

Podcast with Mirjam Labrenz, Student at the University of Potsdam

Intro: A warm welcome to all listeners! Our podcast aims to introduce you to students, teachers, as well as employees from the administration at the University of Potsdam. We interviewed people with and without disabilities. We wanted to hear from them, just how inclusive the University of Potsdam is as a place of study, and as an employer.

Christian: So, a wonderful day to you. I am Christian and I'll be guiding you through this Podcast today. I have with me here Mirjam Labrenz, and well, Mirjam, would you like to introduce yourself a bit?

Mirjam: Yeah, I am Mirjam, I study Computational Science here in Potsdam and I'm studying with an impairment. Sometimes better, sometimes worse.

Christian: Sometimes better, sometimes worse, well... who doesn't study like that? How did you get to the University of Potsdam? What motivated you to come work and study here?

Mirjam: Well, I have to admit, I kind of got to the University of Potsdam on a detour, I was highly motivated and originally planned on going to the HPI, when it still wasn't part of the University of Potsdam. However, they only have limited spots available so when I applied there all motivated, I obviously didn't get in. The University of Potsdam was originally my second choice but proved to be my first later on, with the lecturers, my impairments, etc. it just proved to be the better choice then.

Christian: Okay, that's nice to hear for the University of Potsdam, especially when compared with the HPI, I mean after all, the HPI always kind of positions themselves as the promised land and the University of Potsdam kind of as their little acquaintance. But that's nice to hear. What kind of experiences have you made due to your impairment, with your colleagues, your workplace environment or just the institution as an employer itself?

Mirjam: Well, firstly I'd have to point out that all my impairments are mental impairments, meaning I have better or worse days sometimes and can only influence them conditionally. And I have a hearing impairment on one side as well. Concerning the work and my studies at the University of Potsdam, at least in the IT area, I have made very positive experiences so far, but I've been very open with my handicaps.

Christian: That's a big advantage and I understand that very well. Many people without impairments are probably afraid of saying something wrong, do you have special advice for them on how to talk to people with impairments and how to properly approach them?

Mirjam: I mean, people without impairments should just treat people with impairments like normal people, without being overly sensitive, because in my experience that usually led to more misunderstandings. In my opinion, you can always say something wrong even in groups of people without any impairments, there's no need to judge someone for it, it happens. Just be open when approaching another person.

Christian: That's solid advice that I can only agree with. What support or equality measures do you use at the university?

Mirjam: The biggest and most important one for me would be my individual equality measure, because through that I am able to change my exam form from written to oral or write a research paper instead, I am not necessarily bound to the exam dates, I can postpone exams or cancel them more freely. Yeah... and the other support offers I use that aren't like directly part of my individual equality measure but that help me immensely are the talks and chats I have with the counselors. Like, when I really can't deal with something now, but I need to finish the exams, then I just go up to the professors and talk to them. You don't have to go into detail about everything, but you can say that you're not able to at the moment, but you'd still like to finish the exams, and if there may be another way to go about it. And in the IT department I've only had positive experiences with that.

Christian: I can imagine that the professors in the IT department are used to that, because on the one hand they know about it through their work and are much more understanding and flexible than other professors. That's just my experience and my guess. But that's great and I am glad that your individual equality measure actually is profitable for you and that you make use of it. But what do you think is missing at the University of Potsdam to be an even more inclusive institution?

Mirjam: I mean, what I've noticed through the experiences I've made is that there are no hearing loops although there are so many students with hearing impairments. I mean, you can already tell through these small hearing devices, there are many young people who are already experiencing hearing impairments. The acoustic is so bad in some lecture halls even for people with no hearing impairments, it should be part of the standard equipment, it doesn't cost that much to equip and that is in my opinion and from what I've noticed a big disadvantage. Something else I've noticed is for physical disabilities, a lot of people forget that there are people who aren't physically disabled forever, for example if someone had an accident, you're suddenly faced with the fact that you can't go everywhere anymore. I feel like there is a lot of rework to be done, it's usually a lot of talk and nothing's ever done about it.

Christian: Yes, as a wheelchair user myself I can only support that, but to be honest, in my experience, the University of Potsdam is always eager to better themselves, and there have been some improvements, they may have been very slow but at least they're there. Well, then I'd like to thank you very much for this nice interview, I hope you continue to work and study here with much joy and if you have any ideas or suggestions on how to improve, you can always turn to our team for students with disabilities, we are glad to pass them on and inspire change. Yeah, and if it works, we are glad to help with these improvements.