

# Diversity-sensitive degree programme development – personalisation of learning: Modern teaching and learning concepts in a Swiss context

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## Abstract

In the framework of the swissuniversities P7 funding programme “Diversity, Inclusion and Equity” (2021-2024)<sup>6</sup> the University of Teacher Education Lucerne and ETH Zurich are conducting a collaborative project entitled “Diversity-sensitive degree programme development – personalisation of learning”. The objectives of this project are to analyse current discourse and concepts surrounding diversity and personalisation, to explore the challenges which degree programs encounter at both institutions in this context. The project seeks to further the conceptual development of degree programmes in the area of diversity and aims – in close cooperation with degree programme managers – to underpin the concrete realisation of associated measures in diversity-sensitive, personalised study programmes.

## Diversity as a didactic challenge

A higher education system, oriented simultaneously towards diversification and openness, attracts increasingly students of varied backgrounds, qualifications and expectations. In this context a productive approach to diversity is becoming the norm, but remains also an ongoing didactic challenge – at all levels of teaching, course design and degree programme development. Diversity-sensitive programme development draws on the concept of a curriculum (qualification profile, range of courses, examinations etc.) which takes into account student diversity not only in terms of previous knowledge, preferred modes of study, interests etc, but also in terms of gender, nationality, age, background, religion, social status or physical, mental or psychological (dis-)ability (SBFI n.d.). Diversity-sensitive programmes are designed so that according to their resources and potential, students will be offered various learning paths and opportunities, adequate support and funding possibilities. The aim is to ensure

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the aims of the swissuniversities project “Diversität, Inklusion und Chancengerechtigkeit in der Hochschulentwicklung” see: <https://www.swissuniversities.ch/themen/chancengleichheit-diversity/p-7-diversitaet-inklusion-und-chancengerechtigkeit> (swissuniversities n.d.)

equality of opportunity for all student groups and to optimise the chances of academic success for those previously under-represented. If diversity is considered to be the new norm, then the format and content of courses, and the learning culture of programmes, have to be reflected upon and revised accordingly. Specific disciplines and their associated competences must also be scrutinised (Aufferkorte-Michaelis & Linde 2017).

The requirement for “more diversity” critically questions the traditional self-image of educational institutions at the tertiary level. A process of reflecting upon and, possibly, changing institutional norms and forms of inclusion and exclusion necessarily follows. To empower previously under-represented groups towards academic success, untapped potential must be recognised and acknowledged. It follows also that concepts such as excellence and innovation require redefinition in the sense of achieving excellence through diversity.

Individuals – according to strategic goals of Swiss education policy – should be able to achieve their full potential irrespective of gender, nationality, age, origins, religion, social status, or physical, mental or psychological disability (SBFI n.d.). In practice, this goes hand in hand with the call to “open up universities” and the acknowledgement of existing forms of direct and indirect discrimination. Overcoming this discrimination requires action in the areas of the culture, practices and structures of the higher education landscape.

### **Is personalised learning the answer?**

The growing reference to “diversity” (which generates “diversity policies”, “diversity management”, “diversity tools”, diversity officers etc.) reflects institutions’ growing consciousness that students of very different backgrounds are arriving at university. Diversity contains two different aspects: On the one hand, it addresses issues of variety of experiences, cultures, traditions and ideas, which are to be maintained and nurtured as a resource for innovation and excellence. On the other hand, it addresses questions of inequality, which have to be countered and overcome in order to achieve equal opportunities for all. In this spirit, concepts of “personalisation”, “individualisation”, “customisation” and “flexibility” in learning can be understood as ways to address student diversity in order to achieve a new fit between students and courses on offer in the context of diversity.

Personalisation, however, is a fuzzy concept, and the term is applied in all kinds of different contexts: there is personalised medicine, personalised advertising, and there are personalised children’s books. In didactics, various differing concepts and methods are mixed under the term personalised learning. For example, under this umbrella, we find listed: profile-based student-centred teaching, developing future skills, methods to meet the requirements of flexible career paths and more. Personalized learning methods may also take their rationale from active learning methods and deep learning approaches.

While diversity and personalised learning are somehow linked, their discursive roots are, however, different, and the underlying contexts and perspective of reasoning diverge widely. For example, “personalisation” is frequently taken to mean designing an exact fit for the “client”, putting the individual in the centre. The concept of “diversity” instead, critically targets normative views of “typical” students and calls for the design of degree programmes, which foster the maximum achievement in a wide range of different people and social groups. In the discussion about diversity, personalised learning, customisation, or flexible learning, universities are furthermore confronted with many different demands and challenges: the search for the best minds; competition for students in the increasingly open education market; ever-more-diverse life choices and careers of lifelong learning. Although personalised learning seems to be an approach to answer various challenges that universities face in the context of diversity, there are still many questions regarding the significance and impact of the concepts as well as their implementation.

## The project

Over the last few decades universities have mainly focused on gender and equal opportunities for women. This is reflected in university structures (gender officers, equal opportunity committees) and academic support (mentoring, career advice, MINT etc). Another focus on “internationalisation”, has also been apparent, reflected by the establishment of “international offices” at universities and/or university courses delivered in English. As universities continue to open up, the spotlight is increasingly on further non-traditional student groups: Migrants, Refugees, People of non-academic background, of low social or economic status as well as persons with diverse (dis-)abilities, impairment and chronic illness, of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities. This “opening up” in the understanding of diversity is evidenced not only in State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) programmes such as the swissuniversities P7 funding programme “Diversity, Inclusion and Equity, but also in the fact that former “gender officers” are now frequently known as “diversity officers” (regardless of the fact that equality for women at universities is far from being achieved).

By linking diversity and personalisation, and focusing on degree programme development, the dual-university project aims to make an application-oriented contribution to educational development. It will investigate how far concepts of diversity-sensitive programme development are compatible with the underlying concepts of personalisation and individualisation. The goal here is firstly to build a bridge between the university didactics conversation and the current targets of education policy, and secondly to systematically link the widely separate discussions of diversity awareness and personalisation.

Criteria will be identified and compiled, which can be deployed to analyse existing degree programmes. In close cooperation with persons responsible for degree programmes, research findings will be integrated directly into ongoing practice. A theory-based critical scrutiny will be informed by including experts from the fields of university teaching and degree programme development. In 2022, for example, a multi-part series of events on diversity and personalisation in higher education will be organized, to foster exchange and discussion of concepts surrounding diversity-sensitive, personalised degree programmes. These events will be public, and members of both ETH Zurich and the University of Teacher Education Lucerne will receive special invitations. The project will potentially reveal the two universities’ different approaches to developing and implementing diversity-sensitive, personalised degree programmes. These approaches will inform the practice-oriented recommendations which will be made available to other universities.

Even though the topics of diversity, inclusion, equity and/or equal opportunity have finally arrived in Swiss universities, it is clear that concrete efforts will still be needed to ensure that the principles underlying educational policy are translated into standard practice in curriculum and degree programme development.

## Bibliography

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