be done.

This collection of contributions, which discuss various aspects of the topic, is the result of a cooperation which emerged from the Diversity Round Table, an exchange format which has been taking place every semester since 2016 and which is open to all university members.

I would like to encourage you to contribute to the discourse, to share ideas, experiences and demands. If you have questions, please feel free to get in touch with the Executive Support Unit for Diversity and Gender Equality.

Christina Hansen



Prof. Dr. Christina Hansen

Vice President for
International Affairs and Diversity

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT RACISM

Authors: Dimas D. Laksmana & Enid Still

In 2022 we co-published a statement on anti-racism with the Chair of Comparative Development and Cultural Studies–Southeast Asia. It originated from our preparation for a panel discussion entitled *Diversityprozesse an wissenschaftlichen Einrichtungen - ein „besonderes Gewässer“ für Veränderungs-prozesse* held on Diversity Day, 18 May 2021, at the University of Passau. We also incorporated some of the issues touched upon in the panel discussion. Eight months later, on 20 January 2022, we launched a final draft at the Diversity Roundtable, with the aim to invite students, staff, academics, chairs and student societies to join in the conversation about racism at the University of Passau. At the roundtable, we discussed the need to increase visibility and build awareness of racism at the University, as well as to create safe(r) spaces for students and university members where they can share

their experiences of discrimination. As a result of these discussions, we teamed up with the Welcome Centre to create a new space in their former quarterly newsletter where we could share thoughts, stories and experiences about discrimination and paths towards changing discriminatory practices and behaviours. We hope that by bringing visibility to these issues, this space, with all its limitations, will contribute towards cultivating a conversation that can inspire change.

Therefore, we would like to start this conversation by re-publishing the statement and inviting readers to comment and engage with us and fellow readers. Any responses will be added to this collection so as to keep the conversation going. We encourage you to get in touch with both comments and ideas to help this collection grow at researchmobility@uni-passau.de.

DECOLONIALITY AND EMPATHY: TOWARDS EDUCATION THAT MATTERS IN OUR TIME

Authors: Dimas D. Laksmana, Enid Still and Professor Martina Padmanabhan

Our engagement with anti-racism work was sparked by students at the University of Passau who spoke out in May 2020 about their experiences of racism within the university and in the city of Passau. They demanded that the university assume responsibility and take remedial action. What initially started as a concern of students of the Masters in Development Studies pro-

gramme, brought together other students and staff to advocate for an anti-racist culture at the university. Through numerous conversations, it became clear that a fundamental issue is the limited university information and support in the English language for international students who face discrimination, despite the university's commitment to internationalisation.

As a response to this need, the Diversity Department organised the first anti-racism workshop for English-speaking students in January 2021. This and many other events at the university demonstrate its commitment to diversity and anti-discrimination. However, two issues hinder this effort.

Unlearning Racism

First, there seems to be a reluctance from some university members to act against discrimination. Although there will be many different reasons for this, we believe such a position in the university space can stem from an ahistorical perspective on positionality and knowledge. There is lack of understanding about structural racism in academic institutions, which in turn leads people to misunderstand the aims of antiracist work. To clarify, anti-racism efforts do not attempt to silence people. On the contrary, it urges them to learn about and take responsibility for the harms that certain types of discourse, practices, pedagogies and institutional structures can cause. It also highlights the links between everyday experiences of racism and structural forms of racism, demonstrating that they are intersectional and interwoven into the social fabric. This includes understanding microaggressions as learnt and often built into well-established and socially acceptable patterns of behaviour, which therefore go unseen by those who do not experience racism. The eventual aim of our anti-racism work at Passau University is to give visibility to experiences of racism, and to create a dialogue that will enable a process of unlearning racism and removing oppressive structures, so that all involved in university life, and spaces of knowledge production more widely, are heard. We think it is important to articulate that giving space to

those who experience racism does not negate the speech or space of others.

What constitutes to 'too much racism' and who decides?

Second, any benchmark that measures racism will exclude certain perspectives and the process of institutionalisation has the potential to make its definition rigid. So, we want to understand on what basis or process of measurement does the university consider the development of a diverse university? We ask this because the need for certain types of evidence as a precursor to the enactment of anti-racist activities at the university troubles us. When does racism become 'too much'? Who decides on the threshold? Does diversity depend on the number of students and staff with diverse backgrounds? Similarly, on what basis does the university make decisions when discrimination occurs? Does it depend on how many people experience discrimination? Or does it also consider the diverse personal and intersectional experiences of discrimination? In asking these questions about the process of measurement we do not advocate for actions based on arbitrariness. But rather, given that discrimination intersects with several axes of difference and is located in particular power structures, we should be aware that different perspectives on discrimination and diversity, and their different types of evidences, may carry different weight.

Towards decoloniality and empathy

Finally, we want to share some thoughts about how to work towards an experience of diversity at Passau University that can be made meaningful to those who experience discrimination.

The multiple challenges caused by the pandemic have urged us to think about what education matters in our time. Our proposition to this question is decoloniality and empathy. Decolonial practices address discriminatory institutional structures, value systems, epistemologies, pedagogies and histories, all of which are embedded in colonialism. These practices have been pioneered by Black, postcolonial, post-development and decolonial scholars, activists and artists. Over the course of 2020 and 2021, we have been learning collectively about decolonial and critical approaches to development as well as the social sciences and academia more broadly through a research lab that we run at the Chair of Comparative Development and Cultural Studies – Southeast Asia. The urgency of applying and working with these epistemologies and practices became clearer to us through this learning process.

Simultaneously, because of the pandemic, the distinction between private and public on the one hand, and personal, work, and study lives on the other, have blurred. If previously students came to classrooms, now they attend class from their bedrooms, or living rooms, in shared apartments. This blurring between personal and public lives can be and is disorienting for many people and furthermore, can perpetuate existing inequalities. Therefore, this current situation, the effects of which are likely to be enduring, requires an education that has as its starting point empathy towards other human beings and other living beings, whereby we continuously reflect on and try to put ourselves in others' positions. Attentive listening, we believe, is a starting point to cultivate this empathy.

Empathy in practice is of course difficult to define because it is always situational and relational, meaning that the particular social context of the act has particular effects. Nevertheless, an example of the practice of empathy recently stood out for us. One of our staff members responded directly to students' difficulty in finding information about university support services in English. She contacted the relevant university's departments to make sure that the existing support service information was made available in English. In this simple act our colleague responded to the needs and requests for help from students. Enabling access to this information has the potential to directly change the experience of students who need help and support. With this statement, we urge you and your respective student groups or chairs to share your own thoughts, concerns, experiences about racism and how you understand it as impacting education. We would invite you to share your own statement on your chair or community website. By doing so, we want to initiate an institution-wide conversation about racism that makes people's concerns and experiences visible, whilst also creating for open and honest debate.

We hope this process eventually contributes to the creation of a higher education environment where everyone can feel safer and are able to participate fully in university life.

For more information click here:

[Important service points for students at the University of Passau.](#)

INTERSECTIONALITY AND DECOLONIALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Authors: Dimas D. Laksmana & Enid Still

Intersectionality as a theoretical approach allows to analyse the entanglements of inequality through gender, class, race, nationality and age. The university as a site of societal change provides the space for debates about structural and institutional discrimination and, at the same time, is a field of action. Diversification and decolonisation of teaching and research challenges everyday academic life.

On pages seven and eight, Daniela Melissa Escarria Parra, a Colombian lawyer and student in Master of Arts in Governance and Public Policy, shares her thoughts on decolonising the university in her essay on the Spanish colonial legacy in Colombia, her home country. After graduating in 2019, she was awarded the Helmut Schmidt scholarship offered by DAAD. As somebody who is passionate about human rights and international law, in her essay, Melissa argues that decolonising universities is not only an epistemological endeavour, but also a social justice matter. She illustrates this argument by elaborating the relations between colonialism, knowledge production, and the notion of progress and race in Colombian context. Based on intersectionality, she contends that the erasure of knowledge and people during Spanish colonialism leads to the perpetuation of racist and classist discourses in Colombian societies and universities. Critical thinking, Melissa argues, is essential in examining dominant academic discourses, thus in acknowledging knowledge that has been dismissed or erased through history. She

wrote the initial version of this essay for the Intersectionality and decoloniality in higher education class offered by the Chair of Development and Cultural Studies in the winter semester 2021.

The annual Intersectionality Lecture Series is also organised by the same chair. The title of that year's lecture series was *We need to talk about racism - Anti-racism and intersectionality in conversation*. The theory and practice of antiracism was the focus of this lecture series, which deliberately related academic analysis and social engagement. To this end, scholars, civil society organizations, students, and activists from Passau, Germany, and internationally presented their anti-racism work.

WHY DECOLONISE THE UNIVERSITY?

Author: Daniela Melissa Escarria Parra

The entangled historical relations between colonialism, knowledge production, and universities are the main reasons to decolonise universities and challenge their inherent colonial structures. Universities play a pivotal role in the (re-)production of classist and racist discourses. The fact that knowledge remains as one of the most relevant means of power (van Dijk, 1993 & 1999), explains why universal access to higher education has been achieved only after bloody social struggles. In turn, determining the validity of knowledge and restricting its access are two common strategies for perpetuating social disparities, and domination (van Dijk, 1993 & 1999). The exclusionary approach to cognition has served the purpose of maintaining the status quo in which those who got to establish their alleged universality, imposed their ideas as the unique and valid ones (Icaza and Vásquez, 2019; Bhabra, 2014). This insolent approach—in which universal valid knowledge is the one produced by the European academic tradition—is undoubtedly connected with the origins of universities themselves. European history has shown that universities, since their creation, have been everything but inclusive, impartial or universal, as I will illustrate using the legacy of Spanish colonisation in Colombia's understanding of progress and race.

The Latin-American understanding of progress, due to the legacy of Spanish domination, has been defined in European terms. This is one of the results of the erasure of their knowledge, besides the massive killing of indigenous and tribal peoples, during the colonial times.

Consequently, Colombia has sought to replicate the Spanish sociopolitical and educational standards since gaining its independence more than two hundred years ago. The imposition of an exclusive discourse about knowledge in former European colonies has also led to racist practices, which put tribal and indigenous groups in vulnerable conditions (Bello and Rangel, 2002, p. 40). The whitening tendency—in which the superiority of the creoles over other ethnic groups is inherently assumed (Hellebrandová, 2014)—remains in the collective beliefs of many Colombians. Based on this discourse of European superiority, the eradication of their ancestral knowledge and traditions have been historically justified by creoles. Therefore, decolonising universities is a matter of social justice and epistemological endeavor, as it challenges discriminatory practices of knowledge production.

Decolonising university, in practice, involves a rethinking of curricula that have been adapted by many universities based on European imaginaries for academic institutions. From the ECTS credit-point system to the programmatic content of each university subject, Eurocentric perspectives have been imposed around the globe. And with them, the heteronormative values around labour, family, gender, and sexuality have also been imposed as the result of the Christian tradition of universities. Moreover, universities still reproduce the idea of exclusive access despite the modern adjustment of universities through the alleged value of “universality”.

Thus, decolonising universities and societies requires an understanding of which knowledge belongs to the hegemonic discourses of the “arrogant ignorance” that (re-)produce “Eurocentric, heteronormative and anthropocentric” ideas, along with the western compulsive necessity of certifying knowledge (Icaza Garza and Vásquez, 2019, p. 112).

On this point, the class perspective arrives, because access to universities is constructed around the discourses of meritocracy (Yengde, 2019), or in more aggressive systems such as the Colombian one, based on students’ financial means. This perpetuates the classist idea of limited access to knowledge, so that only those who are able to afford education, or succeed in obtaining a scholarship or credit, can attend university. At the same time, the education system reinforces classist discourses by valuing academic work more highly than physical work. This way of valuing different types of labour reinforces the division and oppression of classes with more knowledge and, therefore, creates unbalanced power relationships.

From this point onwards, critical thinking serves as the main tool to call into question the dominant academic discourses I mentioned above. After acknowledging our privileged position, we have to assume the responsibility that comes with power and to question the power structures that reinforce the disparities and perpetuate the injustice. Therefore, critical analysis of our curricula seems to be more a matter of social justice than a mere academic task. This is because examining the academic structures and the content of study programmes implies the questioning of power structures themselves. For that reason, critical thinking on what, why and how we learn is the first step to sur-

passing the boundaries of European academia. Throughout the process of decolonising universities, we will understand and accept that different cultures around the world have been producing valid knowledge, but they have been historically dismissed, undervalued or erased by the mighty writers of history. Now is the time to hear new approaches and perspectives on history, to present the arguments of those who were dismissed by the academic system and, of course, to redefine knowledge.

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EVERYDAY DISCRIMINATION AT THE UNIVERSITY

Author: Dimas D. Laksmana

On pages nine to twelve, Joeta Ndwiga, a Kenyan student in the Master of Arts programme in Development Studies, shares her microaggression experiences as an international student of colour at the University. As someone who is passionate about finding solutions for social and environmental impacts on society, Joeta highlights a less noticeable form of discrimination — microaggression — in her essay, having experienced this when doing group work and joining student societies at the University. Using the research method of autoethnography she reflects on her coping strategies and responses to these shocking and unpleasant experiences. She has found that bonding with other students with similar experiences helps her develop a sense of belonging and creates a support structure in a not-so-welcoming academic environment.

The University, she argues, has the responsibility to create safe spaces in which minority students can voice their experiences about diversity practices at the University. Joeta closes her essay by highlighting the issue of university staff representation, which is another issue that the University needs to address.

Moreover, page thirteen includes an interview conducted by the Welcome Centre with Regine Fahn, of the University's Diversity and Gender Equality Section. As a diversity officer, Ms Fahn shares the different diversity initiatives that have been implemented by the university and her drive to make the university more inclusive. She also highlights the Diversity Audit that the university is currently undertaking.

UNDERSTANDING THE MICROAGGRESSION EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PASSAU

Author: Joeta Ndwiga

Can you recall a situation where someone commented on some aspect of your race, gender, sexuality, physical appearance or language identity? What emotions did you feel at that moment? Did the comment make you feel a certain way, even if it was made without ill intent? If you answered yes, you have most certainly experienced microaggre-

ssion. Microaggressions, according to Janice McCabe, associate professor at Dartmouth College, are “subtle and covert acts, often identified as verbal or nonverbal” (McCabe 2009: 134) that are done intentionally or unintentionally, and are primarily directed at minority groups. Based on her research on racial and gender microaggressions on a

predominantly white campus, microaggressions can take many forms, including averted gazes, looks, affirmative actions, stereotyping, and comments like “where are you from?...you are so fluent in English”. As a sociologist, she finds that these experiences go unnoticed and unspoken, except to the victims encountering it, thus leaving them feeling isolated, anxious, lonely, out of place, voiceless, and also often resulting in mental and emotional distress (McCabe 2009).

My Experiences of Microaggressions

As an international student of colour at the University of Passau, I have faced microaggressions. When I first embarked on my academic journey at the university, I was excited to begin my course and learn about the new culture while making new friends. On the other hand, I was nervous because after moving to Germany, I became fully aware of the harsh reality of racial discrimination. Whereas I did not encounter racism while living in Kenya, I did witness and experience other forms of discrimination, such as ethnic and tribal differences. These forms of discrimination have been rampant since different social groups hold certain stereotypes about others. Furthermore, such discriminations are prevalent in both government and private institutions, as individuals from specific communities are awarded jobs despite not having the necessary qualifications.

The first semester was a roller-coaster ride as I tried to adjust to a new educational system, a new culture and new weather conditions due to the fact that I began my study during winter, all while dealing with the regular stress of homesickness. The first microaggression experience I faced was in the classroom setting. In one particular group

we had to write a group term paper and prepare a presentation for our topic. I distinctly remember a local student stating that she does not want to work with international students because we “do not understand the German standards”, although I was unaware at the time that this was a microaggression comment. She made me question if she said it on purpose or by accident. I was also taken aback as I never anticipated that she could make such a remark, especially given the nature of our Master’s programme promotes international diversity.

My second encounter with microaggression occurred when I interacted with the clubs at the university. During my undergraduate studies, I was involved in clubs like Rotaract, Red Cross, and AIESEC, which sparked my interest in social change. This motivated me to continue my active participation in the University of Passau’s clubs and societies. Unfortunately, my experience with some of the social clubs was less positive, as the meetings were difficult for me to follow because they were held in German. Furthermore, I struggled to integrate with the local student members, and this made me feel invisible and an outsider. After attending a few student-society meetings, I eventually withdrew from them.

In addition to these examples, students of colour face microaggressions in everyday socialization due to constant stereotypes of them being perceived as a threat (McCabe 2009). In the long run, these experiences influenced how we struggle to make friends with local students. In some circumstances, we are forced to manage our microaggression experiences alone and constantly wear multiple masks all the time in order to fit in and please other students,

especially the local students.

Responses to Microaggressions

As I reflect on the coping mechanism that has helped me overcome the challenges aggravated by microaggressions, I realise that it is not different from that of the minority group in Mizrahi and Herzog's (2012) study on Participatory destigmatization strategies among Palestinian citizens, Ethiopian Jews and Mizrahi Jews in Israel, as they observed that the minority group employed a destigmatization strategy of silence. I recall responding to my classmate's comment with silence because I chose not to confront her in order to avoid escalating the situation despite my discomfort with the remark. Consequently, this comment influenced how I interacted in other study groups that included local students, because I felt the need to prove that I am capable of delivering the work to the required standard. However, I must say that in the majority of the study groups, I have worked with fantastic local students who are openminded and very understanding.

After my experience with the university club, I avoided participating in any other student clubs and societies or academic activities, seminars, and events hosted by the university, particularly those where meetings are held in German, as it served as a constant reminder of feeling like an outsider due to my language identity. Aside from that, I avoided engaging in university activities due to the lack of representation of students of colour in these spaces.

Another way I have dealt with microaggressions is similar to what McCabe (2009) mentioned in her study on racial and gender microaggression, in that students bonded with others who shared similar racial and race-gender experiences as them.

I have tended to bond and engage more with students of colour because I believe we have similar experiences in terms of integrating into the social setting, particularly when it comes to difficulties in developing friendships with local students. I agree that these bonding sessions have created not only a sense of belonging but also a support structure in these unwelcoming academic environments as McCabe observed.

Addressing Microaggressions at the University

Although there might not be any straightforward solution for stopping microaggressions, higher education institutions must play a critical role in fostering a safe space and inclusive learning environments for all students.

The first step is for the university administration to raise more awareness of the prevalent racial microaggressions faced by international students. Yes, the university has come a long way in terms of raising anti-racism awareness by offering seminars on racism, as well as its first anti-racism workshop in English and the diversity roundtable, but the reality is that racism still occurs and that some university representatives pay little attention to it. This is because microaggression is not highly visible. More importantly, as I have illustrated from my study experience, the intention is not to discriminate, though it has discriminatory effects. In addition, the university can create awareness by supporting student activists and student activism groups who advocate for diverse voices and actions against racial microaggressions.

Secondly, as Icaza and Vazquez (2018) advocated in their diversity work at Amsterdam University, the university should create spaces within the institution "that

would function as safe spaces in which students could speak freely about issues concerning diversity practices at the university” (ibid.: 117). Also, the safe spaces will give minority students a platform to address and voice their overall racial oppression experiences. As a result, this will enable them to gain visibility.

Thirdly, after listening to the remarks of Katrina Jordan, the University’s head of the communication department, during the Diversity Roundtable held in the autumn of 2021, I agree that representation of racially diverse staff is necessary. This will make it easier for students of colour to talk to someone with whom they can identify, because the majority of these students, including myself, have yet to encounter a staff member who looks like us and whom we can approach for advice.

In addition, as a strategy for representing multiple identities, the university should incorporate frameworks such as intersectionality and decoloniality (Icaza & Vázquez 2018) into its curricula, as this process of knowledge learning seeks to understand how various forms of discrimination are linked to one another (Crenshaw 1991); this also enables the paradigm shift from the colonial system of knowledge production that is dominated by a particular voice and experiences to a wider representation of a diverse range of voices, perspectives and identities, such as migration, racism, gender bias, colonialism, sexuality, indigenous and disability studies (Randall 2020).

Overall, this article can help university representatives to better understand and act upon the unspoken and invisible microaggressions that students of colour face on a daily basis at the university.

It can also contribute to new understandings of how minority groups experience discrimination based on their most salient intersection identities and how this shapes their university experience. In addition, it will empower students to have the courage to voice their experiences as a way of creating awareness of the challenges they face, especially in the university.

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HAVE YOU ALREADY HEARD OF THE EXECUTIVE SUPPORT UNIT FOR DIVERSITY AND GENDER EQUALITY?

An interview with Regine Fahn, consultant for Diversity Management at the Executive Support Unit for Diversity and Gender Equality of the University of Passau:

How did the Executive Support Unit for Diversity and Gender Equality come into being?

The unit was created in 2012 and extended in 2016. The section was founded following the adoption of the first Equality Concept for academic staff in 2011, which was drawn up based on the Research-Oriented Equity and Diversity Standards of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and in connection with the DFG Research Training Group Privacy. It used to be part of the University Governance Support Division. In January 2023 it was made into an Executive Support Unit of the University under the leadership of the Vice President for International Affairs and Diversity and the University Women's Representative.

What motivates you to work at the Executive Support Unit for Diversity and Gender Equality?

As a former student of the University of Passau I am aware that the University has a very diverse student and work community. The chance to stay here, be a part of creating a more inclusive space and moving our University forward means a lot to me.

Could you share some of your experiences so far?

The field of diversity is very broad, and there is always something to do. So I never run out of new tasks. I am very lucky to share these with a highly motivated and helpful team that I really enjoy working with. My main focus so far has been our Diversity Audit *Vielfalt gestalten*, which helps us to develop new ideas for centring diversity and to implement them. Here I get to work with people from all over our University and discuss different topics that diversity plays a part in, such as communication, teaching and research. Teaming up with so many different people has allowed me to gain many new insights and perspectives.

If you would like to stay up to date on current events or like to get more information about the Executive Support Unit for Diversity and Gender Equality, please visit the [website](#) and/or follow [@diversity.gender.unipassau](#) on Instagram.

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