

Podcast with Ly Tran, 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.

Erika: Hello and welcome to our newest podcast episode! My name is Erika Herbold and my guest for today is Ly Tran. Ly, please introduce yourself, who are you, where are you from and what exactly are you doing at the University of Potsdam?

Ly: Yes, a warm welcome to you as well Erika, and everybody else. Thank you for the invitation to your podcast, I am really happy to be here today.

Erika: You're welcome.

Ly: My name is Ly Tran and I am a linguistics student at the University of Potsdam. To whoever's asking themselves right now, what linguistics actually are, I get that question a lot, for that a short explanation: at the University of Potsdam we analyze various languages from around the world, for example, we look at the grammar, the sounds of different languages. Back then I've actually started with computational linguistics, but there I've realized that I'm not good with the programming, and when I've started developing my invisible disability throughout my studies, I've lost all strength and desire to push through the programming... and that's how I've decided to change over to linguistics and yeah, I am very happy to have made that decision. And now I'm in my last tracks and am working on my bachelor thesis.

Erika: Okay, good to know. I didn't know that you're already this far along. Great, and what would you say do you like most about your studies or the University of Potsdam itself?

Ly: I really like that the linguistics studies here at the university are so interdisciplinary, because we work with psychologists and computer scientists on current research topics. I've had mostly positive experiences with students and employees from various departments and with the lecturers. Even if some of them knew about my disability, they've always tried to treat me

normally and to support me instead of belittling me, after all, you want to be known for yourself and not your disability or chronic illness. And the interconnectedness between the departments, the Career Service – they help students with job-related matters – and the psychological counselling center, and the student counselling, is great.

Erika: Okay, perfect. And what would you say, who or what helps you study successfully the most?

Ly: During my studies, when my illness began to develop, I was very overwhelmed, I had to take less classes and uhhh... battled my way through alone and through a detour, I came across the former Commissioner for Students with Disabilities, Dr. Bürger, and she helped me apply for individual equality measures, which I hadn't really known about at that point and she explained it really well to me, and because of my signs of fatigue that came in bouts and phases I needed more time for my research papers. And working together with Dr. Bürger gave me more assurance to better deal with my disability, it strengthen my confidence to deal with my anxieties, for example to speak and work in front of groups. But of course the Commissioner for Students with Disabilities Mr. Meile has always helped me to better structure my studies and yeah, the offers from the project "A Uni for All" have proved very helpful, for example the writing assistance team from Mr. Meile helped my with my research paper or my bachelor thesis to progress further. And of course, my family, friends and fellow students I've met during my studies have supported and motivated me to continue.

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

Ly: Well, aside from my signs of fatigue that comes and goes in bouts, I've also experienced physical impairments, I had trouble walking up the stairs and I've noticed that in buildings, for example at the campus New Palace, where there are next to no elevators anywhere and if there were any, they were mostly out of order. That's when I realized that I wished for the accessibility to be improved. And the cobblestone pavement at the campus was hard on me sometimes too, to properly walk on them, depending on my physical state at the time, it was really hard to actually walk on them.

Erika: Alright, so especially structural barriers that you've encountered. And you've mentioned earlier that the various institutions at the university helped you, for example the Career Service

or the Commissioner for Students with Disabilities, etc., have you actually been informed about the possibilities available at the University of Potsdam to study with a disability beforehand, like what possibilities there are to study without a disadvantage, with a disability or a chronic illness? And if so, where did this information come from?

Ly: Well, right at the start, before I started with computational linguistics, I got a brochure for and there it was mentioned that there was something like individual equality measures and that you can turn to the, now former, Commissioner for Students with Disabilities Dr. Bürger, but back then, I didn't have a disability or chronic illness which is why I didn't really engage with this topic any further. And then, when it began that I developed a disability, I was very uncomfortable and hesitant to take the first step and at some point I was at the Career Service and during our talk my advisors noticed that there were matters that burdened me, so he referred me to the psychological counselling center to which I then went. And the advisor there referred me to Dr. Bürger, she even offered to go there together with me. I then tried to inform me on the website and then I got to Dr. Bürger.

Erika: So, you'd say that in the moments of you realizing that you needed help, that something was burdening you, you've got according help very fast?

Ly: Yes, exactly, Dr. Bürger replied very quickly to me and got me an appointment fast and during our talks she referred me to the writing assistance and of course, and an employee at the examination office that is explicitly responsible for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and it was great to have a designated contact, where you could always go to. And Dr. Bürger and Mr. Meile have always told me that I can contact them whenever I have any problems and that has also provided a lot of safety for me

Erika: Okay, let's get to the topic of online semester. How has the pandemic changed your studies and which of the changes should remain?

Ly: Well, at first it was rather uncomfortable for me that some workshops were given online because I kept focusing on the camera and thinking "Oh, the camera is on.", but after a while I just got used to it and got better with the workshops and at times where I wasn't feeling too well it was very beneficial that I didn't need to commute to Potsdam, or that I could roam around my room. However, I did miss the personal face-to-face interaction

Erika: Okay, so you'd say, you could relax in your room during the sessions and you'd keep certain parts online right? Because I feel so too, that it brings a lot of advantages, but you say the you notice missing the social interaction after all this time.

Ly: Right, yes, that's what I'd say too.

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

Ly: Right, so I noticed that back then it wasn't all too easy to actually bring this topic up with my lecturers but I thought, I needed more time from them for my research paper and when I actually did talk about it, I was slightly taken aback that some of them didn't know about individual equality measures but fortunately, they understood my situation and through the extra time I was able to achieve better results. What really made me happy was that at the start of the next semester, the lecturers would talk about individual equality measures. So, what I wish for is, that more students and lecturers are made aware of the fact that there are individual equality measures and to sensitize them accordingly

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?

Ly: After my studies I want to gain some workplace experience, preferably in an area where I can work with people with impairments, where I can support them. I regularly talk to my co-students, friends and the career advisors, Vera Yu, about their workplace experiences and especially the workshops held by the Career Service helped me navigate my insecurities concerning the search for jobs as someone with a disability.

Erika: Okay, thank you so so much Ly. Then that was it already, I want to thank you for your time and for your honest answers and I wish you all the best for the future! Good luck with your studies.

Ly: Thanks, you too, and thank you that I could be here.

Erika: My pleasure.