# DIVERSITY-ORIENTATION AS A PROCESS IN ADULT EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS. EXPERIENCES FROM THE ERASMUS+ STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP „DIVERSITY CAPACITIES"

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**Abstract:** In the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership DivCap the issue how (Higher) Education Institutions deal with diversity and promote equality and social justice was explored. The aim of the project was to enhance awareness about diversity issues at a personal and an organisational level in educational institutions. Furthermore, practical measures and guidelines to promote equality were developed. In a first phase, case studies were conducted in two educational organisations in each of the seven partner country. In the analysis, the situation regarding diversity orientation was explored and recommendations were developed and tested. In a second phase, selected measures were implemented in the 14 participating organisations in pilot projects. Based on the experiences of the case studies and pilot projects, overarching guidelines and lessons learnt were developed. It became apparent, that the implementation of diversity orientation needs to be seen as a process which requires a high degree of flexibility. Different levels of an organisation and different stakeholders need to be involved.

**Keywords:** Adult Education, Higher Education, Diversity, Inclusion, Equal Access, Organisational Development

## 1    INTRODUCTION: PROMOTING DIVERSITY ORIENTATION

Educational institutions offer their services in a changing and diverse society. The issues of adult education in the migration society are multifaceted; see for example different topics and issues in the publication of Verein CONEDU 2017 [1]. One of the issues in this context is the equal access and treatment of disadvantaged groups in educational institutions (for disadvantage in higher education see e.g. Karakaşoğlu 2016 [2], for discrimination in adult education Sprung 2011 [3]).

In the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership "Diversity Capacities: Improving the capacities of adult education institutions to successfully deal with diversity (DivCap)" the goal was to promote inclusion and diversity in education. The project partnership consisted of a consortium of partner organisations with different backgrounds from higher education, adult education, and vocational education and training. Also, the regional location of the partners was diverse, they operate in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. The Institute of Social Work at FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences was responsible for the overall coordination of the partnership, which ran from December 2018 to July 2021.

Various aspects of difference can be address by diversity processes. The DivCap project focused on aspects relating to the challenges that adult education needs to tackle in the "post-migration society" (ogsa AG Migrationsgesellschaft 2021 [4]): ethnicity, cultural background, and religion. But in line with an intersection approach (see e.g. Winker, Degele 2009 [5]), other important diversity dimensions were considered as well, such as gender, age, education, and disability.

The work theoretically was inspired by a diversity-oriented opening approach. The term "diversity-oriented opening" considers the criticisms of Intercultural Opening (IO) and Diversity Management (DM), concepts that are used in organisational development processes. Whereas the IO focus on (assumed) cultural differences is controversial, DM concepts take different dimensions of diversity into consideration. However, DM concepts are criticised for their economic reasoning. Furthermore, they hardly address power and dominance aspects (Schröer 2016 [6]). As an alternative concept, the diversity-oriented opening approach considers different diversity dimensions and hence avoids the reduction to one dimension, such as the cultural dimension. Furthermore, the approach positions itself in the discourses on equal access and improvement of services and learning opportunities for disadvantaged groups in a social justice perspective. Practical organisational development processes are also based on this approach (see e.g. Bildungsteam Berlin-Brandenburg e.V. 2018 [7]).

## 2    IMPLEMENTATION

In the application-oriented project the aim was to promote equal access to adult education offerings. This was achieved by providing concrete instruments and measures that were developed and tested in educational institutions. Knowledge of and awareness for diversity issues and equal access were enhanced on two levels. On the level of the employees, the goal was to improve the personal competencies of the employees in dealing with diversity. Here the deepening of the cognitive understanding of diversity was facilitated through

concrete personal experiences. For this purpose, a modular curriculum for an "Applied Diversity Awareness" workshop was developed and tested in three pilot workshops.

Second, work was completed on the level of the organisation to implement concrete measures to promote inclusion and diversity at an institutional scope. In each country, the partner organisations cooperated with a second educational institution that was committed to making concrete steps in implementing diversity. In total 14 educational institutions across Europe were involved. In the first phase, a case study was conducted to analyse the institution in terms of its diversity orientation. For this purpose, a questionnaire was developed, which was used in all case studies (Ackermann 2019 [8]). Based on the results of the analysis, recommendations for the implementation of measures to enhance diversity were made. The recommendations addressed different areas such as mission statement, human resource development, employee competence, or public relations (Klercq 2020a [9]). Furthermore, the cross-case findings were summarised and a tool kit for the analysis of an organisation and initiation of change processes was created (Klercq 2020b [10]).

The recommendations were discussed with stakeholders in the organisations. In a second phase, concrete selected measures were implemented in pilot projects. This phase was heavily impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the work in the educational institutions had to be adapted. It was not deemed a priority to make resources available for "additional" tasks such as diversity-orientation measures. However, some institutions saw the crisis as an opportunity to embark on new paths. In any case, the partners overcame this challenge by being creative and innovative. The results of the change and learning processes in each of the 14 institutions were documented in reports (Moser 2021 [11]). A video series portraits seven institutions and showcases their experiences and learnings in the process. The cross-case findings and experiences were distilled into overarching principles and recommendations for the design and implementation of diversity processes in educational institutions (Ackermann 2021 [12]).

## 3    CONCLUSION: FLEXIBLE AND TAILPOR-MADE PROCESSES

The experiences and approaches to enhance diversity orientation in the 14 involved organisations were very diverse. To make change processes successful, a high degree of flexibility and openness is necessary, to take the needs and possibilities in the organisations into account. Nevertheless, general conclusions can be drawn [12].

At the beginning of the project, it is important to clarify the objectives and expectations, as well as the most relevant diversity aspects. Furthermore, for the design of the process, the environment and organisational structures need to be made explicit (e.g. demographic data of the target group of the organisation, its sector, size, type, and objectives, previous experiences in dealing with diversity, requirements from e.g. funding agencies).

Regarding relevant elements of the process it became apparent, that the case studies were important steps. They provided insights into the institution, and through involving staff raised awareness and interest in the topic. A change process should be implemented with a participatory approach, involving all employees and external staff, as well as learners. The involvement and commitment of different stakeholders is crucial. In particular, support from management is important. Management should set the framework, point out the strategic importance of a diversity-sensitive approach, as well as provide financial and time resources. Moreover, the motivation and willingness of the staff to deal with the topic of diversity is an indispensable prerequisite for the process. The responsibility for the concrete implementation of the change process should be assigned to a person or a working group. Motivating and creating a participatory environment, is one of the important tasks for a facilitator who accompanies the change. Furthermore, it is important to network with and involve external partners.

A change process should affect all areas of the organisation, but to set realistic goals, measures should begin where the highest priorities have been set within the organisation. Change processes should address different levels: the organisation, the competences of staff and the learning-teaching area. The main topics, on which the processes of increasing diversity focused in the 14 participating organisations can be clustered in the following areas: Diversity in Human Resources Management, Diversity and structural change, Enhancing diversity competences of trainers, Diversity sensitive public relations and adaption of educational offers.

Initiating change processes in an adult education institution should be done with a high degree of flexibility in planning. Change takes patience and time and should be considered in a long-term perspective. However, the change processes in the participating adult education organisations took place within the framework of a scheduled project, so that results should also be available at a certain point in time. Therefore, the implementation of the processes had to find a balance between flexibility and deadlines for specific outcomes. The results of the DivCap project indicate that with a high commitment, creativity, and flexibility, as shown by all partners, these challenges can be overcome. As a result, the DivCap partnership could provide relevant tools and guidelines for adult education organisations to enhance their diversity-orientation.

## 4    ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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