Podcast: Wir sind UP!

Episode: Amanda and Marlon – inclusive networking

English transcript

Intro: Welcome to all listeners! In our podcast, we introduce students, teachers, as well as administrative staff from the University of Potsdam. These individuals include both people with and without disabilities. We want to know from them: How inclusive is the University of Potsdam as a place of study and as an employer?

Erika: Hello and welcome, everyone, to our latest episode of "We Are UP." I'm Erika, and today I have Marlon Schwarze and Amanda Beser with me for a conversation. Both of them are students at the University of Potsdam and will introduce themselves in more detail shortly. But first, let me share some initial information: This year, they were awarded the Inclusion Prize at the University of Potsdam. Congratulations on that! The Inclusion Prize recognizes individuals or groups who make exceptional efforts to promote inclusion at our university, thus fostering equal opportunities in a special way. The two of them have initiated a wonderful project, namely the leisure-oriented get-together for students with and without disabilities or chronic illnesses. This project aims to facilitate barrier-free networking among students with disabilities in their free time, providing them with the opportunity to connect, exchange experiences, and enjoy activities together. It is truly an important endeavor. Okay, now let's turn to you. Please introduce yourselves and tell us about your involvement at the University of Potsdam, as I know it's quite extensive. Amanda, why don't you start?

Amanda: Alright, gladly, thank you. I'm Amanda, currently pursuing a Master's degree in Comparative Literature and Art Studies, now in my second semester. Regarding your last point, I must admit, I've been involved with the University of Potsdam for almost seven years, so the question is more about where I haven't been involved yet. I've been part of the Student Election Committee, AStA (General Students' Committee), and currently, I'm also engaged with the student council and various study commissions. I highly recommend exploring the available structures for getting involved; give it a try. [Erika laughs] That's how, in my opinion, you truly get to know the university.

Erika: Yes, cool. And Marlon?

Marlon: I'm a Psychology student, now in my fourth semester. After a few months of joining the university in 2022, I became the AStA (General Students' Committee) representative for anti-ableism and accessibility. This came about because there was a lack of focus on this topic within the student structures. So, I reached out to the Student Parliament, presented the idea, and fortunately, it was launched in May 2022.

Erika: Great. Thank you both so much for sharing your insights. Now, I'd like to learn more about your project, the one for which you recently received the Inclusion Prize. How did you come up with the idea to establish the leisure-oriented get-together? What experiences or challenges motivated you to pursue this initiative?

Marlon: Personally, I realized as a first-year student that I had no connections with other disabled or ill students. Therefore, I had the desire to create something that would serve as a platform for people to find each other. I wanted to provide an opportunity for them to connect and exchange experiences. That was one of the reasons why I initiated the AStA (General Students' Committee) department. However, when I started, I was completely new to everything. I was a first-semester student trying to adapt to university life. I also had to navigate my way as a newcomer in the AStA. By

chance, I met Amanda while she was supervising one of my exams, and she can tell you how we started talking and eventually came together to tackle this whole project.

Amanda: Yes, let me take it from there. We had experienced two years of the pandemic before, more or less, and I have to say, it sounded a bit strange earlier when I mentioned being in the second semester for seven years at the University of Potsdam. That's because I also completed my Bachelor's degree at the University of Potsdam, and I had the fortune of getting to know the university before the pandemic. During the pandemic, I noticed that networking initiatives were greatly impacted, especially on the student side. I really missed getting to know new people and doing things with them. Marlon immediately struck me as likable. I was actually supervising one of his exams, and we started talking afterward, realizing that there was a lack of such opportunities. Coincidentally, the call for the Inclusion Prize was also happening, so we thought, "Let's give it a try."

Erika: Yes, that's awesome. The idea was certainly a success. You were also honored with the Inclusion Prize. Could you give us some insight into how the get-together actually works? For example, what activities do you organize to promote networking and exchange?

Amanda: Marlon, would you like to start?

Marlon: Okay, I didn't know who should start, so I didn't say anything at first. Yes, exactly, I had set up a Signal group and a Discord server myself, which I send to all the people who participate in our meetings. Currently, we have a monthly rhythm, meeting every third Friday of the month digitally, via Zoom. The first meeting was, I believe, in December or January, during the winter. Currently, we have a digital leisure gathering every month, where we meet via Zoom on the third Friday of the month, and we have normal conversations or discuss our plans, and we also ask people what they're interested in. In addition to that, we have a Discord server and a Signal chat. However, to ensure that it remains a safe space, we only provide access to these groups once we have gotten to know the people during the digital meetings. These groups serve as platforms for relatively low-threshold exchange. Additionally, Amanda had the idea to create a document that is open to all members, where they can sign up if they would like company in the cafeteria, for example. So, they would enter their cafeteria times, or they can also enter their own events. For instance, if they regularly participate in various activities at the university or outside the university and would like to meet other members at the same time, they can sign up for that. For example, there might be an open yoga class where they can potentially go, and it would be great if they could bring along people from the get-together or something similar. Or if they attend an event, like a concert, and would like to have someone accompany them. Yes, those are currently the main offerings that have regularity, and sporadically, we also organize outings when opportunities arise. In February, we visited the Schwules Museum (Gay Museum) and explored an exhibition related to queerness and disability. This came about from the first digital meeting because many people were interested in the topic, and many were immediately thrilled about the opportunity. After the exhibition, we had coffee together and spent the afternoon winding down. Our upcoming plans for the next few months include organizing an open-air cinema, which I'm currently working on, scheduled for mid-August. We are also looking into organizing a summer festival for the students, preferably outdoors, potentially by the water, depending on the circumstances. And yes, we're also considering organizing a nice picnic.

Amanda: I fully agree with Marlon. It's important to emphasize that all our offerings are completely voluntary and low-threshold. That has been crucial for us from the very beginning. We try to operate on two fronts, with online offerings as well as in-person activities, depending on the possibilities. We are truly fortunate to have such an engaged, motivated, and intersectional group. It's not something we take for granted, and that's what we've been most excited about.

Erika: That's really cool! It definitely sounds like there are many exciting summer activities coming up for the students, and I hope the group continues to grow. It's a wonderful initiative. But let's continue with the questions. How have you ensured the accessibility of the Stammtisch? What

specific measures have you taken to create an inclusive environment for all students with different disabilities or illnesses?

Marlon: It always depends on the specific location we choose. For example, the venue for the outdoor cinema event doesn't have an accessible toilet. So, I'm currently in contact with an organization that can provide mobile ramps. I'm working on getting a ramp for the stairs, allowing people who cannot use stairs to enter the building and use the toilet and café facilities if needed. The event itself will take place outdoors, but since we have various accessibility needs to consider, such as infection control for chronically ill individuals, immunosuppressed people, and creating a low-sensory environment to avoid sensory overload, we also strive to ensure physical accessibility. Partially, that also clashes with each other. So we simply try to find a middle ground. That's how my idea for the open-air cinema came about, because many of us, who live with chronic illnesses, currently cannot go to the cinema due to the ongoing pandemic situation. Even though the numbers are considered low now, the situation still exists, and many people are constantly ill. That's why it makes sense for us to be outdoors. It's also beneficial for individuals who are easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli due to neurodivergence or mental illnesses. So, it's practical for us to have the open-air cinema where we can sit with headphones on, blocking out all the usual cinema noises like popcorn crunching or slurping. We've managed to address two issues at once. The only downside is the toilet situation. There is simply no other place where we can accommodate it as well, and finding a cooperative venue is also a challenge. It depends on which organizations and locations are actually open and responsive to our inquiries. But as I said, I try to consider everything, although it's definitely difficult.

Amanda: Exactly, I just wanted to briefly add that. We can, of course, plan and gather information ourselves in advance, but it's always crucial to talk to people. The beauty of it is that when we ask, "What do you need?" we receive feedback and additional points that we might not have thought of ourselves because we can't cover all aspects of being affected.

Marlon: Yes, that's true. Another thing I wanted to add is that when we apply for a budget from the Student Union, I always make sure there's a buffer. This means that if an individual with a chronic illness or mental health condition feels unwell during an event, there's still around 50 EUR available for them to take a taxi home. We genuinely make an effort to ensure that people can attend. Another important topic is that money can be a barrier for many disabled students. As students, we're not exactly wealthy to begin with. However, living with a disability or illness often brings additional financial burdens. That's why we also strive to make our offerings free of charge or at the lowest possible price. We make sure that those who can't afford it don't have to pay. Money should not be a barrier either.

Erika: Yeah, definitely. So, I can already see that you have to be very creative in the accessible design and think about many things. As Amanda mentioned, I believe the most meaningful approach is simply asking people what they need. Okay, at the beginning, you already touched upon my next question a bit in your response, regarding the obstacles. What obstacles do you encounter or what challenges arise during the implementation of projects or individual meetings at events? Could you both briefly share what barriers you have faced in your planning and execution?

Amanda: Yes, I'd like to start briefly. Since we operate from within the Student Union (AStA), we also have general AStA duties. AStA meetings, staff meetings, office hours, and all these tasks are time-consuming and require certain resources that we can't fully invest in our leisure activities. That's one barrier. Additionally, at the beginning, when we sent out mass emails through the student mailing list, we encountered, surprisingly, troll and hate comments, some even using real names. It's something most people wouldn't believe, and we didn't either, but there's still a lack of understanding and ableism remains an issue. That's the challenge I strongly see.

Erika: Yeah, I wouldn't have expected that either. As you mentioned, it's somewhat surprising in a student community where the primary image is that people are very open-minded.

Marlon: The good thing is that we have the department together, so we don't have to read the hate mails alone, and we can collectively, if at all, get upset about it. I found it partly amusing as well. Another problem is, of course, not always receiving feedback for all sorts of outings. You have an idea and you have a contact person whom you potentially ask, "Hey, do you want to join?" and then only two or three people respond. For example, I managed to get tickets for a TV show in May for the group, but the group size was already around 10 people, and only two people responded, possibly able to attend under certain circumstances. However, I also need to provide confirmed responses for the individuals or the entities inviting us, and that's a significant issue if we don't receive sufficient feedback. This isn't a criticism of the individuals; it can easily slip their minds, but it's crucial for us to consistently receive reliable confirmations or rejections. However, I think it's something I need to consider myself, how to communicate better and establish a structure to ensure everyone is informed. But as I said, it's about communication and identifying areas where I can improve.

Erika: Okay, now onto something positive. What positive impacts have you observed among the participants in general? Are there any special success stories or moments that have touched you personally? Maybe some feedback you've received as well.

Amanda: Well, I have to say that, although it wasn't surprising, one thing that has really stuck with me is the incredible network of skills we have. No matter what questions are asked, whether it's about student jobs, experiences on campus, or any tips and tricks, there are always people who respond and offer advice. It makes me so happy to see that sense of belonging and mutual respect within the group. I find that aspect really beautiful.

Marlon: Yes, I can confirm that. On the Discord server, I designed the forum in a way that allows sharing of various resources. For example, people can recommend good experiences with certain doctor's or therapy practices, which may not directly relate to the university but are crucial for our daily lives. And there's always someone available to speak with if one desires. Personally, I think that's wonderful. Some members have also formed personal connections, which I believe is very valuable. Even if it's not a large social gathering, you can still meet someone from the group from time to time.

Erika: Perfect. Yes, that's exactly what it's about. That's what you wanted to achieve, for people to meet, connect, and exchange ideas. When that actually happens, it's amazing.

Marlon: There's also a tremendous willingness among people to share their own events. For example, we received the opportunity for a waterfront summer festival through a group member who had contacts. These individuals generously offer their connections for potential activities. We have someone who enjoys bouldering and invites others to join, or someone who organizes a Pen & Paper session for the group. The group thrives on these contributions. While the focus is on us, it's also about these individual members who actively engage and keep the whole thing alive, as well as wanting to support other students.

Erika: That's great to hear. How many members do you have now, in total, I mean the core members?

Amanda: We have a core group of fewer than 10 people, but we have a broader network of around 40-50 people. So, it's flexible, but the core group remains, and that brings us a lot of joy. But I wanted to add something to what Marlon said. It may sound a bit like a fortune cookie quote, but knowledge truly is one of the few things that doubles when you share it, and that's our experience within the network.

Erika: Beautiful, cool. How do you plan to further develop the project? Are there any plans to expand the regular meetups or even start similar initiatives at other universities?

Marlon: Actually, a few weeks ago, there was an online meeting on this topic of peer networking that brought together students from different universities. Some universities also have similar meetup

structures, although they are built differently from ours. They tend to have more of a self-help character. I'd like to take a moment to promote another support group we have within our community. It focuses on the topic of reasonable accommodations, led by a member who is also part of our group. They organize monthly Zoom meetings with a self-help approach, where students can exchange experiences regarding accommodations due to disability and experiences of discrimination. If anyone is interested, they can reach out to us, and we can facilitate the connection. What was the question again?

Erika: The question was about expanding the meetup, and you started talking about the inter-university meeting that took place.

Marlon: Personally, I plan to explore ways to network and collaborate with other universities in Berlin and the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam. If the students desire it, we can ensure there is a larger network available to them. Of course, we want to maintain what we have right now, for sure. It will continue at the same level. However, we are planning to organize a big gathering for all students from Potsdam and Berlin universities. It might even happen during the open-air cinema event, as the venue is spacious enough, and we need about 60 people to attend. It would be a great opportunity for students from different institutions to engage in conversations. It would be fascinating to learn about their experiences at their respective universities. By creating such a pool of knowledge and networking with others, we can all benefit. As I mentioned before, the film we watched, which provides empowering insights into the American disability movement, can also inspire and support this inter-university collaboration. But these are all plans in the works; it's still in the planning stage, but it looks promising. My next step is to invite people and obtain the specific details from the venue. We aim to secure a date in August, either the 11th or the 18th. Those who are listening to us now will receive more information soon.

Amanda: Exactly. I wanted to add that even though we are currently serving in our roles on an interim basis, as elections for the next term will take place in the fall, we have no intention of closing or discontinuing the meetup. In fact, we feel like we've gained momentum, and our journey is far from over. Interested individuals are always welcome to join, and we are constantly looking for more people who are enthusiastic about planning and organizing. This is a little advertisement, perhaps: for those who are interested in joining the committee and becoming actively involved, please feel free to do so. If you have any questions, please reach out to us, and we will continue to exchange information. In terms of the structure, we will assess whether we want to keep the leisure meetup solely under the AStA or if we need to strengthen the structure in other ways. But as good news for the future, we want to keep going and are excited to organize more wonderful activities.

Marlon: Yes, I can guarantee that as long as I'm at our university, and I believe that will be for several more years, this meetup will definitely continue with me. So, there's no need to worry about that for now.

Erika: That's wonderful news. Thank you both very much for providing us with this insight and for allowing us to interview you for our format. I also want to express my gratitude to our listeners for their attention. Thank you both.

Amanda: Yes, thank you.

Marlon: Goodbye.

Amanda: Okay, bye.