

Perceptions of Gender Equality from the Inside

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Introduction

Students studying Gender and Diversity (BA) at a German University, were invited to discuss their views on gender, gender equality, diversity and inclusion within their university. While Gender and Diversity play a major role in many countries, this topic still plays an undervalued role within many universities. Only one German university provides a BA in Gender and Diversity while having a female president but male deans within the faculty. This newly established study course „Gender and Diversity“, now starting in its 3rd year, provides a unique opportunity for students interested in this field in Germany.

While much has been done to explore the views on gender in Academia, students' views on this topic while studying Gender and Diversity have been rather underestimated.

Materials and methods

A one hour Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted in German with students from a German University. For reasons unknown, only white female German students took part although all students (different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different nationalities) were invited to take part. The FGD was partly structured, participants were provided with some questions on their perceptions of how they perceived gender equality within their university as well as how they perceived gender equality within their study course including their views on gender, diversity, and (social) inclusion. Translated extracts from the FGD are used to illustrate their views.

Results

All students raised an issue of greater importance and awareness of gender issues: *“I become aware of the issues I haven't noticed earlier”*. *“I was born to study this”*. *“One notices many things differently now, one perceives it differently”*. *“I notice that there are journal articles every day dealing with my course's topic (prohibition of prostitution, feelings of men being disadvantaged for being men, the turnaround of gender roles)”*. *“My engagement has changed – the injustice for homosexuals in Germany makes me furious now”*. Many of the students expressed a view on being devalued by their fellow students: *“It is such an important issue although many don't realize it. Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Equality is not a topic for students”*. *“Our study course is not being taken seriously”*. *“The study course is too new”*. *“Gender and Diversity – no one knows what it means”*. *“Nothing can result of studying this”*.

Some expressed a lack of feelings of support by the respective university representatives: *“I think this Non-acknowledging of our study course is not only an opinion of students but also an opinion of some staff”*. *“The feeling for Gender has not reached them”*. *“We need to prove our study course makes sense”*, while at the same time holding a position of member of Students' Parliament or Study Course Parliament and similar positions: *“We want to influence the university's officials: they need to see we're here and we won't give in”*.

None of the FGD participants mentioned structural categories apart from gender, such as ethnicity, country of origin, race or similar categories although at least 1/3 of their fellow students within the Gender and Diversity course share a NON-EU-Background and almost 2/3 of the students were female.

While the NON-EU-Students were asked at different time points about their career options of studying Gender and Economics and all answered with enhanced options of career opportunities in their respective countries, the German white female FGD participants expressed a view on oppressed career opportunities when graduating with a BA in Gender and Diversity and repeatedly stated that their choice was an idealism-driven option to change the world for better: *“We don't stand a chance to make millions in our business”*, *“Personally, I study for I want to study this course”*, *“People think we study to starve afterwards”*.

However, all participants of the FGD also stated that they missed a firm university policy on gender equality. They all expressed feelings of being underrepresented and called repeatedly for actions to be taken by the university's representatives on gender equality policy: *“I wish they'd do more to promote our study course”*.

Anecdotally, one student stated after the FGD that she missed gender equality policies on national and supra-national level by stating: *“I want to become the first EU Minister for Gender Equality”*.

Conclusions

All students were eagerly discussing the macrosocial importance of Gender, Gender Equality and Diversity while at the same time struggling with prejudices against these topics.

Given the complicated situations (the study course has not been evaluated yet at the time point of the FGD) at the university, many students dealt with underlying sorrows of the “What if-not” kind and repeatedly stated their fears. Many of the statements of feeling undervalued, underrepresented and underesteemed may stem from this situation. However, some also expressed that, given the systematic under-occupation of women, the systematic underpay of women, the next generation of women has to take radical ways. The fact that the university has a female president (one of the very few in Germany) however, did not raise particular attention to the students despite the fact that they were particularly dealing with gender business topics.

All in all, the intersectional approach (of structural categories such as gender) was of no particular interest for the students although they raised issues of oppression and injustice due to structural categories. It remains unclear whether they were unaware of the intersectional approach or did just not pay attention to it.

The fact that diversity and inclusion were not much of a topic for the students participating in the FGD can partly be explained by the Halo-effect: as only white female German students took part in the FGD whereas the non-white female and male students from Asia and Africa appeared invisible behind the overshadowing gender topic, especially as all lecturers were white.

Further information

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