

*Abstract*

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**How do universities address heterogeneities? Ethnic boundaries according to experts and in artefacts**

Current discussions and implementations of ‘diversity management concepts’ at German universities can be interpreted as a rising awareness of the (old) fact, that university members differ regarding to social or ethnic background, gender, educational biography, etc. We argue that beyond and in addition to these new organisational strategies, universities already do deal – and always have dealt – with heterogeneities in their everyday practices. In our article, we focus on the ways in which heterogeneities are addressed at universities. We do this from two different perspectives that, taken together, shed light on which heterogeneities matter at university, in which way and why. Central to this approach is the assumption, that the modes of addressing heterogeneities at the university may become a starting point for mechanisms of the (re-)production of social inequality.

We conceive universities as organisations that on the one hand are characterised by a formal structure, an organisational objective, different membership roles, etc. On the other hand we assume that the university as such does not exist until these organisational structures and demands are filled with life and are realised in everyday (inter)actions of its members. Thus, processes of interpretation and ‘sensemaking’ (Weick) as well as social practices are essential for creating and reproducing the university as a social space. Central to these practices are processes of social boundary making (Lamont/Molnár), which may refer to ethnicity or other markers of heterogeneity. They have to be understood as elementary constituents of the university itself – the production of university and the production of social boundaries are inextricably interwoven. From this perspective, the question in the headline – ‘How do universities address heterogeneities?’ – can be rephrased and put more precisely: How are heterogeneities referred to, represented, evaluated and shaped in organisational practices?

To picture the vast range of organisational practices at the university, we explore these modes of addressing heterogeneities from two different perspectives. The first perspective is a rather ‘bottom-up’ one which focuses on artefacts on the campus (leaflets, notice boards, pieces of art, etc.). These artefacts are supposed to mirror the more or less unregulated expressions of university members and thus constitute a relevant part of organisational culture. The analysis of how heterogeneities are expressed and referred to in the collected material can therefore be used to assess the degree of the university’s openness for all of its members. The second perspective is a rather ‘top-down’ one and takes as its starting point interviews with professionals working in different counseling and support services at the university. As professionals they are directly involved in organisational activities that aim at dealing with students’ heterogeneities – not only in programmes offered for special target groups, but also in regular services open for all students. These activities can be conceived to be rather regulated and institutionalised modes of ‘organising’ and addressing heterogeneities.

In analysing the collected data, we will especially focus on how ethnicity is addressed, while at the same time taking into account the intersections with other markers of heterogeneity like gender or social background.

One main question to be answered is: Can we identify modes of addressing heterogeneities at the university that point to the operation of social inequality mechanisms?