

Podcast with Annemarie Kleinert, Alumna of 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.

Erika: Hello to you all, my name is Erika and today I have Annemarie as a guest. Annemarie, would you like to introduce yourself?

Annemarie: Hello, my name is Annemarie Kleinert, I studied educational science at the University of Potsdam and Italian Philology, and for around three to four years – I don't recall exactly – I worked at the student counselling offices and first year orientation. And I am happy to be here today.

Erika: Alright lovely, I'm happy to have you here. Would you like to answer my first question? What did you like most about your studies, or about the University of Potsdam in general?

Annemarie: I think, I came directly from school to university and what was so great about being at a university was people's open-mindedness. I have a walker, right, which means my disability is a very visible one and most of the teachers and students were very open, which was so new to me because I came from the school and children there tend to be mean, as well as the teachers. I was the only one in the class who had a need for inclusion. I had been in an otherwise "regular" school, if you can even call it that, so I was always kind of the center of attention and I think, not being the center of attention anymore was just really great for me, so I enjoyed it a lot. These were really my first experiences, and generally I've mostly had many positive experiences. The people were very open-minded and helpful towards me and even brought up new ideas concerning my handicap. It was a really nice time; I like to look back on a lot.

Erika: And what would you say, who or what helped you be successful in your studies?

Annemarie: First and foremost, my parents, because they always supported me, even financially I must admit, meaning I never had this pressure to work to be able to afford housing, so I could focus primarily on my studies. Then obviously Dr. Bürger, the former commissioner for students with disabilities and her entire team, with which I enjoyed many talks. She was always there, even for the smallest inconveniences. The student advisors too, were always very helpful, even with researching, since everything's new in terms of studying – especially with a disability, so you think to yourself you can do everything on your own but in the end it's still a challenge. It was always nice to have someone or to know who to talk to no matter how big the problem is, there is always a solution for it. Sometimes these problems seem a lot bigger to yourself than they are I think, and this idiom: “You can't see the forest for the trees” just fits. Then I went with this problem to Dr. Bürger, and she said: „It's doable, we will manage it, just breathe for a second and then we'll continue. “. It was really nice to just get grounded like that, especially after having had tunnel vision. You want to do everything on your own and it definitely was a learning process to see okay, maybe I'm not as fast as everyone else, but you needed to realize that for yourself.

Erika: That's what the university is for. And where did you get the information about the advisory services and the student advisors from Dr. Bürger? Like, where did the information come from, that the University of Potsdam has these possibilities to study with a disability or chronic illness without any disadvantages?

Annemarie: I've already had this during my school years, like a year before graduation I already knew that I absolutely wanted to go to the University of Potsdam, because I knew I wanted to study and stay in the beautiful Potsdam. I mean, the proximity to my parents was somehow really important to me and then I learned about Dr. Bürger pretty fast, and I heard so many good things about her. I've had my first talk with her together with my mother, because it was really surprising to hear about individual equality measures since at school that only meant I got five more minutes to write while the others were already tidying up and getting home – an individual equality measure like at the University of Potsdam was unheard of for me. I had to write everything on my own, there was no writing assistance and to

learn that something like that exists was just very new to me, especially not having to fight or argue about it, that you could just be afforded this right. I think that back then that already helped me a lot to start my studies unabashedly, because it's already very exciting to start your studies after finishing school. Are you going to manage and how will you manage without knowing how everything works. Yes, that helped me a lot to be welcomed with open arms and basically be told to definitely apply and the rest will be dealt with. It definitely helped to immediately have someone to contact.

Erika: It definitely sounds like you've had a lot of positive experiences. What proved to be the most difficult during your studies?

Annemarie: Well, the most difficult thing for me is that I think faster than I can write. That is especially hard in scientific studies where you have to be fast. You have to work and write a lot and you immediately have to write exams, and this is where I had to unlearn this need to want to do everything by myself, I tried keeping up by using a computer to take notes, but it didn't help that everyone around me kept telling me this wouldn't work out. I just wanted to do, so the first exams immediately tanked, just because I wanted to try doing it all on my own. I didn't listen to anybody. I then found out I had the opportunity to dictate, meaning a student advisor from Dr. Bürger would write down everything I dictated in an exam, which in and of itself is already a challenge since you have to learn to do that too. You have to literally say what you want without changing your mind a thousand times. That was a challenge, but in the end, it proved to be the best for me, because it furthered me in educational sciences a lot, that I didn't have to write on my own anymore but instead be able to dictate or change my written exam into an oral one. It was nice to even have this opportunity.

Erika: Nice and what else would you want from teachers or students regarding studies without barriers? What did you miss still?

Annemarie: Even though I've had mostly positive experiences at the University of Potsdam, I still had a few hardships there. Where you'd come upon disagreements, I had a conflict with a lecturer who just wouldn't understand what I wanted from her, like a misunderstanding of sorts. She just wouldn't understand that my handicap wasn't just physical meaning I couldn't walk and needed a walker, but that I was also impaired with writing. And resolving this conflict, and in the end, it was a true

fight, took a lot of support from Dr. Bürger, my family and my friends, to say I'll finish this all the way because I can do this. Yes, I think I just wish that people were opener to listen and not just to see this person and judge for themselves, but instead to say, maybe there is more to their handicap, and I need to listen, even if I don't know about it yet. Another thing maybe, because I have a lot of friends who struggle with mental health issues, is that this is even harder. These people are often too intimidated or afraid to talk about it. And me too, I wanted to do it all on my own, so maybe to just go out of your way and offer help without the person with handicap needing to plead for it just to get what's rightfully theirs. Often times they just don't do it out of fear even though in the end it might do them good to at least have tried it out. I then think about students with autism, I've just had some experiences with that. Here it often is not like it seems in the moment. I'd just wish there was more information, I mean the university already does a lot with the introductory courses for first years, but just provide more for the people so that they can decide for themselves how they want to receive it, what's available, and they don't need to ask for it necessarily because I think this in itself is already a little barrier for some people. This having to constantly ask for it while others don't have to. I'm always in a situation where I have to thank people and ask them. I just wish, I know it's a long process, but it's about having all these opportunities there. And I think, there should be both written and oral exams already from the get-go available. Then you'd immediately have a choice without needing to ask for it, and then the person could see, here are my strengths. Of course, it has to fit with the exam and theme, but this way there is a choice from the start. I think that's easier and might alleviate some of the fear and worry from the fact that one is different from everybody else and has to always ask for things, this way there's a higher chance people are encouraged to ask with a viable choice from the beginning. Especially for those who are used to asking and not receiving and thus resorting to just never ask for something again. It's very important that teachers bring enough sensibility and attentiveness to the table.

Erika: Exactly, especially about the information and providing the people and teachers with the necessary information.

Annemarie: That doesn't mean everybody has to be educated on these topics, that's impossible. Everyone is different, but that's how it works. People with and without disability sensitize each other, teachers with and without disability sensitize each other. That's how it works.

Erika: That's exactly what we're working towards. Now, onto my last question. What goals do you have after your graduation and who or what is helping you to prepare for them?

Annemarie: That's not as easy, I mean I have a degree in Educational Sciences now and in Italian Philology and did actually stumble into an opportunity through the university because a student was searching for assistance with her study affairs. And now I am in an assistance agency, and I help students, also from the University of Potsdam, as well as other students, which is really nice. And I think I'm learning a lot here, but I still don't know where I really want to be. I know I want to go into advisory roles, and I know there are a lot of hardships still with applying for prospective jobs because you encounter rejection from others without them noticing it's a form of rejection. Whenever they say, they only take written documents although you've only ever handed in oral ones at school or university. In the work life it's just not like that anymore. I think you'd have to grow a thick skin again to be able to walk different paths and I think I'm still searching and realizing that work life is different, so I'll have to try and take every chance I get. And with my current work I got the chance and it's exciting and nice and I'm curious to see what comes next for me.

Erika: Annemarie thank you so, so much for this lovely conversation and for your time and in the name of our team also a huge thank you for being with us. See you!