

Podcast with Maike Schwarz, psychology student at the University of Potsdam and Paralympic swimmer

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.

Amanda Beser: Hello to all. My name is Amanda and today I am talking to Maike. Maike, would you like to introduce yourself?

Maike Schwarz: Yes, with pleasure. First of all, hi! I am happy to be here. My name is Maike, I'm 28 years old, studying psychology at the University of Potsdam and I'm just about to finish my Bachelor's degree. It has all dragged on a bit because, in addition, I am a competitive athlete. I'm a swimmer at the Potsdam Olympic Training Centre. I kind of double tracked studying and being an athlete. Further I am visually handicapped, which means it is really hard for me to see. I still have about 2% vision.

Amanda Beser: Studying at the University of Potsdam – what do you like about it?

Maike Schwarz: First of all, it's close-by, at least in my case, because I live nearby. It's easy to get there using public transport, especially for me. I don't have to jump from bus to bus all the time and it's simple, which isn't always the case when it comes to Universities. Yes, it's just very clearly arranged.

Amanda Beser: And what else helps you to study successfully and what difficulties do you encounter during your studies?

Maike Schwarz: When it comes to my visual impairment for example, the lecturers are very helpful and obliging. I often have a few problems with the subject of statistics which happens to be lectured by using illustrations e.g. and it's difficult for me to work with that because I can't

visually perceive them. The lecturers are always thinking about how they could make it easier for me or they'd switch from a written to an oral exam, something like that. Just to make it possible for me. That's definitely a big plus. On top of that, because of my sport, I actually study less because time is rare. The university is very accommodating, also there is an agreement between the University of Potsdam and the Olympic Training Centre. This is taken very seriously, which means I am able to pursue this dual career easily. It's never been a problem for a lecturer as well, we'd always find alternative solutions. So I found the University to be a very cooperative environment.

Amanda Beser: Yes, you've mentioned that you're an athlete, a Paralympic swimmer. How did you get into this competitive sport?

Maike Schwarz: I was actually born into it in some way. My parents were both swimmers, my dad was a water polo player and I was super fond of water from an early age. Before I could walk, I was already long-drawn to water. Then my parents decided that this child had to learn how to swim. I did a bunch of things when I was younger, I played volleyball, soccer, I did athletics, played the piano, did Taekwondo, so I really did thousands of things but I always got stuck with swimming, because I simply realised: That's my element, I just feel like I am at my happy-place when I'm in the water. I realised that I'm not quite a fool at it and then at the age of ten or eleven decided that I really wanted to take up swimming as a career. In order to be successful and invest that much time and energy it is important to decide that at such a young age.

In retrospect that was the best decision as I lost my eye-sight to a huge extent when I was 13. Apparently it was meant to be for if I had decided to play volleyball or soccer, I would've had to give it up three years later because ball sports are way more difficult without being able to see properly. Whereas with swimming, one learns tricks on how to work it out and it does almost work as well as with eye-sight. And so I kept getting better and better, I started training even more and started to focus on it.

Amanda Beser: You've just told us that you've spent a lot of time energy on sports. How can one imagine your training-routine? How does your week look like?

Maike Schwarz: Usually I'd do about ten so called water-sessions in one week. Which means I go into the water to swim ten times a week and added to it are about three to four sessions of strength training. We do the strength training and then build different, smaller units around it.

What I mean is we'd do athletics, stabilisation and also something like loosening, stretching and physio-therapy appointments. That's to prevent injuries or to recover minor injuries. Then, of course, there's a nutritional advice from time to time, for that's part of being a competitive athlete. So it's not just the training as well as psychological support – its quite a complex field especially the part of regeneration, which means besides doing sports, a lot of time is required to regenerate.

Yea, so a week is pretty busy to put it this way: Considering all the appointments, physio, training etc. it adds up to 35-40 hours a week.

Amanda Beser: You've been to London, Rio, you've qualified for Tokyo. How can one imagine that? How does the hustle and bustle of Olympic Village look like? What kinds of experiences have you gathered there?

Maike Schwarz: It's been a mega experience. Being in the Olympic Village, where all the athletes live together. Usually at the European and the World Championship it'd be just us swimmers, so we're only among ourselves, whereas at the Olympic Village all the athletes from different nations lived together in this small town. This, plus the flair, the atmosphere, is just indescribable. No matter where one's from, who one is... we all had the same goal. We've all been working for this goal at least for the last four years if not even a lifetime, towards this moment. We're all trying to get the best out of ourselves at this very moment. It's that easy: this just welds everyone together, no matter the differences.

Amanda Beser: Yes, that sounds very beautiful, like one of those special moments, also being with all the other athletes. Now, these last two years we've been living in an exceptional situation: corona. How did this affect your sport activities in the first place? Maybe as well: the compatibility with the university?

Maike Schwarz: So when talking about the compatibility of university and sports, Corona for me personally has been – please don't get me wrong –the best thing that could've happened concerning my studies. Studying online has made studying in general a million times easier. I no longer had to manage log ways, that had cost me effort and exertion. I didn't have this big lecture room, where several hundred people would sit in. One could hear pencils scratching everywhere, someone coughing, others making several noises. For me, as I only have the acoustics to follow the lecture, it is hard to concentrate with that many side noises. I really have to rely on what the lecturer says and to follow the voice with that many people around can be super difficult

sometimes. That's also very exhausting. Online, this had been much easier. Everyone just muted their microphones, so that the lecturer was the only one we could hear. On top of that, I was able to record it, which made it all a lot easier for me and also with the sports. When I missed a lecture because of a trainings camp or a competition, it wasn't so bad. I could just listen to it in between and work on it when I had the time. When studying would've worked like that in general, I wouldn't have needed that long for my Bachelor's degree.

Amanda Beser: So the benefits were in your favour. You were able to decide for yourself: when do I watch the records? But how were the study-materials? Could you always access them without any problems, were they accessible and barrier-free or did you have to ask for that sometimes?

Maike Schwarz: So it was partly like this and partly like that. Sometimes it was just like I stated before, the lecturers put the slides online beforehand, which was very practical for me. When I had the slides on my computer I could zoom in as much as I needed. There were some cases when the lecturers put the slides online after the lecture and didn't want to record the lecture at all. When this happened, it was just the same as the usual university-situation. That's very, very difficult for me, because then – as I said before – the other students would follow the slides projected at the front, but when I do not have access to them, I have no possibility to follow. There were problems because lecturers refused to give out their slides before or at all. They said that if they did, they couldn't make sure that the slides won't be shared and so on. So there were one or two people who, let's say, made a bit of a fuss and as a result made my life a bit more difficult. But with that few exceptions, all in all it worked out well.

Amanda Beser: With those exceptions, did the disadvantage compensation help you?

Maike Schwarz: I wish I could say 'yes', but not really. When I addressed the people responsible, I always threw around with my two disadvantage compensations for sports and my eyes. Let's just say, they didn't really impress them that much. Let's put it that way; it's really been an exception. In 90-95% of the time it did go really smoothly.

Amanda Beser: Have you been informed about these possibilities before or whilst studying? Or how did you come up with the disadvantage compensation or the offers of the Students Counselling Service?

Maike Schwarz: I don't really remember how it started back then. I think that everything dissolved on its own because of my career counsellor at the Olympic Training Centre and because of my compensation for disadvantages due to sport through the cooperation between the Olympic Training Centre and the University of Potsdam, which already existed anyway. I think that's when it first came to subject. Then I approached the then representative of the University of Potsdam and she helped me with the disadvantage compensation for my eyes. She made sure I had more time, just because I need much longer to read or perceive anything that's written on a paper. Sometimes – as I said before – a written exam would be replaced by an oral exam. It all came together well and I have to say that I really got help from the University of Potsdam right at the beginning and then very quickly as well.

Amanda Beser: Exactly. Now, this online semester is as good as over. Most of the courses are offered in persona again. You've mentioned in another interview, that you are accompanied by your service dog Jumper. How does this work out? How can I imagine it; can you access the campus and the lecture rooms with your dog without problems?

Maike Schwarz: So far, this worked out just fine. There have been individual lecturers who, at the very moment they saw the dog, immediately shouted: "Dogs are not allowed on campus!", but then had another look at us and said: "Ah, okay, it's alright". It didn't happen to me that someone refused to let us in. I was allowed to go everywhere, but as I said, sometimes this first screaming happened but after they've realised, it was okay. Maybe I was lucky though. I felt like in some seminars with less people the dog was an enrichment. The lecturers were happy to see him.

Amanda Beser: I have the impression that the topic of a service animal, even in everyday life, has not really arrived in Germany yet.

Maike Schwarz: No, it really didn't. Not at all. How often have I been thrown out of a store or haven't been allowed to go in somewhere? People don't even know what a service dog is and what I'm allowed to do. People do often ask if my dog is sick. When I asked them, what makes them think of that, they'd refer to his harness. They think that I have to carry him. I explained that this is kind of a replacement for my eyes, that it is not to carry the dog. Then, so many people would ask me whether he helps me to swim. Whether he swims next to me while my training sessions, so that I knew in what directions I'd have to swim. Of course not, he's sitting

at the edge of the pool waiting for me. This idea of my dog Jumpy paddling along with me and having to swim with me all day. But the questions are so, so sweet sometimes.

Amanda Beser: You'd have an Olympic dog then as well.

Maike Schwarz: Yes, right. He's been with me.

Amanda Beser: We're coming close to the end of this interview by now. I only have two more questions for you. One of which would be: If you were to start over again in the first semester of your Bachelor's degree, what would you like to keep doing the same and what would you perhaps solve differently?

Maike Schwarz: I think I wouldn't let myself get insecure so quickly. When I entered a room and immediately got nagged, even though everything always solved somehow, I was feeling very insecure at that moment and I also felt uncomfortable.

So that's where I would, if I could, I would tell my earlier self to stand up for myself and just get over it. I would be even more persistent at one point or another and insist more on this compensation for a disadvantage which is, in conclusion, no advantage but - as it says - a fair compensation that I really needed at that time. So yes, that's what I would change.

What I would keep the same is to exchange with, and talk to my lecturers.

That always helped. I always introduced myself at the beginning of the course, I said: "Hey, I'm Maike and I can't see well and so on." I had the feeling that when I started that exchange, it made everything a lot easier. It's hard to come up with an issue after 14 lectures or so and say: "I'm sitting in the very back and I cannot see at all, also how are we going to solve that when writing the exam next week?". I've done that once or twice by mistake, but that's always ended up very difficult. So I would do that again, to talk to the lecturers at the beginning of the course so that they could adjust to it better. Those are the first things coming to my mind.

Amanda Beser: Yes, I think many people could use these points. I believe that many students are confronted with this at the beginning and might ask themselves: Why do others get along so well and I don't? Do they know it all in advance?

You're now at the end of your Bachelor's degree. What are your goals afterwards? What is the next step?

Maike Schwarz: In fact, I would like to pursue a different path. I was 19 when I left school and, to be honest, I didn't really know what to do. I knew I'd like to study because it's simply much easier to combine that with competitive sports than an apprenticeship or a dual study program. I've always been interested in working interactively so I've been told that psychology might be a good option for me. I have to say that I found myself in a few courses but simply realised that I don't want to pursue this career after my Bachelor's degree. I'm going to finish the Bachelor and I did benefit a lot from studying, I've learned a lot and I can always build on it. Still, I always wanted to work with animals too. Actually since I was a little kid. I wanted to be a vet or someone who takes care of animals, it's always been and still is the thing that comes close to my heart. After finishing my Bachelor's degree, I'm definitely going to pursue that.

Amanda Beser: Exciting! We wish you all the success for your future.

Maike Schwarz: Times change and one develops in some way.

Amanda Beser: Perhaps a last conclusion: What do you wish for the future?

Maike Schwarz: Generally speaking?

Amanda Beser: Yes.

Maike Schwarz: Since the little man is lying here on my lap slumbering- I really want him to be well and drive me crazy for a few more decades.

Amanda Beser: Okay Maike. Thank you very much for taking your time to do this interview today and good luck for your future!

Maike Schwarz: Yes, with pleasure.