



## Intellectual Output 4 - Pilot Reports

# ENHANCING DIVERSITY ORIENTATION AT THE INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL WORK | INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL WORK (ISA)

Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project “Diversity Capacities - Improving the Capacities of Adult Education Institutions to Successful Dealing with Diversity”

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Illustration 1: © <https://alphaplusmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2014-06-11-Food-for-Thought-1.jpg>

## The Organisation

The Institute of Social Work (ISA) is part of FH JOANNEUM - University of Applied Sciences (FHJ). FH JOANNEUM. The ISA runs different degree and certificate programmes, as well as research projects. The content of the teaching and research in itself focuses on issues related to social work, as expressed by the name of the institute.



Illustration 2: © FH JOANNEUM

# 1. The Institute of Social Work at FH JOANNEUM

The Institute of Social Work (ISA) is part of FH JOANNEUM - University of Applied Sciences (FHJ). FH JOANNEUM - University of Applied Sciences (FHJ) is a higher education institution in Styria / Austria. FHJ consists of six departments with specialisations in computer science, engineering, environment & society, health, management and media & design. It runs 50 bachelor and master degree programmes. Around 4.800 students attended the programmes in 2019/2020. Additionally to teaching, the university's key mission also includes research and continuing education. FHJ has 746 employees and 1.180 external lecturers.

The Institute of Social Work (ISA) is part of the Department of Building, Energy & Society. The ISA runs different degree and certificate programmes, as well as research projects. The content of the teaching and research in itself focuses on issues related to social work, as expressed by the name of the institute.

## Study programmes

The Bachelor's degree programme in Social Work (SAM) is a full-time programme and lasts for 6 semesters. The Master's degree programme in Social Work (SOA) is a part-time and lasts for 4 semesters. There are two certificate programmes running under the head of ISA. The students of certificate programme "Academic Youth and Community Worker" (INJUG, Akademische Jugend- und Gemeinwesenarbeiter\*in) are persons working in youth work, as well as child and youth welfare services. The programme lasts for 3 semesters and is work-friendly. The students of the certificate programme "Academic Peer counselling" (PEER, Akademische Peer-Berater\*in) are persons with physical and psychical disabilities. The programme lasts for 3 semesters, and it is work-friendly. The graduates are qualified to connect their own experiences with competences in counselling as basis for successful Peer Counselling.

## Research projects on social inclusion

The research projects at ISA cover different facets of social inclusion. Recently completed and current research projects deal with the following topics: Diversity in Social Work organisations, Safety in organisations for the disabled, Digitalisation and Social Work, Health care in rural areas, Social Work and Policing, youth participation in rural areas, Girl's Poverty, and the project at hand DivCap. In the past, interdisciplinary projects with the other institutes of the Department were conducted. There is an interest in further interdisciplinary cooperations, and there are considerations and meetings for the initiation and planning of potential joint projects.

## Resources

FH JOANNEUM (n.d.): Wir machen unsere Zukunft FH JOANNEUM. Annual Report 2019-2020, Graz/Kapfenberg/Bad Gleichenberg, p. 16



## 2. Status of diversity orientation at the Institute of Social Work

In the first phase of the DivCap project, a case study was conducted, to identify the status of diversity orientation at ISA (see the DivCap website for the report ). A desk-research, interviews and a focus group discussion with ISA staff were carried out. With reference to the main categories set out in a questionnaire developed by DivCap (see the website for download), structural aspects were inquired, such as the institutional framework or networking connections with the wider community. Furthermore, the conditions for students and staff were researched. Regarding the level of students, a specific focus was put on the application procedure, the composition of students, and the situation during the studies. Regarding staff, the prevailing conditions regarding human resource management and composition of staff were examined. Furthermore, motivation, motives and approaches of staff towards diversity were explored.

### Structural aspects

ISA is part of the big organisation FH JOANNEUM with different departments, administrative units and decision-making bodies. Through the analysis of the structural framework it becomes evident, that laws regulate the work environment and formal requirements prevail. A lot of different entities are involved in the running of FHJ. But there is also scope for flexibility responding to the needs of diverse students and staff, e.g. promoted by the Equality and Diversity Office when it comes to needs of applicants or students with a disability for example. Or special requirements and conditions applied for to certificate programmes, which needed to be specified in the formal documents of the programmes.

### The mission statement and its implementation

The findings show, that the institution is on an advanced level in their diversity orientation. Formally there is an advanced diversity policy at FHJ. In the mission statement a commitment to diversity is stipulated. Measures are taken, when it comes to equal treatment for women. There is a commitment by the University of Applied Sciences (UAS) board's regarding the Advancement of Women. Structural measures are in place that support equality, e.g. the "Working Group on Equal Treatment Issues" of the UAS Board and the "Equality and Diversity Office". Moreover, a training to raise awareness and knowledge about diversity was organised for staff by the Equality and Diversity Office. But further steps for implementing concrete measures and enhancing diversity on the level of FHJ and ISA could be made.

## Composition of students

There is some diversity amongst the students in the Bachelor programme. But the data situation is poor, only for some diversity dimensions information is available, based on estimations and results from the interviews and focus groups. Further research would be needed here. Regarding gender, there are more female students, in average in the cohorts 10 - 20% are male students. Most of the students are between 18 and 24 years old (most of them come directly from a secondary academic college or higher vocational education). Regarding the geographical background, the majority of the students are from the province of Styria and other parts of Austria. Very few of the students with an Austrian school leaving certificate have a migration background (1-2 per cohort). Regarding international students, some students per cohort are from Germany. Very few students have a visible disability. Regarding the educational background, the majority have a school leaving certificate. For a successful admission, applicants need to have previous experience in social work and related fields (e.g. Volunteer Social Year / Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr or Civilian Service / Zivildienst). No data is available regarding socio-economic background.

In the Master programme, the situation is similar, there is some diversity amongst the students. The majority of the students are from the province of Styria and other parts of Austria. Very few students have a migration background (1-2 per cohort). There are more female students, about 1/4 to 1/3 are male students. The cohorts are heterogeneous regarding age, ranging from BA graduates to students who are 30 or 40+. There are no students with a visible disability. The educational background is diverse, there are graduates from the BA programme Social Work, social academy graduates (social academy or Sozialakademie is a predecessor of the degree programmes at the Universities of Applied Sciences), and degree holders from other disciplines such as sociology, science of education, cultural anthropology, etc.

## Application procedure

Formal requirement for the admission to the BA programme Social Work (SAM) programme is a general qualification for university entrance, a university admissions equivalency test or relevant professional qualification with additional examinations. For the admission to the MA programme Social Work (SOA) a relevant bachelor's degree or equivalent qualification is needed. Each year between 300 - 400 students apply for the 55 places at SAM. There is also competition for SOA, but at a lower level, about 60 -70 persons apply for the 28 places per year.



The admissions procedure for SAM consists of three parts: the application, a written assessment test and a personal interview. The admission process for SOA consists of a full set of application documents, an assessment of the concept for the Master's thesis, an interview with the admission committee, an overall assessment of relevant previous qualifications, and an assessment of professional experience in the field of social work. For specific programmes such as the certificate programmes, the requirements for admission are more flexible and correspond with the target group that should be attracted to join the programmes. For applicants with disabilities to the degree programmes, the Equality and Diversity Office at FHJ offers support to participate equally in the admission process and studies.

Regarding the admission interview, it was suggested in the case study, that the admission commission should have a diverse composition, here one measure could be to invite external lecturers or experts. Furthermore, the questionnaire could be supplemented with diversity-oriented questions and by considering diversity dimensions and categories. In addition to the individual selection of applicants, an overall review of the degree programmes in terms of heterogeneity of students could be made and considered when doing the final selection.

### Conditions during the studies

Regarding the conditions during the studies, the fact that there are no tuition fees for students (from the EU, the EEA and Switzerland), was positively noted. The small group size of the cohorts is a big advantage. There is an open-door policy and individual support both by the head of the institute and lecturers. This support encompassed study-related, but also psycho-social needs. Compared to other tertiary institutions, support for students is therefore much better. This is also expressed by the fact that most of the students at FHJ and ISA complete their studies. Furthermore, if necessary, there is the possibility to take leave during studies. It was suggested that the already existing support for students by lecturers could be supplemented by an institutionalised mentoring or buddy system.

The certificate programmes could be used as good practice examples for open and inclusive programmes aiming at attracting students with diverse backgrounds and enabling them to study at a higher education institution.

### Composition of staff

The staff of ISA consists of 21 permanent staff (head, teaching, research, administration) and 59 affiliated lecturers (teaching). Most of permanent staff members are Austrian citizens, 4 have a migration background from another EU-country (Croatia, Germany, Italy, UK). The majority of the staff is female (16 are female and 5 male). Staff is heterogeneous regarding age, ranging from end 20s to 60+. And also regarding “professional age”, staff is diverse. There are no visible disabilities present (except in external teaching staff for the PEER certificate programme). The professional and educational background is diverse, ranging from social workers (social academy and FH) with work experience in different fields of social work to higher education institutions. The academic background is diverse as well, ranging from graduates of sociology, science of education, cultural anthropology, language studies to law. The affiliated staff are professionals with work experience in different fields of social work and higher education institutions.

### Motives and approaches of staff towards diversity

At ISA, there are different levels of awareness regarding diversity. Amongst the interviewed during the case study, there is a wide range of understanding and knowledge regarding FHJ mission statement, diversity and diversity policies. On one side, amongst some there is low consciousness regarding diversity and concrete policy at FHJ and ISA. On the other side, there is staff that has a high awareness about diversity and equal treatment issues. Some are also dealing with these issues in their teaching and research. But there is a lack of resources perceived to develop towards more inclusiveness. In particular time and financial resources are highlighted. Furthermore, formal requirements and regulated processes in a higher education institution in general and at FHJ are seen as barriers as well (e.g. the procedure for the admission is determined FHJ wide and there is only limited scope at the level of the institute).

The case study found that in general, employees meet the topic of diversity orientation and equal treatment with favour. However, the time resources are scarce and organisational structures are not conducive for an exchange about the content and a necessary deepening of the subject matter. Therefore, resources and spaces for exchange should be made available. In order to be able to realistically implement this, ideas could be collected, how these could be integrated in already existing structures and formats.

## 3. Enhancing diversity orientation

### 3.1 Aims

Promoting diversity at ISA and at FHJ in general, has a more inclusive organisation as its goal. This would be beneficial for applicants from diverse backgrounds, who were at a disadvantage in the past to gain access to ISA. Furthermore, it also would improve the experience of students during the educational process, leading to a successful completion of their studies and contribute to equal opportunity. Furthermore, through the process and dealing with diversity issues, the awareness of staff regarding the heterogenous composition of the cohort of students they are teaching, should be enhanced .

#### Rationales for promoting inclusive access

The aim of promoting a more inclusive access to higher education would lead to a diverse composition that reflects the composition of the population and includes underrepresented student groups. Furthermore, the objective can be seen in connection with the goal of having more diverse social workers. The rationale for the objective can be linked to the professional ethical principles of Social Work, epitomised in the global definition of social work that stipulates that “principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to social work.” (IFSW/ IASSW 2014).

Furthermore, professional debates on intercultural/diversity-oriented opening (e.g. Schröder 2018) call for a representation of clients and staff in relation to the composition of the population and reflect societal relations. A further aim is to create and facilitate access for all, therefore the question needs to be asked, where potential barriers restricting equal access can be identified. Another line of argument refers to the National strategy on the social dimension in higher education, a document developed by the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BMFW 2017). The paper points out the need to consider the social dimension in higher education, aiming at the common goal that students should reflect the composition of the population in access, participation and completion of higher education at all levels.



## 3.2 Presentation of the case study, the planned way forward, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

### Presentation of the case study

The findings of the case study were presented by the DivCap facilitator to the head of the Institute of Social Work in February 2020. As a result of the case study, a list of recommendations was developed and short- and long term measures specified. The recommendations tackle questions of mainstreaming of already existing measures, and measures on the level of students and staff.

- Making the FHJ mission statement livelier and more specific for ISA.
- Diversification of the composition of students through making the admission process more inclusive, and setting up networks with migrant organisations to target applicants with a migration background.
- Supportive conditions for diverse students & staff dealing with diverse students through promotion of inclusive teaching and assessing methods to promote equality amongst diverse students.
- Diversification of the composition of staff

Since there is high performance pressure and lack of time in the daily work, new measures, ideas for improvement and change need to be linked with already existing routines and structures



### Planned way forward

The recommendations were discussed and the way forward was agreed. An interest was expressed to further work on enhancing awareness of diversity orientation. A further development of the mission statement should be linked with principles developed during the last institute conference with faculty members. It was decided that the topics of raising awareness of diversity orientation and promoting inclusive teaching methods should be linked, to have a practical outcome and ideas for transfer for staff. The concrete format for implementation would need to be further explored, whether a specific workshop on the topics could be held or synergy effects could be used, by incorporating the topic in other staff meetings. Regarding admission procedures, the concept for the Master's admission procedure has been redeveloped and should be presented to the SOA admission committee members in April. The DivCap facilitator could contribute and bring in the diversity topic in this forum, as well as in the preparation meeting of the SAM admission committee.

The recommendation to consider more supportive measures for students was received with great interest. This linked with the already existing idea of the head of the institute to introduce a tutor system for students. It was agreed that a survey should be undertaken among students to find out where they see a need for support and what challenges they experience in their studies. The findings should be presented in the institutes staff (faculty members and external lecturers) conference in autumn.

### **Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation**

But then in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic got in the way and the plans for implementation had to be rearranged. In Higher Education, the institutions were asked to switch from face-to-face to online teaching from one day to the next and everybody had to work from home. The concepts, didactical approaches and implementation of the courses had to be redeveloped to meet the needs and requirements for online teaching within a few days. Furthermore, the technical equipment and tools for online teaching had to be installed and crash-courses were offered so that the lecturers and students could get familiar with them and were able to use them for their teaching and learning process. Everybody had to get used to work in home-office from one day to the next, getting the required equipment, and good internet connection. In addition to the challenges of the professional adjustments, the uncertain situation, the health threat of the Coronavirus disease, the restrictions in the private life, were enormous strains. For adjusting to the new situation, many efforts had to be made and tied up lots of resources.

Therefore, most of the foreseen measures of the DivCap project couldn't be implemented as planned in the intended time period. But wherever possible, an attempt was made to combine upcoming necessary tasks and needs with the concerns of the DivCap project, and the issue of diversity orientation was brought into institutes meeting, whenever possible. In order to focus resources, activities were centered on the support for students and the admission interviews.

## **3.3 Support for Students**

Studying at a higher education institution required skills and abilities to successfully meet the requirements of an academic setting. The requirements can be distinguished between performance-related requirements (e.g. writing seminar papers, oral presentations, exams) and those in the organisational area (e.g. work planning, self-organisation, time management). Some students have acquired relevant skills on their previous educational pathway, some need support.

Furthermore, in particular for first-generation and non-traditional students it is not easy to orientate themselves in an academic setting and institution and find their way around. Here support systems such as mentoring programmes can serve as an important aid.

Therefore, support for students was the topic of one of the recommendations in the case-study. In an HE organisation, necessary support measures can be distinguished between study-related support and psycho-social support. During the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning, the need for support became even more eminent. Especially, vulnerable groups and students from disadvantaged backgrounds found it more difficult to cope with the situation. Here in particular, besides study-related support, psycho-social support systems were necessary.

During the pilot project in the framework of the DivCap project, research was done regarding concepts, already existing measures and dissemination of the information regarding support systems. Furthermore, the DivCap facilitator set up or got involved in initiatives to support students.

### **Psychosocial support for students - Initiative at the Institute of Social Work within the framework of the DivCap project**

In line with the approach to respond to current concern and link it with recommendations made in the case study, in March 2020 the DivCap facilitator initiated an exchange amongst ISA staff about the need for support of students and possible options how to assist. First an exchange was facilitated in the institutes' Moodle forum. Information was collected regarding the following questions:

- Needs: Is there a need for psychosocial support on the part of the students? What are the current concerns of students? In particular also thinking about student groups that are not so visible and keeping in mind the different needs of different groups (age, gender, professional situation, etc.).
- Collection and dissemination of information regarding existing initiatives: on FHJ and ISA level, from student representation, and informal peer support among students.
- Concrete support measures for students - contribution on the part of the institute: in the teaching, but also beyond.
- Concrete support measures for employees: survey, whether there was a need for further support amongst staff.

Regarding support for ISA staff, several measures were in place, e.g. there were exchange forums such as the Moodle and the institute meetings as well as e-mails and meetings in pairs, information was provided by the head of the institute, and through newsletters by the FHJ, support regarding online didactics and technical questions was provided by ZML - Innovative Learning Scenarios.

Five colleagues expressed their interest to form a small working-group and these questions were discussed in an online meeting. As a next step, the DivCap facilitator contacted students' representatives to explore their view on the current situation of the students. An online meeting with the first-year students' representatives took place at the beginning of April 2020. The agenda of the meeting was two-fold, to hear their assessment regarding the study situation under regular and under the current COVID-19 conditions.

Student representatives' feedback in April 2020, a few weeks after the sudden switched to distance learning:

- Need for improvement: more clarity is needed, keep changes to a minimum, appropriateness of workload
- Positive feedback regarding MS Teams online lectures and teaching videos produced by the lecturers, as well formats of exams such as open book exams



The most important points of the discussion during the meeting were then shared with the ISA staff. General concerns regarding the situation during their studies were expressed by the student representatives. But the focus was on the current situation due to COVID-19 and particular regarding online teaching: a big need for clarity was expressed. They experienced a lot of changes induced by the switch to distance learning regarding the course outline as well as the usage of different tools and platforms. These changes should be kept to a minimum. Furthermore, considerations were expressed regarding the appropriateness of the workload. Positive feedback was given regarding teaching and assessment methods such as MS Teams online lectures or videos with PowerPoint Presentations and audio file, or open book exams. Furthermore, the students expressed in a self-reflecting way, that without a fixed structure it was more difficult for them to learn continuously and to work through the proved course material independently. The idea to provide an additional Moodle platform for support and information, was not considered as useful, since there were already many new online forums within the study programme. However, there was the suggestion, that tips for dealing with online learning and home isolation should be posted on the FHJ Instagram page.

Additional, to the results from the exchange with the students, links and information for dealing with the current situation were distributed amongst the staff; and they were invited to forward the information to the students. It was decided not to create an additional forum or information sheet, but use and disseminate the ones already available, e.g. the ” studyonline and stayhealthy” section at FH Website , the factsheet ”Tips and Tricks for Online Learning” or the info sheet ”COVID-19: How to survive domestic isolation and quarantine” by the Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists.

### Initiative “Studying together in times of COVID”

In the winter term, after a short period of in-classroom teaching, all the lectures had to go online again. In November, at FHJ “Studying together in times of COVID” was launched as a joint initiative of the directors of FHJ, the UAS board, and the student’s union. The DivCap facilitator also was engaged in the preparation and implementation of the initiative.

The shift to online teaching was very challenging. The personal contact with lecturers and fellow students was lacking. These contacts fill studying with life in the first place. Therefore, the initiative offered the students some ideas and opportunities to get in touch with other students, and initiated and encouraged these contacts. Different measures were proposed such as tutorials and study groups. The aim of these groups was to organise joint activities that increase the joy of studying and make studying more successful. Tips were collected and disseminated how to organise these study groups. Furthermore, a coaching for these groups was proposed and the DivCap facilitator was one of the contact persons for students interested in an exchange.

Representatives of a few groups got in touch and a joint exchange meeting was considered. But since the response for such a meeting finally was not very big, this did not take place. The study groups seemed to be running well without additional external support needed.

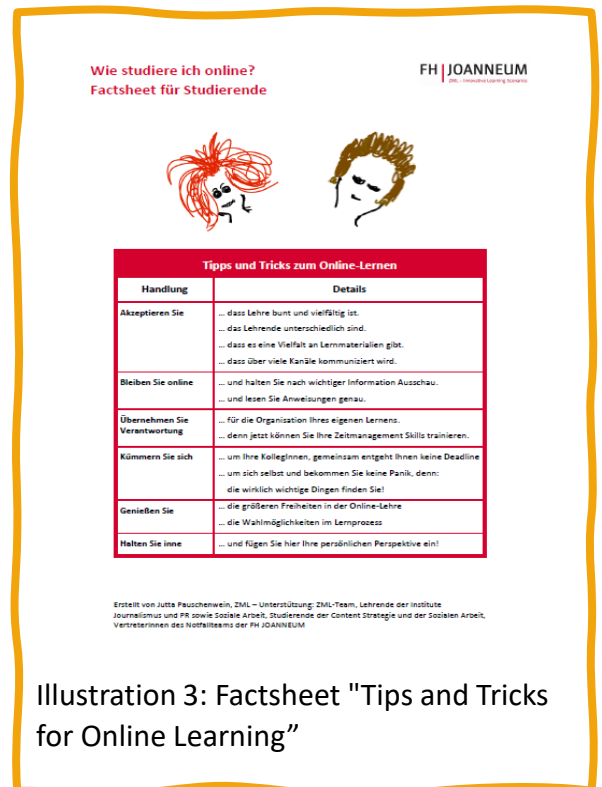


Illustration 3: Factsheet "Tips and Tricks for Online Learning"



Furthermore, peer counselling was suggested as a further measure. Peer counselling is offered by students to students who are experiencing stressful times. Students who were looking for advice, could approach designated contact persons. And students who wanted to get engaged as peer advisor could get in touch for an introductory training session. There was some interest and two training sessions took place.

And third, in the framework of the initiative, information about the services and offers by the Psychological student counselling (Psychologische Studierendenberatung) was distributed.

The aims of the initiative to promote a supportive environment for students to successfully cope with the strainful times during their studies meet with the aims of DivCap to promote a conducive environment and awareness for students needs and propose concrete support systems. In particular vulnerable groups and students from disadvantaged backgrounds found it more difficult to cope with the situation. Therefore, the proposal of concrete measures was a relevant step to support students to successfully deal with the situation and continue their studies, despite all challenges. This can be considered as an important contribution to becoming an inclusive organisation.

”During the period of complete lockdown and exclusively online teaching and learning, it was not possible for students to simply meet before or after courses, chat, informally exchange information about their studies, talk about day to day worries, etc. Head of institutes were worried that some students would not be able to cope with this phase of online learning and experienced this situation as extremely critical. Therefore, peer counsellors were trained together with the Austrian Student Union. Some degree programmes organised tutorials. So that students could help students not to become lonely, to keep up their motivation for their studies, to make everyday life more communicative. Offering relationships in times of digital communication was an enormously important resource.”

(Vice Head of the UAS Board)



## Buddy programme organised by SAM students

One of the agreed measures for the DivCap pilot project was to do desk research regarding support system for students and develop a concept for a mentoring or tutoring system based on the findings. During the project period it became apparent, that this approach is of relevance and that there is a need, since the students at the Bachelor programme SAM organised a buddy programme on their own initiative and in a self-organised manner. Also, in previous years, peer programmes existed, and there was networking and exchange amongst the cohorts of different years. The contacts were made mainly through interactions and meetings directly at the FHJ, e.g. through a welcome party organised by 2nd year students for the 1st year students. Since the COVID-19 restrictions didn't allow events and most courses were held online, personal contacts were not possible. Therefore, at the beginning of the winter term 2020, a buddy programme was initiated by 2nd semester students. Through the programme they wanted to offer the 1st semester students the opportunity to get to know fellow students from another cohort. Those were available in a one-to-one buddy relationship to answer questions related to the studies and beyond, e.g. life and events in Graz. In a first step, the initiator and three fellow students met to develop a concept for the buddy programme. Important topics discussed and agreed upon were:

- The programmes should be a buddy system, in the sense of a peer to peer approach. And not a mentoring system, since this would imply a hierarchy.
- Duration: for one year (until the end of the summer term)
- Commitment by the buddy for the entire period (unless there are some serious reasons to end before and/or both sides are not interested in the continuation)
- Equal distribution: One buddy is responsible for two or three students.
- Distributions of students to the buddies: different systems were considered, but the final decision was to do the allocation in an anonymous way through a drawing. And not based on common interests or already existing acquaintances.

"In my eyes the Buddy program had shown its importance through the COVID-19 Pandemic and its social impact. We as students felt the urge to get in contact with our fellow students to support and share our experiences and fears regarding this crisis and our studies."

(Initiator and leader of the buddy programme)



- Mode of first contact: the buddies make the first move and get in touch with the assigned 1st year students.
- In a first meeting between buddies and students, expectations, responsibilities and the shape of the buddy relationship should be clarified.
- Swapping to other buddies was possible, if there was a lack of sympathy, but had to be clearly communicated.
- Two 2nd year students took part in the programme, but without taking the role of buddies themselves, their task was to be responsible for questions or if conflicts arise. One of the “complaint persons” was male and one female, to consider potential gender issues. Furthermore, a messenger group was set up to discuss and support each other, if sensitive issues came up during the programme.

The working group presented their ideas to fellow students interested in the programme, and after a discussion, the concept got finalised. The buddy programme was presented to all 1st semester students during an online lecture. The response was overwhelming, 40 of the 55 students expressed their interest. The groups were formed and developed into various forms. The main focus was on exchanging information about study related topics, e.g. exams, study material, or internships. The complaints persons didn't need to get active, since no conflicts were brought to their attention. A mid-term meeting was planned, but due to the busy academic schedule and COVID-19 restrictions, that meeting was postponed and a big get-together with all buddies and students was scheduled for the end of the summer semester.

The concept of the buddy system is available in a written form and will be handed over to the student representatives of the 1st year. It is optional whether they continue the programme next year (see the concept paper in the attachment).

The DivCap facilitator attended the course where the initiative was presented and also had a meeting with the initiator at the end of the summer term, to hear about the experiences and lessons learnt. Diversity aspect were not a specific issue that arose, since the composition of the cohort was perceived as quite homogenous by the students, when it comes to e.g. socio-economic background (see chapter 2 as well regarding the composition of the students). Nevertheless, it was deemed important to engage with the buddy programme, since the initiative is an important contribution to a more inclusive study environment.

## Examples of other mentoring programmes

Some research was done regarding mentoring programmes at other institutes. The findings showed that there are different models of programmes in place at FHJ and beyond.

### Lecturers as mentors

At the Institute of Energy, Mobility and Environmental Management, a mentoring system is run. Each faculty member is responsible for a group of 5-6 students. The lecturer acts as a contact person for questions or problems arising during the studies. Twice a semester personal meeting (online during COVID) with the group take place. Topics discussed are exams, course material, or feedback regarding lecturers and the quality of courses. If issues arise, the mentor brings the topic to the attention of a colleague or it is discussed in the institute conference.

### Students as peer-mentors

At the Institute of Information Management, a mentoring programme is run in the Bachelor and Master programme. Initiated by the Institute, students from the 3rd semester act as mentors for the 1st semester students. The programme has been running for 10 years, initially for the Bachelor, but then extended to the Master programme. The programme is very successful and also reduces the dropout rate. At the Institute one staff member is entrusted with the task of managing the programme. A call for students interested in acting as mentors is made by the Institute. For those interested, an information session is organised and approaches, role and duties are discussed. At the beginning of the semester, when the composition of the mentor team is fixed, a get together with the four mentors and the person responsible takes place. The meeting over coffee is paid by the Institute, to show appreciation. Furthermore, the mentors receive a small allowance and a certificate. Regarding the composition of the team, it is important for the organisers to have two male and two female students. In the first week of the new semester, the mentor team visits a lecture attended by the entire cohort, usually it is a lecture conducted by the head of the study programme. Here they present the mentor programme. The further implementation is in the responsibility of the mentors. The group size is between 15-18 students. Topics covered are study-related questions, but also settling in and finding your way around a new city. At the beginning of the semester, an excursion to a wine tavern is organised, paid for by company sponsoring. These events are considered important for bonding. The experiences of the mentors are documented and passed on to the team of the following year. Furthermore, students from the 5th semester act as senior mentors supporting the 3rd semester mentors if questions arise. Also, the person responsible for the programme is available for questions.

### Peer-mentoring for first-generation students

An interesting programme with a specific focus on diversity issues is implemented at the University of Graz. The teaching and study services run a peer-mentoring programme for prospective students and students who are the first in their family to study (“First Generation Students”) or with a migration biography.

For more information see:

<https://lehr-studienservices.uni-graz.at/de/studienservices/>

### Dissemination of information regarding study-related support measures

The research done regarding support services for students’ regard performance-related and organisational requirements showed, that there are several institutions that provide support services in this regard, but they are not widely known. Therefore, the DivCap facilitator aimed to make these offers better known, by sharing the information in institutes meetings and courses.

At FHJ, the division **ZML - Innovative Learning Scenarios** offers the workshop “Learning how to learn.” Topics such as motivation, time and stress management, or effective learning strategies are covered. The three-hour workshop is free of charge for FHJ students. And if lecturers are interested, they can invite the ZML trainers and integrate the workshop content into their course.

Furthermore, the **Psychological Student Counselling** (Psychologische Studierendenberatung) provides several offers related to academic performance and personal challenges. The counselling centre offers support by telephone, e-mail or by prior arrangement via video telephony and chat. Personal counselling is also possible after making an appointment by telephone. Furthermore, group counselling is available. On their website lots of helpful tips and information are provided. For more information see <https://www.studierendenberatung.at> (also in English).

At the **University of Graz**, the **Writing Centre** offers workshops and consultations on academic writing, writing strategies and working techniques are taught, and it initiates exchange and dialogue about writing. The Centre offers workshops, as well as individual coaching and arranges for peer-to-peer writing tutors. On their website lots of helpful resources are available, e.g. video tutorials. For more information see <https://schreibzentrum.uni-graz.at>.

## 3.4 The admission interviews & diversity perspectives

As mentioned above, the admission procedure for the Bachelor programme SAM consists of three parts:

- the application,
- a written assessment test and
- a personal interview.

In 2021 344 persons applied for SAM and after taking the test, the first 190 with the highest scores were invited to the personal interviews. A first selection already takes place here - or even before: the question must be asked who applies for a place at the study programme for Social Work?! This points to the issue of pre-selection mechanisms during the educational path and school systems for different groups. Other factors are the educational choices of different groups and the role of educational guidance. Furthermore, the image of Social Work in the wider society needs to be considered as another influencing factor. And in a second step, the question needs to be pursued, who has passed the test; which relates to the selectivity of the test.

Although these questions are highly relevant, in the framework of the piloting for the DivCap project, a focus had to be chosen. This needs to be seen in the light and context of available possibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic; staff working from home, and scarce (time) resources because of additional work load for the staff of FHJ, evoked by e.g. preparation of distance learning courses, which is more time-consuming and exhausting. Furthermore, the feasibility to address far-reaching issues and to introduce wide-ranging changes in the framework of a project with a fixed and time-limited schedule needs to be considered. Moreover, some of the fields are not within the FHJ's direct sphere of influence. Therefore, the focus was put on the admission interviews.

### Including diversity perspectives in the admission interviews

At the institute, the interviews with the applicants are carried out by committees that consist of two members of permanent staff. In a preparatory meeting, the process and the conduct of the interviews are discussed. During the online meeting of the members of the admission commission of spring 2021, the DivCap facilitator gave an input about the DivCap project and enhanced awareness about diversity orientation.

At FHJ some measures already exist regarding facilitation of access for disadvantages groups, e.g. for applicants with a disability the Equality and Diversity Office offers support. And at ISA specific consideration is given to applicants with a first language other than German (with a foreign school leaving certificate).

The standard interview procedure is as follows: The interview is structured by questions related to six dimensions that have been predefined in the interview guidelines. In spring 2021 (as well as in 2020), because of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures, the interviews had to be held online. The duration per interview is between 20 to 30 minutes. After the interview has been conducted, the team decides on points awarded for each dimension, and observations and interpretations are discussed.

### **Proposing the “Diversity wheel” as a tool for reflection**

Regarding perceptions, it may be assumed that a high level of reflexivity is prevailing amongst the members of the committee. But nevertheless, the question needs to be asked, whether unconscious bias still operates. As a tool for reflection, the diversity wheel (four layers of diversity) by Gardenswartz & Rowe was proposed (see the annex). This should help to enhance the awareness about different diversity dimensions of the applicants. The proposal was, that in addition to the standard procedure, an exchange is done amongst the committee team regarding the issue of diversity dimensions and how they could influence their perceptions and judgements. For this purpose, a questionnaire was proposed.

The suggestions were discussed in the meeting. The importance of taking diversity into account and reflection was stressed by the committee members. But contradictions were highlighted as well, e.g. regarding some dimensions sensitivity is required, and some dimensions are not allowed to be enquire in the interview. One group cannot be advanced in particular; this would need to be laid down in the formal regulations of the study programme. A discrepancy between the standardised procedure and requirements for equal treatment versus measures to promote equity were highlighted. Furthermore, more empirical evidence regarding the interview procedure and its results was requested. Moreover, the situation for non-traditional students should be the topic of further investigations. Another issue was the limited scope of action for the institute as part of the FHJ, since to a great extent, the admission procedure is standardised across the FHJ. Moreover, it was emphasised that students also need support during their studies, in particular for non-traditional or first-generation students or for students whose first language is not German.

As a result of the meeting, three diversity dimensions were specified that are of particular relevance, namely gender, migration and age. Committee teams that want to participate and use the questionnaire for reflection, should send their feedback in a collected form to the DivCap facilitator.

#### Important points when considering diversity orientation

- Balance of the ambiguity between the importance of considering diversity dimensions versus diversity dimensions as a sensitive issue which can't be enquired in interviews
- Standardised procedure to promote equality versus support measures to promote equity
- Determination of relevant diversity dimensions for a specific context
- Heterogeneous students will need support during their studies
- Need for empirical evidence regarding the interview procedure and situation of first-generation and non-traditional students



### Experiences with the diversity wheel as a tool

#### The diversity wheel enhances the awareness about diversity dimensions

Despite the time constraints that characterise the daily work routines, members of the committees took their time and used the proposed tool for reflection. In the feedback received it was voiced, that it was interesting to consciously reflect diversity dimensions and the role they play in the interviews. Diversity dimensions such as gender, age, sexual orientation, regional origin, hobbies, language and accents, social background (of the parents), or appearance (clothing) were noticed and mentioned. It was also stated, that religion didn't play a role. In particular the educational background and previous experiences in the field of social work and related fields are deemed as important. This is linked with the importance attributed to previous experience and the ability to express knowledge about the field of social work. Furthermore, it was voiced, that it is good that the interviews are conducted by a team in order to notice areas where they may have an emotional reaction or a subconscious prejudice, due to the own biography and experiences.



### **Diversity dimensions versus assessment criteria and dimensions**

Diversity dimensions are consciously - or unconsciously - noticed. But in the interview and the assessment, the focus is on the 6 dimensions of the assessment form. Therefore, diversity dimensions could not be taken into account in the assessment and attributing of points. E.g. when it comes to gender and the goal to have a more mixed cohort regarding gender. Some committee members expressed that they noticed the gender of the applicants. But if the male applicants couldn't show their knowledge and experiences in social work and demonstrate their suitability as future student of social work and social worker, they didn't fulfill the requirements and their assessment and the scoring did not turn out so well. Discriminating positively against "gender" is not part of the assessment procedure. This is true also for other dimensions such as age or educational and professional background. Here the principle of equality and not equity is applied.

In general, the observations were made that the applicants are not very diverse - that means either the diversity dimension is obvious or so hidden that it is difficult to ask about it. The feedback and reflections received from the members of the committees show that composition of the applicants is not very diverse. The majority of the applicants apply soon after they passed their leaving certificate, directly or respectively one or two years afterwards. Most of the female applicants did a voluntary social year (Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr), and the male applicants did their compulsory community service (Zivildienst).

### **Complexity of the topic requires multidimensional approaches**

After the completion of the admission procedure, the diversity topic was on the agenda during an institute meeting with all staff members at the end of the summer semester. The DivCap facilitator summarised the feedback received and the results were discussed. The main points and topics raised were:

#### **Consideration of different levels**

It was deemed that only focusing on the level of perceptions during the admission interview is falling short of a comprehensive treatment of a complex topic. The consideration of three levels is important: before the application to the study programme, the admission procedure, and during the studies. Furthermore, the issue needs to be seen and addressed not only on the level of the Institute, but also on the level of the entire organisation. In addition, the responsibility of management to promote diversity was pointed out.

It was stressed that regarding conditions before applying to the study programme, mechanisms in the school and educational system prior to tertiary education need to be considered. Moreover, the need to bear in mind where the study programme is promoted, was expressed. One strategy could be more networking with relevant stakeholders to advertise the Social Work study programme to diverse groups. This could change the situation of a homogeneous composition of the applicants.

### **Consideration of the formal requirements of the admission procedure**

Regarding the admission procedure, it was stressed, that it should be about selecting the most suitable applicants, regardless of diversity dimensions. It was expressed, that experiences with the diversity wheel showed, that addressing diversity dimensions has no impact on the scoring; it was underlined, that age or gender are not relevant for the ability to be a good social worker. If there is an aim to promote specific groups, this needs to be made explicit. If a decision is reached, e.g. if prioritisations of specific target groups are made (e.g. regarding gender or migration background), then the approaches and targets need to be specified in the formal document that sets out the framework and regulations of the study programme. One idea voiced were quota places for specific groups, e.g. for persons that have proven themselves in practical work in the field of social work. An example regarding this idea was put forward, there are quota places at the degree programme in Vienna.

### **Consideration of the situation during the studies**

If the composition of students becomes more diverse, the situation during the studies needs specific consideration. Conditions, that are supportive for diverse students would be necessary, and preparations and support systems would need to be in place. What would be needed from our side to manage arising divergent needs?! And take care of them during a very busy everyday life in a higher education institution?! And how can these issues of diversity can be dealt with in a higher education organisation with formal requirements? How do those who are characterised by differences, orient themselves and are successful during their studies? E.g. there is some experience with older students: while some find their way, for some it is more difficult to manage. Also, the issue of how students interact with their fellow students (e.g. with disabilities), was discussed.

Conclusive answers have not yet been found to the raised questions. But a start has been made in raising these questions. Concluding the meeting, the head of the institute set up an internal working group to further look into the issue of diversity in the admission procedure. The DivCap facilitator will coordinate the next meetings of the working group.

## 4. DivCap - offering food for thought and further steps

Change processes need to be seen in a long-term perspective. During the DivCap project period steps towards the goal of a more inclusive higher education organisation were taken. Several concrete activities were implemented to promote diversity-orientation at ISA. These steps were done in a period where the COVID-19 pandemic had its far-reaching impact on all aspects of life, also on the running of higher education institutions. But it has nevertheless succeeded in introducing and discussing impulses that went beyond everyday processes and issues ISA staff has to tackle.

What became apparent is the complexity of the issue. Interrelationships and impacts need to be considered. One important point is that, if you raise the diversity of the student composition, you need to think about introducing support systems for the heterogeneous students, to assist them to find their way, study successfully, and meet the requirements in an academic system. During the piloting different support systems were explored. Two different approaches that can be distinguished are, on one hand approach that promote peer group support, and on the other hand lecturers that act as mentors. During the project duration, initiatives to support students were promoted and knowledge was gathered that can be built upon.

When raising the diversity of the student composition → the introduction of support systems for diverse students is necessary



During the piloting, the awareness about diversity of the admission commission members was addressed through the introduction of the diversity wheel as a tool for reflection. What became apparent is that particular diversity dimensions of applicants can only be promoted, if there is a prioritisation and officially declared promotion of specific target groups (e.g. regarding gender). Therefore, beyond the individual level of the committee members, diversity awareness needs to be lay down on an institutional level. As a first step, the relevant diversity dimensions and criteria need to be discussed and agreed. And then laid down in the formal document that sets out the framework and regulations of the study programme.

Diversity awareness on the individual & institutional level



Important lessons learned in the change process:

- Finding a balance between "justice in the sense of equality for all" and the inclusion of "affirmative action".
- To deepen the awareness of diversity in the study programme and to increasingly include the consideration of diversity in all study-relevant organisational processes.

Challenges in the change process

- Innovations through the project versus standardised procedures and processes in the FH management system.
- Additional task in the admission procedure and insufficient time resources to sufficiently reflect on examples and therefore the requirement of "learning-by-doing". Debriefings and evaluations are planned for a next round.

(Head of the Institute)



### Follow-up activities

The DivCap project has offered food for thought regarding diversity orientation during the project duration for the head of the institute and staff. Further concrete follow-up activities to deal with the issues in the future are planned.

At the beginning of the winter semester 2021, a conference will be held with all faculty staff and external lecturers of the institute. The DivCap facilitator will have the opportunity to present and discuss the final results of the international part and piloting at FHJ with the entire team.

Furthermore, regarding support measures, the proposal for an applied research project to implement a support system for students with mental health issues, that was not successful during the last submission, will be reconsidered for submission to relevant funding agencies.

Moreover, the working group on the admission procedure set up by the head of the institute, will have meetings to further discuss diversity orientation.

The DivCap facilitator is member of the Working Group "Social Work in the Migration Society" of the Austrian Society for Social Work (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit / ogsa). Because of her initiative, the issue of admission procedures was put on the agenda of the next meeting of the working group in November 2021. The topic was met with great interest by other members of the group, some of them also work at institutes of Social Work at other Austrian Universities of Applied Sciences.

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### Links

- Diversity Capacities website: <https://www.diversitycapacities.eu/> [2021-07-05]
- Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists (Berufsverband Österreichischer Psychologinnen und Psychologen): COVID-19: Wie Sie häusliche Isolation und Quarantäne gut überstehen / How to survive domestic isolation and quarantine [https://www.boep.or.at/download/5e70a6b23c15c85df5000007/20160317\\_COVID-19\\_Informationenblatt.PDF](https://www.boep.or.at/download/5e70a6b23c15c85df5000007/20160317_COVID-19_Informationenblatt.PDF) [2021-07-05]
- Psychological student counselling (Psychologische Studierendenberatung) <https://www.studentenberatung.at/> [2021-07-05]
- University of Graz, Peer mentoring <https://lehr-studienservices.uni-graz.at/de/studienservices/>; <https://welcomeday.uni-graz.at/de/serviceeinrichtungen/peer-mentoring/> [2021-07-05]
- FH JOANNEUM: studyonline and stayhealthy, <https://www.fh-joanneum.at/blog/studyonline-und-stayhealthy> [2021-07-05]
- Writing Centre (Schreibzentrum), University Graz <https://schreibzentrum.uni-graz.at> [2021-07-05]
- ZML - Innovative Learning Scenarios, FH JOANNEUM/ Jutta Pauschenwein: Factsheet "Tips and Tricks for Online Learning" / Tipps und Tricks zum Online-Lernen <https://cdn.fh-joanneum.at/media/2020/03/factsheet-D.pdf> [2021-07-05]

## 6. ANNEX - Good Practice Examples

### 6.1 Concept buddy programme

The document was provided by the initiator of the programme (the original version is in German).

#### Buddys

minutes of the meeting of the working group

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##### Basic idea

- Contact person for studies (public transport tickets, how to get involved politically, lecturers, etc.)
- Professionalism: anonymous, internal exchange (SAM19 group)
- List with e-mail & main focus /interests

##### Brainstorming

- Persons selected/assigned
- Deputy buddy? / reflecting partner
- Individual vs. groups
- boundaries
- Limits or (non-)responsibilities are defined personally!
- Complaints system?

##### Agreement

- Individual relationship
- Internal list of resources (created by xy)
- Whats-App group
- Primary: I give info from expert to buddy
- Buddies are randomly assigned (discussion: take gender preferences into account yes/no?)
- Duration 1 academic year
- No compulsory - voluntary
- Next meeting in December, further meetings as needed
- No leadership. If necessary, this will be agreed individually
- 2 complaint persons (1 male / 1 female) xy & xy;
- Openly handed out FH email addresses
- Idea: if it is possible due to Covid, there should be a joint event.
- Boundaries will be clarified individually with the buddies.
- At the beginning 1-2 times offers should be made, then the buddy decides.

## 6.2 Questionnaire for admission commission members

### Admission procedure SAM, summer semester 2021

Members of the Admission Committee

Name or names of the team: \_\_\_\_\_

#### My experiences with dealing with diversity dimensions in the admissions interview

1) Has anything changed in the evaluation of applicants as a result of the awareness of diversity dimensions?

If yes, in what form?

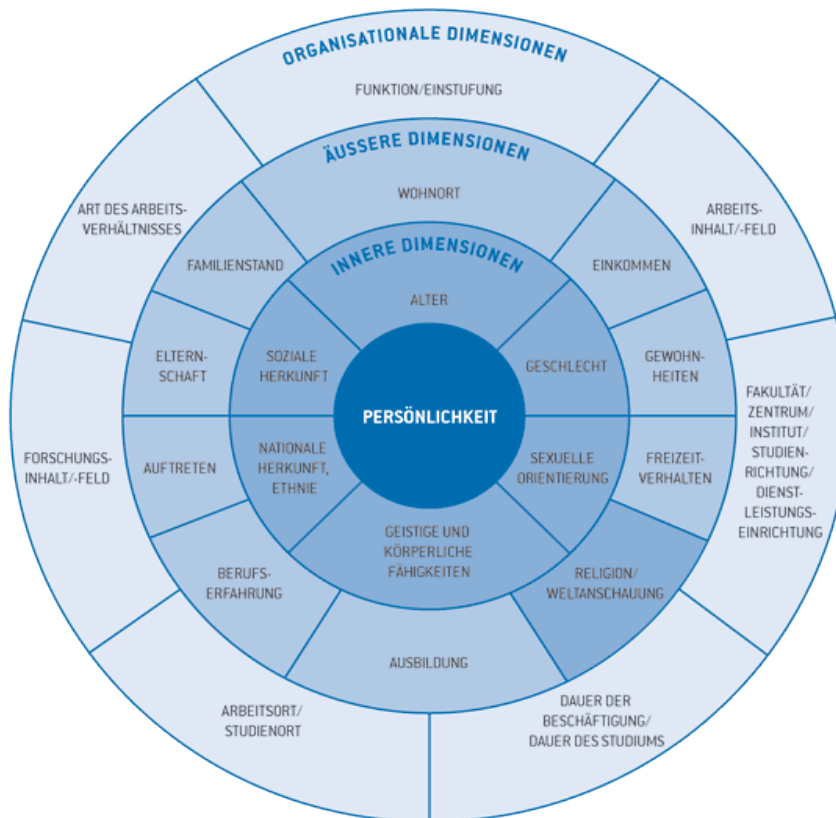
If no, what are the reasons?

2. Did I become aware of anything else?

Diversity dimensions determined as relevant during the discussion in the preliminary meeting of the admission commission, summer term 2021

- gender
- migration
- age

Diversity dimensions according to the diversity wheel



4 layers of diversity by Gardenswartz, L. and Rowe, A.; adapted by the University of Vienna (<https://personalwesen.univie.ac.at/gleichstellung-diversitaet/diversitaet/worum-geht-es-bei-diversitaet/>)

Legally protected dimensions according to the Equal Treatment Act or the Federal Act on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

- Age
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Ethnic affiliation
- Religion / belief
- Disability

Note:

- **Social origin** has not yet been included as a legally protected characteristic. But in the social sciences, race - class - gender are seen as important structural categories.





[www.diversitycapacities.eu](http://www.diversitycapacities.eu)

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