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Promoting diversity and gender equality within the Berlin University Alliance (BUA): Reflections and policy recommendations

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Abstract: This essay contains a policy memo with recommendations on promoting diversity and gender equality within the Berlin University Alliance and its partner universities. The essay also includes a reflection on how, why, and for whom this policy memo was produced, as well as a larger reflection on the need to archive institutional (in)action on diversity, gender equality, and related topics.

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Part I: Reflections on the translation of research into policymaking and institutional (in)action

In 2025, the administrators of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA), a consortium of the Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin meant to promote co-operation and excellence across the four research institutions, asked the authors to prepare a two-page policy memo. They requested that the memo draw from our research expertise to put forth recommendations on how to strengthen diversity and gender equality within BUA and its participating universities. The designated audience for the policy memo was the presidential boards of the four universities. Over the course of 2025, we prepared, presented and discussed the policy memo, once at an internal meeting with the vice presidents of the universities and once at public-facing event with the university presidents and senior administrators.

The BUA Steering Committee for Diversity and Gender Equality asked the authors to write this policy memo in our capacity as the principal investigators of four junior research groups, one at each of the participating universities established in 2023 through BUA's thematic focus on diversity and gender equality followed by the four key strategies that have shaped universities and policy: Fix the Numbers,¹ Fix the Knowledge,² Fix the System,³ and Fix the Institution.⁴ Each of the authors have a research background in the institutional-

1 At the Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, the junior research group “Fixing the Numbers: Development and evaluation of an intervention to increase diversity and gender equality in research, teaching, and health care” is conducting a pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT) for doctoral students and their supervisors (PI: Buspavanich).

2 At the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, the junior research group “Fixing the Knowledge: Attitudes toward Diversity, Objectivity and Meritocracy in Science (ADOMiS): Multiple barriers to academic excellence” is committed to comparative research on academic career trajectories (PI: Fischer).

3 At the Freie Universität Berlin, the junior research group “Fixing the System: Analyses in the Context of the History of Science” investigates how gender and intersecting forms of oppression have been, and have not been, institutionalized over time (PI Bellows-Blakely).

4 At Technische Universität Berlin, junior research group “Fixing the Institution: How can we

zation of diversity and gender, as well as linked efforts at anti-racist, decolonial, intersectional feminist, and/or queer knowledge production within higher education, policymaking, and/or clinical medicine. As the introduction to this special issue states, we bring in different disciplinary backgrounds and interdisciplinary approaches that bridge sociology and organizational behavior; psychiatry and psychology; history and cultural studies; and gender studies.

We include the policy memo that we produced for the presidential boards of the four BUA universities within this special issue on the institutionalization of diversity and gender studies for a variety of reasons. First, the policy memo provides a glimpse into the fraught processes through which scholarly research is translated into policy recommendations. Scholarship generally emphasizes nuance, complexity of thought, rigorous citations, and deep engagement with how and why we know what we think we know (and do not know). Policy recommendations, on the other hand, often emphasize conciseness, brevity, and concrete plans for action. A considerable amount is lost in translating between the two genres. Moving between these two realms requires work, and that work is often fraught, deeply political, and contested.

Despite the pitfalls inherent in the act of translation from scholarly text to policy memo, we see value in trying to build bridges between these worlds of scholarship and policymaking. When it comes to diversity and equality programs, in particular, institutional policies are not always drawn from evidence-based approaches; political constraints, bureaucratic logic, and organizational cultures are three of many constraints on the side of institutions, while scholarly reticence to get our hands dirty and attempts to “remain above it all” in the name of objective science, as well as jargon-heavy texts, can erect unnecessary barriers to the accessibility of scholarship. So, too, do scholars rarely formulate our research questions and methods with input from practitioners who are out “doing the work” in policymaking and institutional settings.

This policy memo illustrates one approach to present the research findings in this special issue in the form of a policy brief. This is not meant to serve as an exhaustive or final set of recommendations. As a group of authors, we had to negotiate with each other, compromise, and remove key findings in order to meet the two-page limit set by the Berlin University Alliance. While drafting, we made strategic choices, such as combining a few, concrete action items that we thought would be feasible and inexpensive in the short term (e.g. the code of conduct) and proposals that requiring deeper structural changes over the

design collaborative, knowledge-based diversity policies at universities and work effectively against discrimination?” focusses on development of new anti-discrimination structures (PI Oloff).

long-term. Rather than an end product, we view the policy memo as part of an ongoing conversation on how and under what conditions scholarly research can be translated into proposals for public policymaking and effective institutional action.

While the above reason for our inclusion of this policy memo in the special issue is based on optimism about the potential for scholarship, policymaking, and institutional action to better inform one another, our second reason is more pessimistic: we wish to create a record of the recommendations that the BUA asked us to produce and our presentation of these recommendations to the presidential boards of the four participating universities because we know that the likeliest outcome of our recommendations is institutional (in)action.

The policy memo we wrote is not the first set of recommendations intended to promote diversity and gender equality and combat discrimination in the history of these four universities. Nor will it be the last, if the historical pattern holds. We therefore publish this policy memo to create a paper trail for future scholars who wish to study the cycles of crisis, calls to action, inaction, silencing, forgetting, and crisis anew that underpin the creation of these kinds of policy recommendations. The logic of institutional inaction, whitewashing, and forgetting should be studied in further research. Our decision to publish this policy memo, rather than leaving its dissemination solely in the hands of BUA or the university leadership boards, represents our effort to contribute to the archives of institutional (in)action. By creating a publicly available paper trail, we wish to combat institutional forgetting. Said forgetting is part of the cycle of persistent institutional (in)action in the face of decades-old, repeated calls for structural change to combat discrimination within higher education.

Part II: Policy recommendations for the Berlin University Alliance (BUA) and the four participating universities

Prepared in May 2025, discussed with the Diversity and Gender Equality Steering Committee of the Berlin University Alliance on 4 June, presented to the vice presidents of the four universities that participate in BUA on 7 July, and presented to and publicly discussed with the presidents and senior administrators of the four BUA universities on 9 July 2025.

[1] *Code of Conduct*: The Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin are highly recommended to establish a code of conduct following the model of the code of conduct adopted by the United Nations, available here (the

second page is the most relevant): https://www.un.org/management/sites/www.un.org.management/files/cod_brochure_en_letter_blank.pdf. Codes of conduct are most effective when adopted at the university-level and are led by the President's office (i.e., instead of within individual departments or programs, everyone at the university follows the same code of conduct for all BUA institutions). It would be prudent for the Code of Conduct to be authored by drafting committees comprised of administrators, senior faculty, mittelbau, and students.

- [2] *Systematic Data Collection and Monitoring*: It would be beneficial for the universities to collect data every two years. Considering heterogeneity and diversity beyond gender, for example through surveys such as those conducted by PI Prof. Mirjam Fischer in the ADOMIS project (<https://adomis-project.de/>) or by PI Dr. Pichit Buspavanich in Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin Stärken project (<https://www.drks.de/search/de/trial/DRKS00028779/detail>) could facilitate data driven strategic planning. This research is usual business when large institutions collaborate and integrate. It should be conducted by an employee or work unit, ideally at BUA, who conducts the surveys for the universities. It is important that the four universities collect the data in comparable ways.
- [3] *Standardized Documentation and Reporting of Discrimination and Misconduct at the Universities*: There is scope for the faculty as well as the women's equality officers, diversity officers and disability officers to keep anonymized records each year of how many cases of harassment and discrimination are reported to them and what the alleged transgressions are. These figures should be reported to the anti-discrimination advisory service who will submit them to the academic senate each year and make them publicly available. Transparent and accountable complaint procedures for sexual harassment and discrimination are needed. These procedures must be separate from counselling services, and they must clearly define responsibilities, steps, and sanctions within independent, cross-university structures.
- [4] *Address the Leaky Pipeline*: In light of the well-evidenced and economic benefits of heterogenous and diverse teams, there is an opportunity to create new chair positions and permanent research fellow positions for disciplines with lowest rates of diversity. Existing data show that additional funding should be allocated for these chairs, rather than transforming existing chairs into diversity hires. When these chairs or research fellows retire, their positions must be filled by people who also meet diversity hiring criteria or the position disappears. Furthermore, to promote more inclusion and diversity in academia, the scope of existing successful initiatives such as mentoring

program ProFiL (<https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/profil-programm/index.html>) need be extended beyond gender equality.

- [5] *Research-driven Policy Implementation:* Policies promoting gender equality and diversity within the universities must be based on peer-reviewed research and input from impacted groups. This process should be supported by robust data collection and monitoring at the institutions in Berlin. This means administrators, including members of the university presidents, deans, women's equality officers, diversity officers, disability officers, and other relevant parties should collaborate with researchers and community-based stakeholders, including student groups, to support interventions, the implementation of programs, and new strategies for promoting diversity and gender within universities.
- [6] *Create a Working Unit:* In order to support the implementation of points 1-6 above, the universities must collaboratively create an independent, integrated working structure across the four institutions to promote gender and diversity. The university administrations should equip this structure with necessary resources, including permanent positions for administration and research. This could potentially take place within a Berlin Center for Diversity Policies in Higher Education (analogous to the Berlin Centre for Higher Education (Berliner Zentrum für Hochschullehre)); another possibility could be a work unit within the context of BUA.