

As Germany and the rest of Europe begin to ask themselves what they can do to accommodate the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, diversity management experts from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Canada gathered on November 16th 2015 at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin to discuss strategies and programs that have been implemented at their own higher education institutions to foster variety on their campuses. Over the course of several hours, the panel put on by the International Dialogue on Education titled “Exploring Differences — Diversity Management and Equity as Factors for Student Success” examined the topic as outlined below.

Summary by Miranda Lee Murray, Berlin, Nov. 2015

National Backgrounds

In Canada, diversity management first began to enter the conversation as a mainstream issue in the 2000s due to efforts at widening university access across Canada as well as a major influx of international students, with their population jumping from 40,000 to 120,000 in the 10 years leading up to 2015. These two changes made administrators realize that simply putting different people together was not enough, and in 2008, they began to pursue a more strategic approach.

The turning point **in the U.S.** toward a more diverse university landscape began in the 1960s as the civil rights movement fought for desegregation within the entire education system, a divide from which the country is still working to heal from and has been the main driver behind universities’ focus on equity, and it wasn’t until 2000 that higher education institutions began implementing job positions that focused specifically on diversity management. People in some areas remain convinced that underserved students don’t have as much to offer, but the U.S. focus on social justice and righting past wrongs through focused diversity management at the university level is seen as one of the system’s strengths and a necessary factor in achieving excellence as a university.

As an ex-colonial power, **the U.K.** had to examine its relationships with the populations it had repressed far before many other European countries, with the first anti-discrimination law addressing overt racism appearing in the mid-1960s. A government examination prompted by the police killing of a black student in the late 1990s found racism was as much in the power structures as it was in people with bad intent, and in the 2000s, the Education Ministry gave funding to universities to look at systematic disadvantages in their system, which led to the founding of the Equality Challenge Unit to serve as an adviser to universities on the topic.

In Germany, it has been accepted only within the last 15 years that universities must acknowledge the issues that students with migrant backgrounds face within their systems and are just now beginning to think about diversity and how to begin building it within their own institutions.

The Main Challenge

Convincing others, whether it be faculty members, the school's leadership or students, that diversity management is necessary *was named as the biggest challenge by each panel participant*. Panelists observed that leadership had to be on board in order to enact any real change, and that a passion for diversity, often driven by one's personal background, was a critical factor for its success.

However, one pragmatic way to address a lack of enthusiasm for diversity within a university's highest levels is to make the case that it's good business for the school: Most universities want to work on a global level, and diversity can be sold as a way for them to reach that goal. While creating a strategy for diversity is essential, it's just as important to hold the entire university accountable -- otherwise it's simply a hollow promise -- and to make sure the initiative touches every level in order to make it an integral part of campus.

At the faculty level, requiring diversity training is one way to bring professors on board with a university's initiatives. Having a dean or faculty member appointed as responsible for diversity is another solution to integrating it further within the campus. For students, universities can offer classes addressing diversity and encourage them to start groups focusing on the issue. One example from the university in Bremen is an ongoing lecture series that's open to the entire school that addresses the topic, which also helps send a clear message that it's an obvious value of the school.

Bringing in Diversity

In the U.S. and Canada, *universities employ recruiters whose primary job is to target certain groups* locally and internationally in order to ensure diversity on campus. However, when looking at a potential student's application, Canada practices blind admissions, while the U.S. can prioritize whom to admit based on demographics as well as grades.

In the U.K., government funding is tied to a university's commitment to bringing in students from underrepresented groups and spending a certain amount on recruiting, but they cannot practice positive discrimination. German universities, which admit students based solely on GPA, will send admission staff out to encourage students with migrant backgrounds, for example, to apply, but there are no dedicated recruiting efforts. All the panelists mentioned open house days or camps at their universities aimed at allowing minority students to get a feel for life at that university.

Panelists briefly discussed the finding that *the application process was found to be a barrier to admission* for some minority students in Canada and the U.S., and to remedy that, employees were hired to aid them through the process. Some panelists agreed that admitting minority students without the proper GPA disadvantaged them and encouraged more support systems to be put in place earlier to help them overcome that hurdle.

Ensuring Student Success

All of the panelists mentioned centers focused on getting students involved in campus life, whether initiated by the school or the students themselves, as crucial to preventing dropouts and ensuring success, but a notable difference in practices was quickly observed between Germany and other countries when it came to the use of data to measure whether retention efforts were working and minority students were obtaining degrees. *Data was seen as an important way to make sure minority students, who generally drop out at higher rates, could be offered help with adjusting to campus life.*

In the U.S., this translated to assessing minority students at the third semester to see if they were at risk of dropping out and having in place “early warning systems” where struggling students were identified and offered help from university advisers. On and off ramps should be in place to ensure that a minority student who may need to take time off to address personal issues will return, noted a panelist. In the U.K., by examining metadata, which is anonymous and does not infringe upon students’ privacy, universities could see which students were more likely to be at risk and could target services for them to help prevent dropouts. *Data is key, many of the panelists conceded, in seeing where to focus efforts at building diversity as well as the effect those efforts have had.*

After Graduation

While universities increasingly feel that their responsibility to a student no longer ends after they give them a diploma, their reach can only go so far when it comes to increasing diversity outside the academic setting, panelists observed. In Germany, universities could do better at informing international students about their rights to stay and look for a job, one panelist noted, but career services are not aimed specifically at them, similar to the other countries, where students can take as much or as little advantage of them as they feel is necessary.

Main Takeaway: Diversity Equals Excellence

A recurring thread throughout the discussion was the idea that diversity and excellence are inherently tied together. Students with migrant backgrounds are sometimes seen as a burden on the school system, even though they have been found to prioritize education and work harder to get better grades, and universities should overtly focus on changing this negative perception into the sentiment that *differences are worth celebrating* and enrich the entire campus.

Panelists also discussed examples of the effects of diversity in faculty hiring, which has led to new research areas and completely transformed others, as well as led to richer dialogues on campus and exposed students to diverse perspectives. Panelists observed that diversity is key to successful problem-solving within groups because people with various backgrounds can apply their unique viewpoint that then can lead to a solution, and that *while it can be uncomfortable at first to interact with people who are different, such experiences better prepare students for the real world.*

Panelists of the 12th ID-E Berlin Conference:

- U.S. speaker: **Josephine De León** Vice President/Chief Diversity Officer, Division for Equity and Inclusion, University of New Mexico
- Canadian speaker: **Sara-Jane Finlay** Associate Vice President, Equity and Inclusion, University of British Columbia
- British speaker: **David Ruebain** Chief Executive, Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)
- German speaker: **Yasemin Karakaşoğlu** Vice Rector for International Affairs and Diversity, University of Bremen
- Chair: **Jan-Martin Wiarda** Science and Education Journalist

Some Examples of Programs that Work:

In North Rhein-Westphalia, a program called **Talentscouting** was mentioned as a new effort by the state government there to actively bring in more diverse students to its schools:

www.wissenschaft.nrw.de/talentscouting

Another program in the U.K. that has found long-term success in encouraging more women to enter STEM fields is the **Athena SWAN Charter**, which has now been expanded to include different minorities and been adapted for other countries as well:

www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan

At the University of British Columbia, international students can take part in **Jump Start**, an orientation and transition program that helps them be prepared for life at a Canadian university and supports them:

<http://students.ubc.ca/campus/get-oriented/attend-orientation/undergrads/international/jump-start>

Further Information and Conference Documentation:

www.ID-E-Berlin.de

The series INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE ON EDUCATION BERLIN (ID-E Berlin) is a joint initiative of the British Council, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the German-American Fulbright Commission, the Embassy of Canada in Germany and Freie Universität Berlin.

