

Wir sind UP – The Podcast

Guest: Alexis Lemaire-Patin

Episode Title:

À bientôt in Bordeaux

Description:

As part of the Erasmus Staff Exchange Program, Alexis Lemaire-Patin from Sciences Po in Bordeaux visited the University of Potsdam. Alexis is the French counterpart to Robert Meile, the representative for students with disabilities at the University of Potsdam, and Annette Guzmán, the representative for staff with disabilities or chronic illnesses, also at the University of Potsdam. In this episode, the three discuss the similarities—as well as the important differences—in their work, from which both sides can learn.

Important Links:

Studying with disabilities: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/studium/beratung/behinderung>

Inclusive study design: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/studium/beratung/behinderung/beratung-inklusive-studiengestaltung>

Study abroad for all: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/international/outgoing/ausland-fuer-alle>

Transcription:

Intro: [00:02–00:17]

We are UP, and we want to know: how inclusive do you find the University of Potsdam?

Robert:

So, a warm welcome back to our podcast *We are UP*. [00:17–00:30] Normally, you hear Erika in this podcast, but today we have a special edition. I'm Robert Meile, and I'm here today with Alexis from Bordeaux and my colleague Annette Guzmán,

[00:31–00:45] whom you already met in the last podcast with the chancellor. And we have Alexis here today because we've received a visit as part of a staff exchange through the Erasmus program from Sciences Po in Bordeaux. [00:46–01:00] Hello, welcome Alexis. Maybe you can introduce yourself.

Alexis:

Hello, I'm Alexis Lemaire-Patin. I work at Sciences Po Bordeaux in France. It's a higher education institution, a university for political science, and I have been [01:01–01:15] working there for two years as an equal opportunities officer and representative for students and staff with disabilities. And I'm spending the whole week here at the University of Potsdam as part of this [01:16–01:33] Erasmus staff exchange.

Robert:

So once again, welcome. Alexis, why did you decide to visit us? What made you want to come here?

Alexis:

Well, I'm here because you, Robert, responded. We have many different partner universities [01:33–01:47] in Germany. Then the University of Potsdam, through the coordination office and the whole advising team, organized a really great program. That's why I'm very happy to be here.

Robert:

[01:47–02:00] Yes, we’ve really put together a full program this week. I tried to involve as many people and institutions as possible who work on diversity and inclusion here at the university. On Monday—so yesterday— [02:00–02:12] we were at the Coordination Office for Equal Opportunities. You already met Annette, you had lunch together. Today we’re heading to the POX for an event, and I think the highlight is on Friday: the Campus Festival. [02:13–02:30] Then we’ll have a nice conclusion to the week. Maybe you can explain again for our listeners what exactly your role is at Sciences Po.

Alexis:

Yes, so at Sciences Po Bordeaux we have 2400 students, 1000 staff members, [02:32–02:50] including administrative and technical staff, and also 100 faculty members. And two years ago, my position was created. Before that, there were teaching staff who were responsible for disability or equal opportunities. [02:52–03:06] Then the decision was made to consolidate these topics under one person. On the one hand, I advise students and staff with disabilities, [03:06–03:21] for example adapting exams with the teachers, adjusting the workplace in coordination with the occupational physician. On the other hand, I also have to implement equal opportunity projects with the whole team, [03:21–03:33] such as promoting gender parity among professors, developing recruitment measures, measures around work-life balance, and so on.

Annette:

[03:33–03:46] Yes, that definitely sounds like a really comprehensive program. My name is Annette Guzmán, I’m Robert Meile’s colleague, and I’m responsible for staff, while Robert is in charge of students. [03:46–04:05] For us, the responsibilities are divided, and there’s now also a central unit within the Equal Opportunities Office that deals with other dimensions of diversity. So of course, we’re very interested in how you manage to handle all these different tasks together. [04:06–04:25] And yes, we already chatted a bit yesterday. What I found particularly interesting, at least from the staff side, is that when someone returns to work after a long illness—six weeks or more—at your university, the occupational physician is the first point of contact. [04:25–04:49] Maybe you can elaborate on that again—I found it very interesting.

Alexis:

So, according to French law, it’s mandatory for everyone—whether in the private or public sector—to see an occupational physician if they’ve been absent for more than 30 days. [04:50–05:03] And sometimes nothing comes of it, sometimes there are recommendations. And then, as the officer for staff with disabilities, [05:03–05:19] I’m supposed to work very closely with this occupational doctor. For example, there are employees who have been absent for two or three months and are not even aware that they might [05:20–05:37] have a disability, and they haven’t started the process of dealing with it or considering what accommodations they might need. And in that case, the occupational physician can really help, [05:37–05:50] because they’re an external person and can simply explain: okay, you need this accommodation, and it’s not a problem for your employer—in fact, it’s their duty. [05:50–06:03] And then I can work with that employee to identify: okay, what do you need, and what can we do together?

Annette: That sounds super interesting, especially in terms of reaching out to those [06:03–06:15] who might otherwise be hesitant to reconnect after a longer illness.

Robert: But would that also be, Annette, when you hear that and of course mainly work here [06:15–06:30] with employees with disabilities – is that something we as a university could also learn from?

Annette: Yes, that would really be a very nice cooperation if we could work more closely with the occupational health doctor or if employees would also make use of this offer.

[06:30–06:46] Unfortunately, that's not the case here. We only have the occupational reintegration management system, and that's connected to a letter. That's often just processed bureaucratically. Very few people dare to accept such a conversation with the employer.

[06:47–06:59] And we actually miss out on many opportunities to give employees good advice, to refer them, to support them in their reintegration. And that applies not only to people who have had cancer

[06:59–07:13] and are returning to work, or serious orthopedic issues – we have a lot of other cases, especially psychological illnesses. And that often becomes a burden for the teams, for the

[07:13–07:29] colleagues who have to make up for the long absence of coworkers or coordinate with the supervisor or the management team.

[07:29–07:45] And that would really help us to connect earlier and start the conversations and mediations.

Robert: Is that also one of your responsibilities in France? Do you get requests from teams, [07:45–08:00] saying, "We have an employee who's been out for a long time – what can we do?" Or sometimes there are other team conflicts when someone is out for a long time or not fully able to work anymore. Are you in a mediating role there or what is your function?

Alexis: [08:00–08:15] I would say that the request usually comes from the affected individual. So not really from the team, not from the supervisor, but for example, an employee who realized [08:15–08:32] that team dynamics had become a bit difficult because she was often sick, because she has a disability, and this also impacts personal relationships.

[08:32–08:45] Then she asked me, "Can you do something? Maybe you could talk to my supervisor or my colleagues." So I

[08:45–09:02] arranged a meeting – first individually and then with everyone – to say, "Okay, of course I can't say everything, but we can sit together and say, you need to work together, and we can find a solution."

Annette: [09:15–09:28] Yes, that definitely sounds very interesting. How is it in terms of students? Have the two of you maybe found in personal conversations that there are cultural differences or also similarities in how impairments or chronic mental illnesses are handled in university studies?

Robert: Yes, we talked about that this morning, and Sciences Po is a significantly smaller university. I think you said around 2,000 students at the moment. My role often

[09:29–09:41] is to advise students, especially those who need accommodations in their studies – both at the start, during the program, or during transitions. And I think you do that as well.

[09:42–09:57] You can correct me in a moment. And we also talked a lot about developing concepts. Alexis is now, similar to what we did four or five years ago, working on inclusion concepts, and Sciences Po is facing this challenge too.

[09:58–10:11] Maybe you want to elaborate...?

Alexis: Yes, exactly. So we've both noticed that mental health and its consequences for [10:12–10:27] disability is becoming very important among the student population. For example, at Sciences Po we currently have 80 students who have some kind of disability or chronic [10:27–10:43] illness. Among these 80 students, the majority actually have mental illness. That's now very important for me, to work with the school's psychologist.

[10:43–10:59] We also have significantly fewer students. The process at our institution also means that I sometimes face difficulties collaborating with teaching staff.

[10:59–11:10] What I've noticed here is that perhaps Robert has a simpler relationship. At our school, administrative staff and teaching staff are very separated.

[11:10–11:24] We hardly see each other, or very rarely. So of course, it's also harder to collaborate.

Robert: Yes, here it's a different kind of challenge to work with teaching staff, because there are just so many.

[11:24–11:37] There are people or lecturers I work with very closely, but it varies greatly – very diverse in that respect. I also found it interesting that you mentioned the group of people with psychological impairments

[11:37–11:49] is the largest group. I think that's also the case for students here, and Annette, also for staff members, right? And I also heard that you have psychological counseling. I think that's something we have in common with the University of Potsdam, and we

[11:49–12:17] also work very closely together. I'd be curious to know: do you have special or specific programs planned or already in place for this group of students or employees with psychological impairments?

Alexis: So in France, after Covid and especially in recent years, the topic of students' mental health has received a lot of media attention.

[12:18–12:32] And the Ministry has launched many programs in this area. For example, there is currently a program on the mental health of students on the autism spectrum.

[12:32–12:45] That's also very important to us at Sciences Po Bordeaux. We're a school for political science. There are ten political science schools in France. And we've noticed that we're a very attractive school.

[12:45–13:01] For example, we have 4,000 applicants. In the end, there are only 200 spots – very few. And we've noticed that there are applicants with

[13:01–13:13] autism or other disabilities or chronic illnesses who think, "Okay, it's too competitive. There are too few places for too many applications,

[13:14–13:26] so it doesn't make sense for me to apply – it's not worth it." So it's very important for us to start working with these schools already at the secondary level.

Robert: [13:26–13:55] Interesting, right. They don't even apply because they feel that with their disability, they have no chance of getting a place at university.

Annette: That's very interesting for us as well, of course, because the University of Potsdam is also a very attractive place to study and a very attractive employer. And we could definitely also face this problem here. This is also a European country, and we certainly have several people with impairments here – among both

[13:56–14:20] students and staff. And especially in areas where things become more selective the higher you go, such as professorial positions, we see fewer and fewer applicants who, for example, also have such an illness or impairment and who also disclose it. So those are really two separate topics

[14:20–14:39] – or they simply don't apply at all. That's definitely an issue for us as well. We also talked about it yesterday with Christina Wolf from the coordination office – that we still definitely need more support there. There are several dimensions involved.

Alexis: With this topic, we find that it's about students or pupils with disabilities,

[14:39–14:52] but actually, we can also observe the exact same thing when it comes to equal opportunities. For example, at our school, we see that the question of diversity is sometimes also very

[14:52–15:04] problematic. That's simply how it's viewed in France – that these political science

schools are very privileged. And, for example, we receive very few
[15:04–15:28] applications from pupils who come from rural areas – many more from urban areas. So we have to work with those schools too, just as we do in the area of disability.

Annette: Do you feel that inclusion is comprehensively considered in politics in France?

[15:28–15:41] Or is it something that's only gained traction in recent years? And to what extent is inclusion defined? Because at your university you're responsible for many dimensions of diversity.

[15:41–15:54] Here, things are a bit more separate, and we're also divided up according to different legal frameworks. It's more specifically defined. What's it like in France?

Alexis: Well, the political system in France is very different from that in Germany.

[15:55–16:18] Everything in France is centralized, and we always need an impulse from our ministry to launch projects. Regarding diversity as a whole, I'd say there has been a development in recent years where these topics must

[16:19–16:35] be considered during studies – in the classroom, in student life. For example, when I was a student five or ten years ago, I never heard anything

[16:36–16:50] about diversity. I never heard anything about accommodations for disabilities.

Annette: So that means it's now already being included in teaching, this topic – regardless of the program of study, students are being taught about it?

Alexis:

[16:50–17:09] It's beginning – maybe slowly, but it's starting. For me, it's a development similar to environmental topics. These days, in all our degree programs, environmental protection topics are somehow covered.

[17:10–17:23] And this topic of diversity and equality is being approached in the same way. We have many different courses – history, philosophy, economics, etc.

[17:24–17:38] And there's always at least one session that specifically deals with diversity and equality.

Robert: I'd like to go back a step. I'm not even sure whether the University of Potsdam is a regular cooperation partner,

[17:38–17:50] but through the Erasmus program, our students can also go to Sciences Po. And I – we try, or I in particular try – to encourage students with disabilities to go abroad,

[17:50–18:07] together with our International Office. Maybe you could say a bit more about the institution. So, if I have someone who's interested in Sciences Po – how accessible are you, and can students contact you if they have questions? And they'll notice

[18:07–18:21] you speak German – that's already one less barrier. Maybe you could talk a bit more about what it's like for exchange students.

Annette: That also applies to staff within Erasmus+, just like you here, Alexis.

[18:21–18:34] We of course also encourage others to become mobile in the staff exchange context.

Alexis: First of all – you are all very welcome.

Robert:

[18:34–18:51] That sounded like an invitation, didn't it, Annette?

Annette: We're definitely going, right, Robert?

Alexis: And the same goes for students. At Sciences Po Bordeaux, we're lucky that our buildings are relatively new. They were built in 2016, so they are accessible.

[18:52–19:04] And I work very closely with my colleagues in the Erasmus team, and we quite often receive requests from international students.

[19:15–19:28] What can we do together? Can we adapt this or that? And yes – definitely. My

colleagues speak English, and I can also speak German. And on the campus, alongside Sciences Po Bordeaux, we have a student health service. We work

[19:28–19:40] together with them, and basically all students who have a disability must first see a doctor. And then this doctor

[19:40–19:52] writes the recommendations, and then I, as the representative, have to put those recommendations into practice. And this is completely open – also for international students.

[19:52–20:03] Bordeaux is a beautiful place to study, a very beautiful city, and a great destination.

Annette:

[20:03–20:30] That sounds really good. What about digital accessibility? You already mentioned that you have new, modern buildings. What does digital accessibility look like for you?

Alexis: We do have digital accessibility – it was financed through the European Union. We have a lot of equipment.

[20:30–20:45] We rarely get the opportunity to use it, but the fact that we are a relatively small school is also a benefit. And I, as the advisor, do have the time and can take the time.

[20:46–21:04] I don't have all the answers, but I have many contacts who can help me. For example, in terms of digital accessibility, we have a whole IT team that is trained in this area.

Robert: Interesting – that's actually a bit like it is

[21:04–21:18] for us, just on a smaller scale. We also have a large media center – it's called ZIM – and there are experts in digital accessibility who support our work and look for solutions when challenges arise.

Annette:

[21:19–21:33] Exactly – we work in a steering group for digital accessibility, and that's interdisciplinary as well. And of course we are always confronted with various challenges.

[21:34–21:51] It's also not that easy to comply with all legal requirements. But we're on a good path, and often it's already enough for the relevant institutions to be open, and for those affected to know: "I can go there."

[21:52–22:06] And there's someone who will listen to me, and there are possibilities to make adjustments to my individual situation – and first of all, to have a dialogue about what's needed.

Alexis: Yes, and we also have time beforehand for the employees or for the students.

[22:07–22:22] We can also prepare everything beforehand. And it is also important to understand that, for example with Erasmus, it is also possible to ask all questions before the start of the semester.

Robert: [22:22–22:35] Yes, that is another important point. So if there is a particular challenge or an adjustment needed for such an exchange, it is important to get in touch in good time. I always say that. Then the institution can prepare well, but also the person. [22:35–22:47] And for students, there are actually so-called preparatory trips for such a mobility. So it is also useful to take advantage of that.

Annette: Robert, you recently told me about a great candidate. [22:48–23:09] You told me about a student you accompanied, an autistic person. I found that very interesting. Would you like to briefly outline that again? That is indeed a very, very rewarding situation.

Robert: Yes, that is actually our goal, so to speak, to bring many students, especially in my field, into mobility. [23:12–23:47] We had, that was already about a year ago, I believe, a person with autism who was in Lisbon, and what I also learned new is that for this person, there is not only the mobility grant but if there is a special challenge, there is also the possibility of higher funding. The person took a preparatory trip and was able to first get an impression on site in Lisbon: what does the university look like, who are the contact persons, where can I find an apartment, is the dormitory suitable, and

then the person came back with a good impression. And I think the special thing is again, [23:48–24:02] that the person has an assistant, a study assistant, who was also able to participate in the mobility, who then accompanied the student for half a year in their own apartment of course, but then also accompanied them in the context of the mobility in Lisbon and [24:03–24:15] supported them on site. So it took about a year of preparation, yes you have to know that, it takes time, but it works and a lot is possible. So also to everyone who maybe says a bit, [24:15–24:27] yes, I can't do that, I don't have the financial resources or the possibilities. Much is possible, and I believe Ms. Kettmann or Ms. Wilford at the International Office advise very, very professionally. We have really [24:27–24:40] also gathered a lot of experience for this case.

Annette: Yes, and that is really very, very helpful for personal development.

Robert: Definitely. So I believe the person benefited massively from it, also that it was possible and I think the person benefited massively from the fact that it was possible.

[24:40–25:05] And I also think, of course, everyone somehow grows from such a mobility. Being abroad is a special situation. They only started learning Portuguese about a year or a year and a half before but managed very well.

Annette: Yes, I find it incredibly exciting what it is possible to achieve by promoting such a European or even international exchange. We are now sitting here in the Staff Exchange talking across such borders. [25:05–25:18] How does it work for you? Legal framework, cultural differences, commonalities. And at the same time, we can think about what are best practices, what can be transferred. [25:18–25:30] And we are thinking about how we can also enable our specific target group, the chronically mentally ill and those with impairments, such an international exchange. So it is somehow doubly valuable.

Robert: [25:30–25:43] Yes, as I said, a lot is possible, especially if I—but you have to think about it—if I take medication that I might also have to bring across the border abroad, if I have therapies, even if they are just physiotherapy, I have to find a physiotherapist on site or [25:44–26:00] a psychotherapist or therapist. That requires some planning time, but it works. And there are also formats that are online. A lot has really happened in online exchange formats in recent years. You don't always have to go abroad for a whole semester or half a year, [26:01–26:27] but there are also smaller formats like summer schools, winter schools, or so, to maybe just try out what it is like, and then maybe prepare for a bigger mobility.

Annette: I would also at this point definitely want to take away these fears of contact beforehand, also for example give a hint to managers to also get in touch with us if they notice dynamics in the team that somehow indicate that

[26:27–27:06] there might be difficulties because someone has been absent for a long time or because someone needs special support. We also support here on site as well as with further training options, whether that is domestic or abroad, whether that is a language course or another kind of personal development, which in the end benefits the team and ultimately also the output, the workload, and of course the manager.

Robert: Yes, the week is quite short then, Alexis. Today is only Tuesday. Tuesday noon soon, but maybe you can tell our listeners again, what has been the most interesting or surprising thing so far in the program? [27:08–27:20] And when would you say at the end of the week, that was a success for you?

Alexis: Okay, so it is only Tuesday noon, so a whole week still to go. [27:21–27:35] This week will end with the campus festival, I am already looking forward to it. For me, it's not really surprising, but it is rather impressive, positively impressive, that so many people work on these [27:35–27:49] tasks with

the coordination office, with you, for the employees, for the students. We also met many colleagues, the career service, family service, and so on. [27:50–28:04] At other universities, in other structures, I have already noticed that when these tasks are so separated, people don't really work together. [28:04–28:19] That makes it harder for everyone to collaborate. I have just noticed that here common projects bring everyone together. That is very positively impressive. [28:28–28:40] That would be my answer.

Robert: Then thank you and we hope for an interesting week.

Annette: Yes, do you still have a wish of something you definitely want to do this week? In Germany, in Potsdam or Berlin?

Alexis: In Potsdam, yes I would like to visit these very [28:40–28:57] very beautiful buildings. For me, for us in Bordeaux, we are on a campus, which is very much in the city. So here, for these study conditions almost in a park, I just find that so, so great. [28:58–29:10] I would like to explore that a bit more.

Annette: We will do that right now, won't we?

Robert: Great, thanks.

Alexis: Many, many thanks to both of you.

Annette: Yes, Alexis, many, many thanks for your cooperation and support [29:10–29:22] here on the podcast, that you were so spontaneously willing to do this podcast recording with us. We had a lot, a lot of fun. We learned a lot together, laughed a lot and yes.

Robert: I think also [29:22–29:35] we could learn a lot, although you came to us to learn from us, we also took away a lot from you. I find that also a very important insight. Many thanks.

Alexis: Thank you very much and for the whole program and à bientôt in Bordeaux. [29:35–29:36]