The Conclusion is Inclusion: An Overview of Student Views on Diversity in the Context of European Technical Universities

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Abstract

Diversity and Inclusion are key elements of ETH's value system. ETH Zurich, a leading technical university, prides itself with its global eminence in teaching and learning. The VSETH, the student union of ETH, has dealt often with this topic and its many aspects in various forms of exchange. Although ETH is making progress in the right direction, the students see more possibilities to improve the situation of diversity and inclusion. As discovered in #wiegETHs? survey which the VSETH held in the year 2019, international students, in particular, are faced with the challenges of integration. In addition, the current pandemic with its isolationism makes the situation even more difficult for them. During the IDEALiStiC (IDEA League Students in Conference) conference in December of last year, students from the five leading technical universities of Europe met virtually to discuss the teaching and social life on campus during and after the pandemic. In their concluding position paper, they found that the social integration and inclusion of international students was a focal point in the discussions. Most participants agreed that efforts have to be made continuously to improve these values to ensure a healthy and progressive future for the universities.
In this paper, we outline what the VSETH does in the field of equal opportunities and propose further ideas for improvement of inclusion and diversity in the context of the ETH. The main focus lies on an analysis of the students' view of the current situation. Our personal experience, as well as the work done by our predecessors and colleagues, will be used to describe this work in progress.

Introduction

Diversity and Inclusion play a key role for the future development of ETH. These aspects are a great challenge for the university. From listening to every-day conversations, it was evident that many international students felt discomfort in the university's environment. ETH is confronted not only with the difficulties of inclusion, but also with the topic of diversity. The office for equal opportunities of ETH writes in their 2019/2020 gender-monitoring report that 32.3 percent of women studied at ETH, a female-to-male ratio which depicts the lack of gender diversity (Hettlage 2020).

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Additionally, the need for a more inclusive environment for all students exists and ETH is making the diminishing of stereotypes in gender an integral part of the agenda (ETH Rat 2021). Based on the awareness of these existing problems, a study was conducted by the VSETH to gather more information on the students' wellbeing at ETH. This study, the #wiegETHs? survey, managed to acquire a response rate of 6420 students, corresponding to a total of 42.2% of the ETH students in the year 2019 (VSETH 2021b). The following paragraphs show the study's motivation, methods, and survey design specifically in the context of inclusion and diversity. This is followed by an analysis of the results of this study and a discussion of its impact on diversity and inclusion. After integrating the topic into the context of ETH and its environment, the paper gives an overview of the international work in the framework of the IDEA League. In summary, both the internal and external efforts are combined to emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion as values that have to be continuously fostered.

Development and Creation of the #wiegETHs? Survey

The #wiegETHs? survey was held in the spring semester 2019 and acted as a fundamental reference point for students' wellbeing at ETH (VSETH 2021b). A subgroup of VSETH, the working group for equal opportunities, carried out this survey and was supported by gfs.zurich, a company specializing in the conduction of surveys to ensure the high quality standards of statistical considerations. The questionnaire was sent out to all Bachelor and Master students of ETH Zurich. A list of all questions asked to the participants is published on the website of VSETH (VSETH 2019b). From this list, it is apparent that most of the questions refer to one of the following topics: mental health, discrimination, student wellbeing and inclusion and diversity. Besides evaluating the ETH-wide results, an analysis was made separately for all the individual academic departments. In this process, a member of the VSETH working group for equal opportunities presented the results to the department heads and representatives of the faculty student associations. Furthermore, the working group analysed the situation and discussed possible measures for improvement with the academic departments.

In addition to the individual departmental evaluation of the results, the VSETH wrote five action papers (VSETH 2021a; 2019a; 2020c; 2020a; 2020b). The topics of these action papers include the general study situation, sexism and sexual harassment, LGBTQIA+ students, mental health and foreign students. The overall focus is to connect these sub-topics to the overall wellbeing of the student body.

Results of the #wiegETHs? Survey

The following paragraph gives an overview of the topic "Inclusion and Diversity" at ETH and particularly focuses on how foreign students are being affected. The study found that in the year 2019, 21% of the students who are not from the German-speaking part of Switzerland stated that they had been disadvantaged on the basis of ethnicity, origin or language (VSETH 2021b).

F15: Did you ever feel disadvantaged at ETH because of... ?
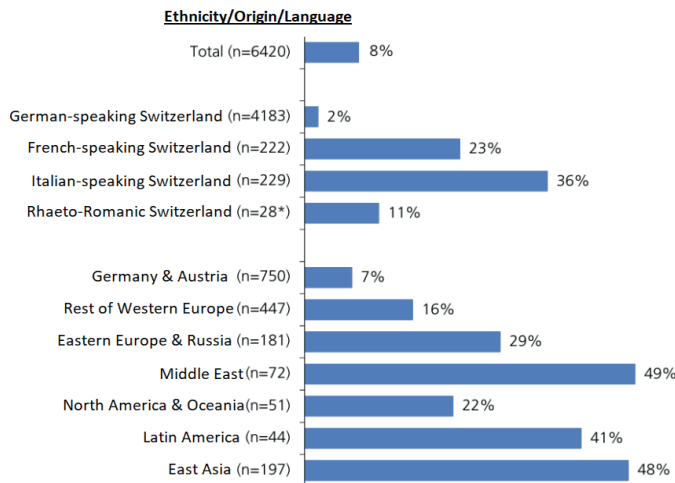n= 6420 / several answers possible

Ethnicity/Origin/Language

Total (n=6420)	8%
German-speaking Switzerland (n=4183)	2%
French-speaking Switzerland (n=222)	23%
Italian-speaking Switzerland (n=229)	36%
Rhaeto-Romanic Switzerland (n=28*)	11%
Germany & Austria (n=750)	7%
Rest of Western Europe (n=447)	16%
Eastern Europe & Russia (n=181)	29%
Middle East (n=72)	49%
North America & Oceania (n=51)	22%
Latin America (n=44)	41%
East Asia (n=197)	48%

Figure 1: Perceived discrimination of ETH students due to language origin or ethnicity (VSETH, 2021).

This is a large number, especially when put into the context of ETH having an enrolment of 22'193 students in 2019. The graph in Figure 1 shows the results of the percentage of students that had experienced a disadvantage at ETH. However, it still includes the German-speaking Swiss students in the calculated number, which results in a total percentage of 8% instead of 21% for foreign students.

To specify, the disadvantages were then categorized further, which is illustrated by the graph in Figure 2. The data in the graph in Figure 2 illustrates the exclusion and the acts of aggression directed towards specific student minorities. This data convinces the VSETH that measures need to be taken to fight discrimination with regard to origin, ethnicity and language.

F19: Did you ever experience one of the following with respect to people of a certain race/nationality/religion at ETH?
n= 6420

	Exclusion (n=260)		Aggression (n=63)	
Total (n=6420)	3%	1%	1%	
German-speaking Switzerland (n=4183)	2%			
French-speaking Switzerland (n=222)	2%	3%		
Italian-speaking Switzerland (n=229)	1%	3%	1%	
Rhaeto-Romanic Switzerland (n=28*)				
Germany & Austria (n=750)	5%	2%	1%	
Rest of Western Europe (n=447)	3%	3%	1%	
Eastern Europe & Russia (n=181)	3%	8%	1%	1%
Middle East (n=72)	3%	10%	3%	3%
North America & Oceania (n=51)	10%	4%	2%	
Latin America (n=44)	7%	9%	2%	
East Asia (n=197)	5%	7%	2%	2%

■ Yes, I experienced this as a bystander.   ■ Yes, I experienced this personally.
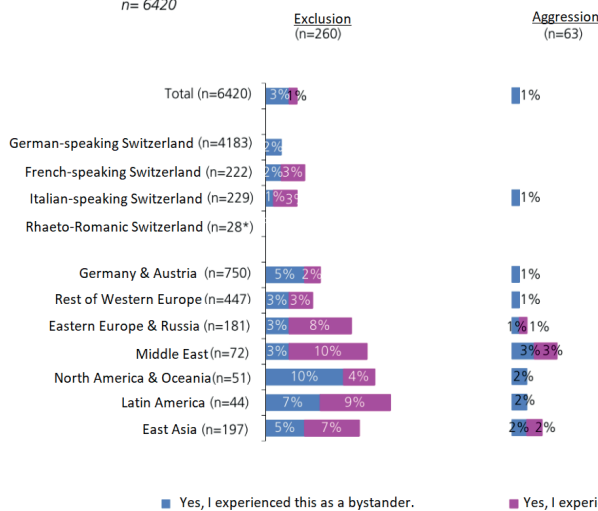
Figure 2: Proportion of ETH students having experience exclusion and aggressive behavior due to race, nationality or religion (VSETH, 2021).

The measures proposed in the action paper on international students are divided into the following categories and are found in the final report of the #wiegETHs? survey:

social integration, discrimination, and language barrier (VSETH 2019a). For the category of social integration, the position paper introduces the idea of a welcome week before the start of the semester as a measure to acclimate and integrate the international students into the ETH community (VSETH 2019a). This includes integrating these students into a new country and culture and recognizing that they need support to build a social network in their new city. Efforts in this direction will be implemented for the students starting in the autumn semester 2021. In regard to some of the socio-psychological topics in the survey, it was suggested that the individuals affected should be invited to discussions and dialogs before deciding on measures for change. By including the individuals affected in the process, one is not only promoting an inclusive environment, but also making sure that optimal measures are found to address the challenges. Another project proposed for the sake of fostering inclusion is the buddy program (VSETH 2019a). This was presented in a position paper and many faculty student associations have already put this into place. In this program, new students at ETH have a chance to pair up with more experienced students who can help them with their integration. The significance of buddy programs has long been recognised. Sandhu writes in a paper from 1994: "To help foreign students combat loneliness, it is imperative to develop a social network through a planned buddy system including both national and international students" (Sandhu 1994). To improve social integration, the VSETH team also suggests that a more targeted promotion in events for international students should be offered (VSETH 2019a).

An inclusive environment cannot exist without fighting against discrimination. The gravity of the negative consequences of international students being victim of discrimination has been emphasised by Smith and Khawaja (Smith and Khawaja 2011). The key to avoiding such consequences is awareness. The position paper proposes a voluntary awareness training along with a publicity campaign showing the advantages of a multicultural environment and making people aware of everyday racism (VSETH 2021b). Because every student should be aware of the rights they have, we propose that ETH create a summary document including the most important rights of an ETH student. This document then can be presented in the introductory lecture for first year students. The paper also suggests that this document can be presented in a flyer in the "ersti-bag" which every student receives during the first day of university.

Moreover, VSETH has realized that the movement towards a bilingual environment is highly crucial. Because English has taken the role as the global language, it is the most functional and easiest to use for communication among international students. The translation of documents and information channels from the German language into English is an important step for including all students. According to the position paper, the German courses at the language center are quickly booked up; therefore, the financial resources of the language center should be increased to raise its capacity and facilitate inclusion. To become an inclusive environment, the same chances and resources should be open to all (VSETH 2021b). ETH should have a translation service for official or legal appeals because they have to be submitted in one of the national languages. Documents written in German which are important for political participation should be offered in English as well. This observation is in accordance with the conclusions of Chen, who recognised second language anxiety as one of the most important stress factors for international students in North American universities (Chen 1999).

Overall, the #wiegETHs? survey showed a real need for change and for tackling the negative results with concrete measures on both an academic departmental level and on the ETH institutional level. This created a momentum which led to the formation of new student-led working groups and invitations for the VSETH to act as advisors in many topic-related projects.

The VSETH supports and fosters the momentum created by other groups or individuals who want to add something to this positive directive. Student-led working groups such as the VCS Help desk, a student association lead support platform, or the D-BAUG mental health working group are important additions to the cause (VCS, n.d.). The VCS help desk is a contact point for chemistry students, who are victim of discrimination or sexual abuse and are seeking support. The D-BAUG mental health working group is a subgroup of the academic department of civil engineering, carrying out and planning activities to foster mental health.

The International Context: IDEALiStiC

Data presented in the sections of the #wiegETHs? survey results suggest that the situation of diversity and inclusion is troublesome at ETH Zurich. In this section, we analyze if the observations are specific to ETH Zurich, or can be broadened to the context of academic institutions in Europe. To this purpose, we introduce the results of the IDEALiStiC conference (IDEA League Students in Conference), which was held online in December 2020.

The IDEALeague is a strategic alliance of European leading technical universities. The IDEALiStiC is a biannual conference organized by the student associations of the IDEA League member universities. During these conferences, student inputs are gathered by ideation workshops. Five to six members of each participating university's student union are invited to take part, allowing for a broad representation and diverse perspectives. In regard to the topics of diversity and inclusion, the workshops organized as part of the conference held in December 2020 are of particular interest. Focusing on the vision of the post-pandemic university, the workshops were designed to gather best-practises and new ideas on how to foster diversity in the university and how to create an environment in which all students feel included. The first workshop focused on teaching. The participants were asked to write down keywords and short texts describing their vision of teaching in the future. The keywords and the short texts were shared anonymously between the participants and discussed in the plenum. During the discussion, the moderator emphasized the aspects related to diversity and inclusion. The second workshop focused on campus life. The workshop included two brainstorming sessions followed by a discussion. First, the participants focused on the reasons behind the importance of students taking part in campus life. Second, the participants gathered ideas on how to create a more inclusive campus life, which addressed the needs and preferences of all students independently of their background. Following the workshops, participants were invited to volunteer to write a position paper which summarized the conclusions of both workshops. This position paper is published on the IDEALiStiC website (Pfister et al. 2021).

Conference Results and Discussion

The position paper describes a situation which most international students experienced during the year 2020 (Pfister et al. 2021). The pandemic has led to social isolation particularly for international students arriving in a new country. These students face the impossible challenge of building up a network of friends or integrating into an existing community. The participants of the IDEALiStiC conference therefore ask the universities "(...) to proactively make sure that these students feel a part of the local community" (Pfister et al. 2021). For the workshop participants, this is particularly important in order to ensure that no mental health issues arise due to a lack of integration and inclusion. In the broader context, Rienties et. al. believes that universities are responsible for tackling these challenges adequately (Rienties et al. 2012). In accordance with Rienties et. al.'s recommendations, ETH works on improving international student integration and inclusion (Rienties et al. 2012). For example, the ETH administration has dedicated an office for this work. And this office and the ETH student associations have created a new, more extensive version of the "welcome day" for master students without an ETH bachelor.

Additionally, the position paper of the IDEALiStiC conference emphasizes the importance of assisting international students in the matters of housing and finances. The reasoning behind this recommendation is the difficulty for students to integrate in a local community if they are not living in the city, or if they are having to work long hours in the evenings or on weekends. This recommendation is also in accordance with the findings of Calder et al., who extensively describes what role housing and finances plays for international students in a West-Canadian university (Calder et al. 2016).

Finally, the conference participants expressed the opinion that semesters abroad are a good way of fostering the diversity of the university community and the intercultural sensibility of the students. The authors of the conference position paper state "(...) some measures should be taken for boosting exchanges and bringing them back to the pre-pandemic level" (Pfister et al. 2021). Guest et. al. backs this conclusion in a paper, which describes the initiatives the science faculty of the University of Melbourne take to foster the international mobility of their students (Guest, Livett & Stone 2016).

Conclusion

ETH Zurich has been working on improving their integration and inclusion throughout the last years by expanding its offerings and programs for international students. However, the results of the various discussions and dialogues of the interest groups concerning these topics clearly reveal that although much is happening, there is still much work to be done. In the VSETH´s #wiegETH? survey and the IDEALiStiC´s position paper we see that both the issues as well as the measures used to counteract them, are very similar. The importance of inclusion and diversity is therefore not an isolated problem of a single university, but rather a focal point in the academic system in Europe.

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