

Podcast with Janny Armbruster, state government commissioner for people with disabilities in Brandenburg with Robert Meile, the commissioner for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses 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.

Robert Meile: Well, dear listeners, a warm welcome to you all to our newest edition of our podcast “We are UP”. Today with a different interviewer, normally you’d be hearing the students interview each other, but today I’ll be doing it myself. My name is Robert Meile, I am the commissioner for students with disabilities at the University of Potsdam and today, we have a very special guest with us. Said guest being Mrs. Armbruster, the state government commissioner for people with disabilities in Brandenburg. We will shortly talk about that but since Mrs. Armbruster and I have known each other for a very long time, we are on a first name basis, just to clear any confusion. Dear Janny, welcome, it's great to have you here.

Janny Armbruster: Thanks, Robert.

Robert Meile: Janny, would you mind introducing yourself briefly?

Janny Armbruster: Ah yes, I am Janny Armbruster. I'm actually still a member at the University of Potsdam, but I am currently functioning as the state government commissioner for people with disabilities in Brandenburg. Nevertheless, I am still a part of the university and have worked here

for over 20 years, starting in 1998. I used to work in the civil service sector in different positions and functions and have also worked at the TU Berlin. I studied German and History to get a teacher training certificate at the Humboldt University, and that is the abridged version of my resume.

Robert Meile: Well, thank you, and you've already mentioned this, but how do you become state government commissioner for people with disabilities?

Janny Armbruster: Well, it's a function that is bound to a legislative period, the government orders it and the procedure is like a typical application process. It was a three-tiered process in which I came out on top of over 20 other applicants.

Robert Meile: Well, and if I'm not mistaken, it's been two years already since then.

Janny Armbruster: No, actually it's only been one since August of last year. So technically, it's true but it always takes a while for things like that. Well, first the government must set up and then it takes a while for a position like that to be enforced. And then Corona happened and then it did take like nearly a year.

Robert Meile: It's been a very trying time. How did you experience all of this personally, and as the government appointed commissioner for people with disabilities in Brandenburg?

Janny Armbruster: When I got this position in August of last year it was the height of the pandemic. I mean everyone can remember we don't have to recount it again. And for a task like this, a political one, where I must negotiate or be the advocate for people with disabilities in our state, while still maintaining the decisions enacted by the government. And now you're in this position, where you can't even get to know the people and the organizations you're supposed to be advocating

for. It's a tough start, where now you're forced to be a pencil pusher for the most part, and it's only been half a year or so in which I've been able to get to know and meet these people and organizations, not just via Zoom, but in real life, and this part of the job is incredibly important.

Robert Meile: You haven't mentioned this yet, but you've been working with people with disabilities for a long time now. You were like a guidance counselor at the university, so this topic isn't exactly new for you, you've been working in this field for a long time. What would you say is your vision for a truly inclusive society? How do you envision the people living together especially in Brandenburg?

Janny Armbruster: Ideally, we wouldn't have to define this term "inclusive society" anymore. If we stopped defining people with different disabilities through their disability and started seeing them just as any other human being and communicated openly with them, like we do with everybody else, I mean in the realm of possibility, then we would have achieved a truly inclusive world, and this is something we only learn through interaction. Be it in every part of our life, whether it be in our education, in the job market, in sports, in our free time, anywhere. Basically, in every part of our life other people can decide freely for themselves and unfortunately, we are a long way from there still.

Robert Meile: You said it. What would you say, I mean, being the state appointed commissioner for Brandenburg, what could you tell us about your experience, or what the people with disabilities in the state Brandenburg have told you, I mean you are also in contact with the state Advisory Board for people with disabilities and other fractions. What would you say are the biggest areas for improvement that need working on? That was the first question and the second one is, what are the steps you're taking to realize these improvements and work on these areas?

Janny Armbruster: Well, it's basically a cross cutting political issue, because whenever one tries to engage politically, they are always trying to further their own agenda. Maybe someone wants to develop more mass sports, or someone wants to engage politically, whether it be in education or whatever, but inclusion literally encompasses all of these areas of life. Since I am coming from a background of higher education and have been socialized in university circles, I am familiar with the typical student life cycle and that cycle starts way before you begin your studies, even before the matriculation and it sticks with you until you graduate. And I've tried to adopt this model for the task I am heading currently, meaning that especially young people with disabilities are near and dear to me because I think we can break out of these old patterns. And if we manage that our children born with a disability or that become disabled over time don't have to end up in this old-fashioned cycle off having to go through early intervention institutions until they move on to special needs schools and apprenticeships, where they are immediately assigned to workshops and are therefore continually ostracized from society, then we can say we have achieved something. So, my goal is to make these special needs schools inclusive, meaning that our children can get into good inclusive schools. As for the parents, currently they have the authority to decide where to put their children and they oftentimes think that these special needs schools are better suited for their children instead of inclusive schools, and I'm afraid that this might actually be true, so we need to rethink inclusion and better our inclusive schools. We want the parents to say yes, my child needs to be schooled inclusively and children that have been schooled inclusively don't necessarily end up in these workshops like the one's commonplace in Berlin, where the children usually don't end up on the general job market and are therefore excluded from the aforementioned typical life cycle of a student. Realistically speaking, in my 3 remaining years I know I won't be able to change the world. I wish I could, but the least I can do is try to open doors so that we can achieve more inclusion in early intervention institutions. I am in talks with the secretary of education over how to improve inclusion in education, which has a pretty bad reputation here in Brandenburg. We want to right the

wrongs of the past years and to boost this topic to get more inclusive schools and to get more children into this inclusive field of education and hopefully so on and so forth.

Robert Meile: That is a very nice approach, and as you said it yourself, something that I also experience as a commissioner is that very few people with disabilities actually acquire their A-Levels or general qualification for university entrance, because they are forced in a certain direction or because the system doesn't have any confidence in them. For that I can definitely support this approach, I mean there is a very little percentage of people with disabilities who actually start their studies here with us. And if they were to undergo a “normal” schooling and education system, they would also presumably end up at the universities.

Janny Armbruster: But most likely not a single person from special needs schools, right? And that's the problem, they aren't encouraged the way they would be or could be at an inclusive school.

Robert Meile: It starts with individual equality measures and that's something we've experienced, that if they haven't gotten the proper individual equality measures at school, they most likely don't reach graduation at these schools, unlike if they had a proper individual equality measure as they can acquire here. So that's also something to take into consideration. Especially people with partial performance impairments or dyslexia or dyscalculia, they oftentimes fall out of these systems entirely and end up in special needs schools.

Janny Armbruster: My strategy is actually, it's just seeing how much we can achieve in these three years so that it actually continues well into the next legislative period. And I think the idea here would be to like get some kind of model school or model region maybe, wherein a system is put in place that mimics this student life cycle we've talked about before. Only now, it would be the

life cycle of children with disabilities where we showcase exemplary ways of what this model could entail and look like.

Robert Meile: Models are very important, that's why we do this campaign for our podcast in which we introduce all these people that have walked this path before. And a lot of them often times recount this experience as very tiresome, where they must muster a lot of courage and strength. But I admire this a lot because I think, especially for people with disabilities, they must assert themselves in society to enforce their rights more than someone like me for example. Education is a very big topic. You've mentioned before that you've started during the pandemic, and we've experienced a tremendous digitalization, especially at the universities. We switched over to or had to switch over into the digital sphere. In your department there is also the implementation office for digital accessibility. Sounds a bit complicated. What exactly is that and what do you do, what does someone do there?

Janny Armbruster: I mean, whenever we talk about inclusion into society, we are also always talking about dismantling barriers. We've talked about the ones prevalent in schools but obviously there are also barriers in the digital sphere. You couldn't even imagine. We are all sitting in front of our computers, attend Zoom meetings, I don't know, do video conferences, switch our files from A to B and are generally just very mobile. And especially for visually impaired or blind people, partially even deaf people, there are built in barriers that we don't even acknowledge. It starts with documents that aren't readable, like PDFs, which then started an accessibility act in the EU, that had to be administered in every country, the BitVO. With this act, everyone in civil spaces and institutions is obligated to design accessible website or mobile applications like apps. We are currently still at a point where we have to declare these things still, like it's still not accessible in this or that part, but I think, at the beginning of next year we will have to start shutting down websites. And we are currently at a university and something that's important for universities is that

students work with online learning platforms. Lecturers upload their material and partially what's uploaded there. Websites like Moodle aren't accessible for the most part. Or PDFs that aren't readable and here the university is obligated to fulfill their legal order. Accessible websites, accessible documents, and the implementation office for digital accessibility to answer all these questions, they all have to be set up. The implementation office is tied to my position currently and all students, every person, every citizen can come to me whenever they notice inaccessible websites or applications, they'll be redirected to our implementation office and they'll be taken through the regulated process, where they can show what works and what doesn't. If within three weeks they haven't received a response and the barriers persist, then we would start to pressure the relevant parties to either take down the website or change the inaccessible features.

Robert Meile: And this is currently happening? Do you have an overview over the number of enquiries or complaints you get?

Janny Armbruster: Unfortunately, not. I've only hired someone two months ago and we've started doing this ourselves, making a website and flyer for it. It's always like that. This implementation office in our department wasn't really well known, but as soon as people become aware of it, people will start coming to us with their queries, saying they can't access this part because there is a barrier they can't overcome. I think this will start happening once there is a general awareness about this position.

Robert Meile: Digital accessibility is a big challenge for lecturers with which we must deal with, not just digitally. We have a huge pool of lecturers at the university that must provide accessible documents or education, and all the enquiries land on my desk first. How do we go about that? Which advice would you give lecturers that ask you this question, like how am I supposed to manage that?

Janny Armbruster: As with everything else, if accessibility is considered from the start, then we wouldn't face any of these problems anymore. The problem arises once you have to take it into account retrospectively because then it's associated with effort, and you encounter technical obstacles. My advice for everyone is, think about it from the start, look for barriers and how you can design your documents and webpages accessible? For you, Robert and your colleagues, my advice is to create a style guide for accessible documents for people to just download it. How does it work? How do I create an accessible PDF? It's just a matter of how to save it. Basically, for the university you'd let Frau Guzman develop a handout with which all teaching staff can work. But I'd also advise the university to implement a supervisory board, to prevent these barrier ridden sites from ever uploading. It is after all a legal objective for the university to control these sites, so they have to think about how they want to go about that.

Robert Meile: It is a huge opportunity. We've been dealing with this for a long time now. You start to look at your own structures and think "What can we improve?" and I think that overall, we're on the right track. We've commissioned a website test with the LRSV and we've gotten back a very long reports I think over 100 pages, but that's exactly what the state benefits from, even one for digital teaching. And we've noticed that for people with disabilities or certain impairments it's been a huge relief. We've noticed that the students with chronic illnesses, or those who can't leave the house, students with psychological illnesses, have done much better during their studies now rather than during classroom teaching. According to my colleague Annette Guzmann this also partially applies to employees with disabilities and impairments since we are also an educational institution. Did you also get feedback from the citizens during the pandemic or rather let me rephrase that, what type of feedback have you received? What elements we adapted during the pandemic should be maintained? What has been accepted and what are things where people say "No, we can't keep

doing this, we need to return to the standard procedures.”?

Janny Armbruster: I don't think that there'll ever be a normality the way it was before corona.

Especially regarding digitalization, I see it as an opportunity, I mean an opportunity for a hybrid work form, wherein I don't need to go on business trips, only to meet up with three colleagues.

Instead, I can do it via Zoom, it saves time and for short notice work related organizational matters it'll definitely prove positive because they help us simplify these processes, like homeschooling for example. I pray we won't have to go back to homeschooling entirely again, but we should maintain this hybrid form. And since we'll just have to get accustomed to living with Corona, I wonder whether it's really necessary to have lectures with 500 people in a room, with a single professor standing there and talking for one and a half hours. I think in this case it's just simpler to upload it on Moodle and everyone watches it whenever they find the time to do so. I know Oliver Günther would rather have regular lectures back, but I think combining it like this is much more useful. Of course, there aren't only positives to the pandemic, to working from home while knowing that the social life, interaction and knowledge exchange is just as important, which is why we need to find a middle ground, to work in real life with each other and digitally, for the students and employees who need this social interaction while sharing a coffee break. It's part of our life, we just are social creatures, and nobody benefitted from the time we had to stay locked up inside, that also makes us sick. And for people with disabilities this was especially troublesome because they need these contacts, the support, and the social inclusion more than others even.

Robert Meile: I attended the conference in November, the state disability politics conference.

There were a lot of people with disabilities in attendance and I noticed that the measures taken there, that had to be taken rather rashly, don't consider people with disabilities. As important as a mask is, for people who lipread it's a huge problem and this will probably be a problem at the university as well, if many people wear masks in the lecture halls. I hope we can at some point get

away from this and I definitely support the point you've made, a healthy mix of both measures does it.

Janny Armbruster: With the corona measures in place currently I wouldn't do lectures with 500 or 200 people, but instead classes where students can interact and discuss. I think it's important that these can still take place.

Robert Meile: Well, then I thank you. I have one last question, Janny, and this is a question to kind of look at what the future holds. The question being, Janny, if you were prime minister of Brandenburg for a day, what would you immediately enforce regarding your current workplace?

Janny Armbruster: I would like to build a disability parliament for Brandenburg and I would like to order it, although a minister doesn't have the interference rights into parliament, but I'd talk to the state legislative president to work together with the state commissioner for people with disabilities to establish a solid talking ground, it doesn't have to be neither exclusive nor inclusive, just a place for the parliament and people with disabilities to talk. After all, they must make sure that the decisions and proposals keep the interest of people with disabilities in mind. We are allowed, and now I do have to add 2 more things I forgot to say before. Here in Brandenburg, we have the highest quota for people with disabilities, not least because of obsolescence in our society. Especially here in Brandenburg we have 500.000 people with disabilities and around 138.000 with a recognized disability. That's 20% of our population. And this is sometimes overlooked, but I think it's so important, I've said it before the elections, to keep these people in mind and put our political focus on them, not just in my department, but for all political decision-makers. That would be tremendously important to me and I think a designated parliament might help with that.

Robert Meile: That's a nice ending sentiment Janny, thank you for being here with me today and see you soon.

Janny Armbruster: Thanks Robert, we'll probably see each other under different circumstances again, but it was my pleasure. Thank you.