

The new vessels of knowledge: Exploring the meaning of cultural diversity in the age of globalization of higher education at ETH

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Abstract

Universities worldwide, driven by the impetus to be more diverse, are increasingly imbuing an international outlook constituted by individuals from all over the world. ETH Zurich, like most universities in its league, attracts a significant international student pool: The 23'420 students at ETH are from 121 countries, with 30% of its master's and 53% of its doctoral students being international students (ETH Zurich 2020). Consequently, initiatives such as the Respect Campaign, the rETHink project, and trainings are steps towards ensuring an inclusive environment for the diverse community which constitutes ETH Zurich (Baumann 2020). However, there are important questions which arise in contemplation of what gives these initiatives substance: What issues do they seek to address and to what extent do they fulfill the prerogative to inspire and uphold ETH's values in learning and teaching? In this article, the African Students Association of Zurich (ASAZ)⁵ seeks to explore these questions and, more precisely, tries to investigate what the interrelationship is between globalization of higher education and cultural diversity goals at ETH. By designing a research project that explores the experiences of domestic and international students with minority backgrounds, this article intends to contribute to diversity studies by showing how student initiatives and the issues that sustain them can be of incremental value to creating a more inclusive learning and teaching environment.

Introduction

Culture, from small to larger scales, can be thought of as a set of rules common to a group of people and by which they all agree to play. Let us consider a usual checkers player entering a game of chess. Based on the fact of there being a checkerboard, would one expect them to excel at the new game, solely relying on the set of rules they know from the former one? This simple illustration is an attempt at describing situations and initiatives ASAZ has collaborated on in recent years and which, in the sphere of global higher education, could be examined in a similar way: Graduate school applications that are rejected not because of the applicant's lack of competencies, but because they are unaware of certain standards in place, namely regarding how these same competencies are expected to be presented in a CV, a motivation letter, or an essay. An implicit rule and criterion which, in the local organizational culture, is just as crucial for the application to succeed. Though it may sound intuitive to some of us or common knowledge to others, is it really?

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Definitions

To effectively set the frame of the research project later, it is essential to first introduce and define the different concepts discussed in this article, starting with diversity. This concept in itself carries numerous components, which, as introduced in the results of the INVITED project, we will be referring to as dimensions (Claeys-Kulik et al. 2019). The general idea that it conveys is that there are different people and/or ideas within a social organization (European University Continuing Education Network 2018). Gender, sexual identity, disability, ethnic or socioeconomic background are dimensions that readily come to mind when talking about diversity. For this research project, we have chosen to focus on education and culture with the implicit aim to explore the diversity of experiences, i.e., to look into how individuals are experiencing the institution.

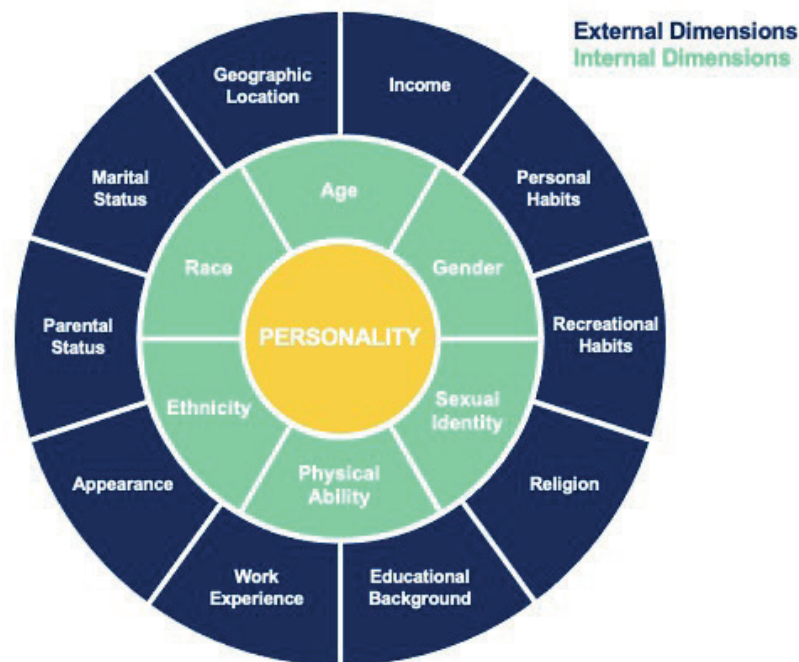


Figure 1: Three Levels of Diversity, adapted from The Four Layers of Diversity by Gardenswartz & Rowe (2003)

By diversity with respect to **education**, we understand the fact of considering the different academic paths that students have taken before and during their present studies at ETH, as well as the knowledge they carry. The notion of **culture** is a set of ideas and customs common to a group of people and which can be expressed, for instance, through values or even more concretely through languages. Moreover, culture adds an idea of time and, more commonly, of place to diversity (Cambridge University Press 2021). What this article and research project try to underline is how cultural diversity adds value to the ETH culture through its power to bring together different perspectives, build awareness, and come up with solutions to multifaceted problems.

On the one hand, the **globalization of higher education** is the process that allows new people, ideas, cultures, and knowledge to flow into the university. In that context, it is important to consider ETH as a pole that attracts, recruits, and also retains students from various parts of the world (ETH Zurich 2020). Ultimately, we can affirm that it is the mobility resulting from this attraction that is one of the driving forces for diversity on campus (Claeys-Kulik et al. 2019). On the other hand, **internationalization** is defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education.” (Knight 2003) Here, the dimension we focus on is the student body and, in particular, the **new vessels of knowledge**, those students with a **minority background**. Following the definition of the UNESCO Thesaurus, a cultural minority is a

“group of persons belonging to a culture different from that of the majority of the society in which they live.” (UNESCO 2021) In that sense, **minority background** here refers to the fact of being fully or partly part of a cultural minority. These students are considered vessels because they bring and collect knowledge to and from ETH Zurich. As opposed to a stream of knowledge brought by globalization, the term captures the idea of individuals’ singularity, which, more often than not, can be lost in data. As we will later discuss, the research will attempt to highlight individuals’ experiences and narratives.

The new vessels of knowledge come from abroad or within Switzerland. That is why we find it pertinent to classify them into two groups: the **domestic students** and the **international students**. The first group includes all students who have obtained a secondary education diploma in Switzerland or who have at least partly gone through the Swiss education system upon applying to ETH. The second group includes students who usually come from abroad to pursue a degree from bachelor’s level upwards.

Broaching the topics of diversity and internationalization requires us to nuance the concepts of **inclusion** and **integration**. With the former, we mean the removal of barriers, in order for all students to be able to enjoy the same experiences. This means it is the institutional system that caters and adapts to students’ needs. While with integration the idea of bringing diverse groups of students together does remain, it requires them to adapt to the system (Eid 2018).

Problem framing

ASAZ was created with the aim of welcoming new African students and facilitating their entry into student life in institutions of higher education in Zurich. It also aims at bringing together students of African origin and be a learning environment for those interested in African cultures and issues. Understanding how international students from Africa experience diversity and inclusion at ETH, as well as considering the experience of domestic students of African heritage, the smaller proportion of ASAZ members, is key to achieving these goals. Furthermore, contributing to ETH’s efforts to make the learning and teaching environment more inclusive and diverse is up to each one of us as students and also, as a diverse student organization itself, to ASAZ. The association is a crossroads of countries, cultures, and academic backgrounds, where people can connect, reflect, and learn from each other. It is important to us to act as a platform that voices stories of members and alumni*æ, from which we believe the greater ETH community can benefit to advance even further. Last but not least, as a large number of ASAZ members are among the 53% share of doctoral students recruited internationally, we expect their point of view to be particularly insightful. Considering current domestic and international students, but also alumni*æ allows us to cover a broader range of questions, some of which being specific to Switzerland, such as the local process of obtaining a secondary education diploma and getting access to university (Felouzis & Charmillot 2017).

Finally, starting from the ETH statistics and the share of students recruited abroad, we could design a general research structure as follows:

- The first aspects to be examined would be the university’s aim and actions to be a global institution, as well as its federal status, which ultimately nurture diversity on two levels: nationally and internationally, with vessels of knowledge coming from different cantons and countries respectively.
- The transition from one academic system to another and expected standards would make up the second part. As touched upon in the beginning with the example of the application process, adapting to a university’s bureaucracy in a foreign country, or even on a different continent sometimes comes with hurdles. The question here is whether the system considers international students’ background, and if not, whether this possibly hinders diversity. This section should also be interesting to compare the requirements international students had to meet with respect to the academic degree for which they applied.

- The subsequent focus would be on the inclusion of these students in the lecture hall, especially looking at participation, identification, inclusion by peers and teaching staff, and possible biases. This section would also address the language barrier.
- The final aspect that was important to cover is the social and cultural integration of international students, as well as further initiatives than can be brought within the ETH community to facilitate this process.

Thus, our research should consist of a comparative analysis of a series of cases of students' experiences, both from the perspectives of the domestic and the international vessels of knowledge. Ultimately, its goal is to further the conversation on diversity at ETH, and most importantly to bring diversity in a valuable way that can yield sustainable impact and solutions.

Methods

Description

As the approach of this research will be explorative and descriptive, the methods used will be of qualitative nature. The data collection tools will be an online survey as well as 1-on-1 interviews. While the first tool should help us to reach more people, the interviews should allow more flexibility, in order to develop and delve into the specific topics mentioned in the structure in more detail. Furthermore, we expect these interviews to be a valuable instrument for the sought qualitative goal of this initiative. Lastly, an important question will be whether the answers in the surveys substantiate the information we will gain from the 1-on-1 interviews.

Pilot interview

In the preparation phase of the project, we conducted a pilot interview with an African alumna who did her Ph.D. at ETH Zurich. She joined from the UK, where she did a Master's in Public Health. She had done her undergraduate and her first master's degree in Buea, Cameroon.

The pilot interview was a way to test a selection of six questions extracted from our general structure:

1. Did the minority background of domestic/international students directly or indirectly affect their academic route? E.g., has it pushed them to pursue studies at university, and more specifically at ETH? Or have they, on the contrary, ever faced any hurdles because of it?
2. Were domestic/international students with minority backgrounds informed about prospects for studies at ETH? If so, at which level (primary, secondary I, secondary II, ...) and/or through which means (e.g., Zukunftstag, Mathematical Olympiad, ...)?
3. What were the diplomas of domestic B.Sc. students with minority backgrounds upon application at ETH (gymnasiale Matura, Berufsmatura + Passerelle, other)?
4. What is the highest level of education of the parents/former legal guardians?
5. How comfortable are international students in participating during lectures? How much do international students feel included by their peers (with respect to language, anecdotes, references, ...)? How does their previous institution differ from ETH? (academically, culturally, on a personal level, ...)
6. Could students with a minority background identify themselves with their lectures and professors? Was this important to them?

Coming from a very modest economic background, neither of her parents having studied further than secondary school, the alumna had to rely on self-information to find educational opportunities. For example, she found the Ph.D. program call on the website job.edu.uk.

She shared that her minority background did directly affect her academic route. First, she was delayed in her curriculum, because she had to wait for programs and admissions that would be inclusive of her, those being rare, some even bi-annual. Second, when she passed her

interview for a Ph.D. position at ETH, she did not get her desired position. Instead, she took the opportunities that were presented to her. Once she got enrolled, she still had to take one year of master's-level classes to prove that she had the required level to study at the university, which was an additional burden compared to Swiss and German students, she said. Our interviewee strongly felt that she must perform better than her non-minority counterparts, because she represented more than herself. Thus, the possibility of other African students joining the institution after her depended on her success.

Our alumna felt comfortable during lectures. She described that no particular effort was made to include her in the classes, but it did not bother her. She underlined not identifying with lecturers and professors, but this was not important to her and did not stop her from learning. She still mentioned that it would have been nice to have minority background lecturers. With her peers, she felt partially included and partially kept to herself. The culture was different and new, she explained, but she still tried to maintain contact with somewhat similar people.

One feedback she wanted to give was that, from her perspective, diversity at ETH included mostly Europeans and that students from other migration backgrounds had less visibility and access to the university.

Conclusion

Though only a glimpse thus far, the pilot interview has allowed us to address topics with our interviewee that are central in the conversation on cultural diversity in the learning and teaching environment. The scope of the questions also enabled us to catch a story. Of course, to get more insight or even effectively identify a trend, a larger number of cases is indispensable. Moreover, some aspects that will need to be considered meticulously in the actual research are survey and interview bias.

In a very similar fashion, the dual perspective of this prospective project could be extended more generally to domestic and international students with minority backgrounds within other cultural student associations, leaving room for a wide range of possible research focuses.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Dr. Elsy Mankah Ngwa for participating in the pilot interview. They also thank Tayssir Limam, Elke Tomforde, and Anna Garry for preliminary discussions on the research subject and the article structure.

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