

Podcast with Christian Opitz, Alumni 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.

Erika: Hello everyone! My name is Erika and my guest for today is Christian. Christian, would you like to introduce yourself? Who are you? Where are you from and what exactly are you doing at the University of Potsdam?

Christian: Yes hello, I am Christian, I come from a small quiet town called Finsterwalde located in South Brandenburg. I finished my school in Dresden and then came to the University of Potsdam to study History, and Politics and Administration.

Erika: Okay and what do you like most about your studies, or about the university in general?

Christian: Personally, what I really like about the University is that there is a lot of support, via a network of well-connected people who help me with my studies as a wheelchair user. And, of course, as a history student, the historical location.

Erika: What or who would you say is helping you specifically to study successfully?

Christian: In addition to the network mentioned just now, of course, the team of student staff from the commissioner for students with disabilities, Mr. Meile. The good contacts, competent people are always a great help, also about contacts and advisory opportunities outside the university.

Erika: And of course, individual equality measures?

Christian: Of course, individual equality measures, how could I forget those? Actually, the University of Potsdam is the number one when it comes to individual equality measures, that you might know from school, which, of course, is a great help if you're a person with a disability

who is currently studying at the university.

Erika: And on the other hand, what causes you particular difficulties during your studies?

Christian: Particular difficulties are simply due to my type of impairment. As a wheelchair user, it is of course always a difficulty to reach buildings. Are there any stairs? Does the elevator work? Is public transport disrupted or functioning? And of course, the longer you drive, the more time and energy it is, and in the autumn and winter months, in weather conditions with snow and rain, wheelchair driving is of course very difficult. Especially at the campus New Palace, the campus is of course a special challenge for wheelchair users, even if it has improved in recent years, due to the cobblestone pavement and the very old building structure.

Erika: Have you actually been informed about the possibilities available at the University of Potsdam to study with a disability, or even with a chronic illness, without any disadvantages, or as much without disadvantages as possible? And if so, where did this information come from?

Christian: I was lucky enough to have visited the university in person during the application process and to have met Dr. Bürger there. She was the previous representative for students with disabilities and was already very well informed about disadvantages, about other possibilities, but also about the problems at the university. It was also at the New Palace, and I immediately had an impression of my new study place, especially in regard to History which is mostly taught here. In this respect, I was very well informed before and also already familiar with many problems and difficulties.

Erika: How has the pandemic changed your studies and which of the changes should remain?

Christian: Of course, classroom teaching. In the last two semesters, these have not taken place as much anymore. That's a huge change, of course. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. To the advantage of course, if I can do everything from home on the computer, paths and routes and stairs and elevators and technical problems are a much smaller concern for me, also in terms of moving locations which means I have much more freedom to choose how I build my timetable, because I don't have to factor in any time to move from location to location, or from room to room, or from house to house. All in all, I think this could definitely stay. Of course, the social component has become completely obsolete, if you simply don't see

your fellow students anymore or don't see them live, but only as a small picture on the screen, which of course reduces the experience of studying at a university. That shouldn't stay.

Erika: And what do you want from the lecturers or other students in terms of a barrier-free education?

Christian: The University of Potsdam is quite different from what I know, what I have experienced myself or experienced through third parties. I would like the students to just carry on like this, because I really haven't had any negative experiences with the university and I don't have any explicit negative experiences with teachers. But of course, the teachers could focus more on balancing the disadvantages in their lectures, as there are still difficulties in reaching people with impairments in order for them to become aware of these opportunities. Even if the university's internet presence is remarkable, it's still different to hear this from a teacher. In the classes, I can imagine that teachers should ask more actively in some respects, for example, as a student in a wheelchair, some rooms at the University of Potsdam, especially at the New Palace campus, are not accessible. It's not feasible to get there. It would be good if there is always the possibility to change the rooms, so that you aren't faced with the problem that you want to or must attend a course at some point, and can't attend that course, because the room is not accessible, and a change is simply not possible. Although I also don't think that the teachers should be held accountable for that, since it is the university, or in this particular case, the Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation, as the owner of the site, who are then of course responsible for the building, and should pay more attention to these implementations. Although great progress has really been made in recent years.

Erika: Okay, so let's get to my last question. What goals do you have after your studies and who or what helps you prepare for them?

Christian: Yes, my goals after graduation are relatively simple – I plan to go into the civil service, maybe to stay at the University of Potsdam, if the opportunity arises, and then maybe – or hopefully – to be able to work in the sector for students with disabilities, to help in the student advisory services at the university, especially to improve conditions for wheelchair users. And I would particularly like to highlight Mr. Meile and Mrs. Kühn from the Examination Office, who are and were incredibly important as contact persons for any and all help and advisory needs you have.

Erika: Well, it seems like you have arrived well at the University of Potsdam and would like to stay here. Christian, thank you very much for your time and the nice talk, see you soon!