Investigating the awareness of students on discrimination and inappropriate behaviour - the example of the HEI implementing the GEP

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) implement University Social Responsibility that can be understood as "a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced by the university in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development" [1]. It provides an opportunity to implement and promote the organisation's desired values and behaviours in education, research and managerial processes [2]. Students' awareness and willingness to act in accordance with the adopted principles contribute to the creation of inclusive and friendly universities. Thus, diversity and equality are of particular importance [3]. The University of Lodz (UL) referring to the principles of social responsibility of universities[4], is looking for ways to develop its social sensitivity. The UL has joined the RESET project in 2021 [5]. Since then, various actions have been taken to improve gender equality and diversity. The project team builds on earlier, less formalised activities[6] and has had some successes like: the first GEP and anti-discrimination procedure implementation, social campaigns, Team for Combining Professional and Family Roles at the University of Lodz and the Equal Treatment Council were established, and extensive training activities were applied.

Goals and research methods

1. Understand students' attitudes towards gender equality.
2. Check their knowledge of diversity and inclusion activities at the UL that followed the implementation of the GEP.
3. Identify a catalogue of inappropriate behaviours perceived by students.
Research questions were formulated (*see the section „Results" below*).
The quantitative study was carried out just before the end of the 2023/2024 academic year (using an electronic survey questionnaire). Respondent: first year students - 148 valid responses. All results: own work.
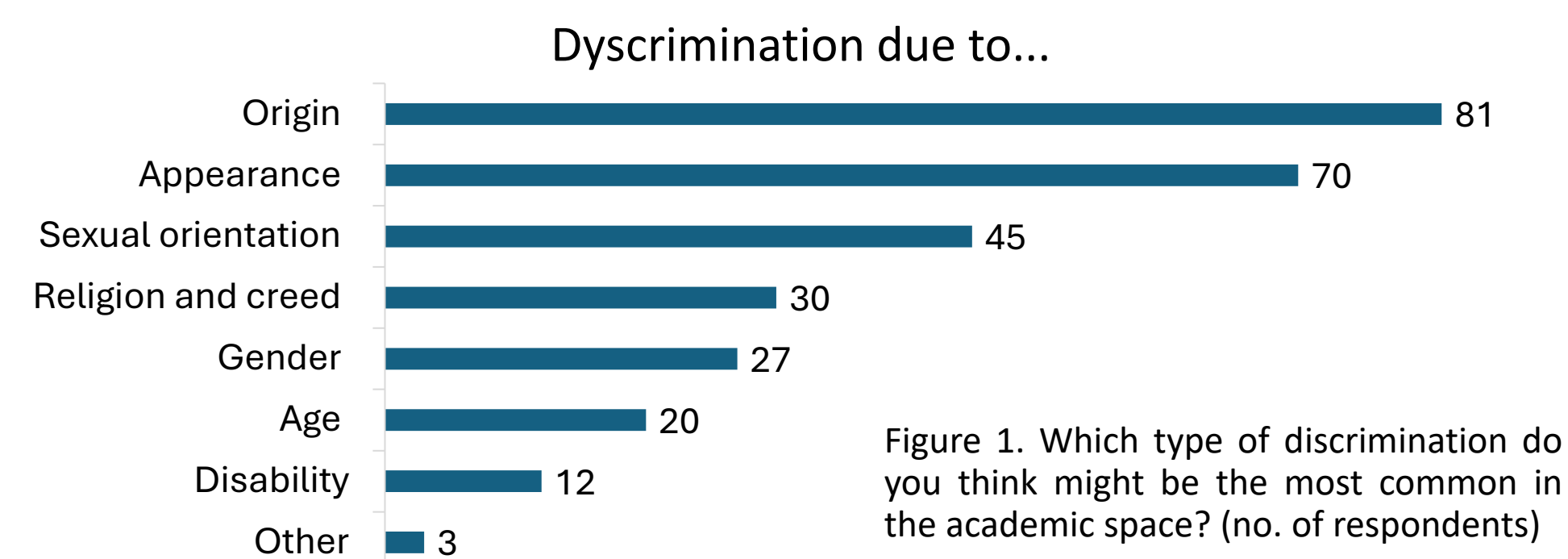
Results

How do students understand and perceive discrimination at university?

Students' responses accurately defined what prejudice and discrimination are. Some evaluate them, e.g. as bad behaviours, or evaluate people who demonstrate these behaviours, e.g. "closed mind and narrow horizon", "low level of personal development".
Students see the university as a non-discriminatory place and confirmed that they had never experienced discrimination - only 21 persons said that they could name a single incident.
According to respondents the cases of discrimination could be related to origin, appearance and sexual orientation (Figure 1). The presence of students from Ukraine and Belarus or other countries can cause some difficult situations due to cultural differences. But about half of respondents do not see any groups being treated less favourably in academia.

Dyscrimination due to...

Origin	81
Appearance	70
Sexual orientation	45
Religion and creed	30
Gender	27
Age	20
Disability	12
Other	3

Figure 1. Which type of discrimination do you think might be the most common in the academic space? (no. of respondents)

Students are sure that the University and the Faculty should take a strong stance on issues related to discrimination cases (104 respondents who answered - yes and 26 rather yes). Faculties and university authorities are perceived as the main bodies involved in combating the cases noted but all need to be involved to some extend (figure 2).

Faculty authorities	30
University authorities	28
Lecturers and employees of dean's offices	24
Government and legal regulations	22
Social organizations and other institutions	16
Individuals, who take care of their rights	15
Groups of intrrested people	13

Figure 2. Who should work primarily to counteract discrimination and minimise its incidence? (no. of respondents)

What types of behaviour are perceived as undesirable?

Except for cases of discrimination, there are inappropriate situations that should not be accepted at the University (list in the tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Inappropriate behaviour that should not take place at university (no. of respondents).

Sexist taunts from lecturers and/or other students	122
Offensive words aimed directly at a given person	114
Making fun of a person for their appearance, posture, etc.	112
Overtly sexual provocations, gestures and proposals	110
Inappropriate jokes, even if they only indirectly offend specific groups of people	94
Language that excludes a given group of people	71
Discussing topics based on personal opinions not supported by scientific research	48

Unfortunately, cases of misconduct happen – almost half of respondents have heard of such cases, witnessed or encountered them personally. One person perceived him/herself as a persecutor (Figure 3).
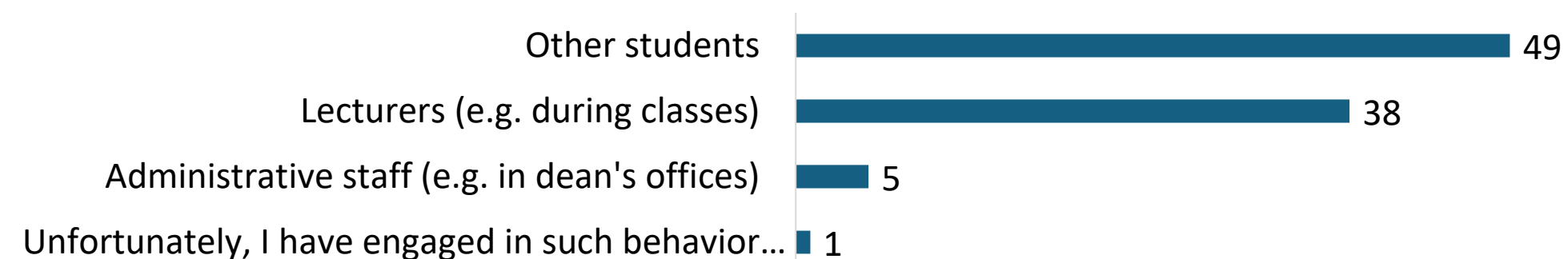

Other students	49
Lecturers (e.g. during classes)	38
Administrative staff (e.g. in dean's offices)	5
Unfortunately, I have engaged in such behavior...	1

Figure 3. Who demonstrates inappropriate behaviour at the university/faculty? (no. of respondents)

To what extent are students aware of the activities carried out and communicated at the University of Lodz?

People were asked if they knew what kind of activities and initiatives are carried out at the UL that reflect anti-discrimination and the promotion of diversity and inclusion (Figure 4).

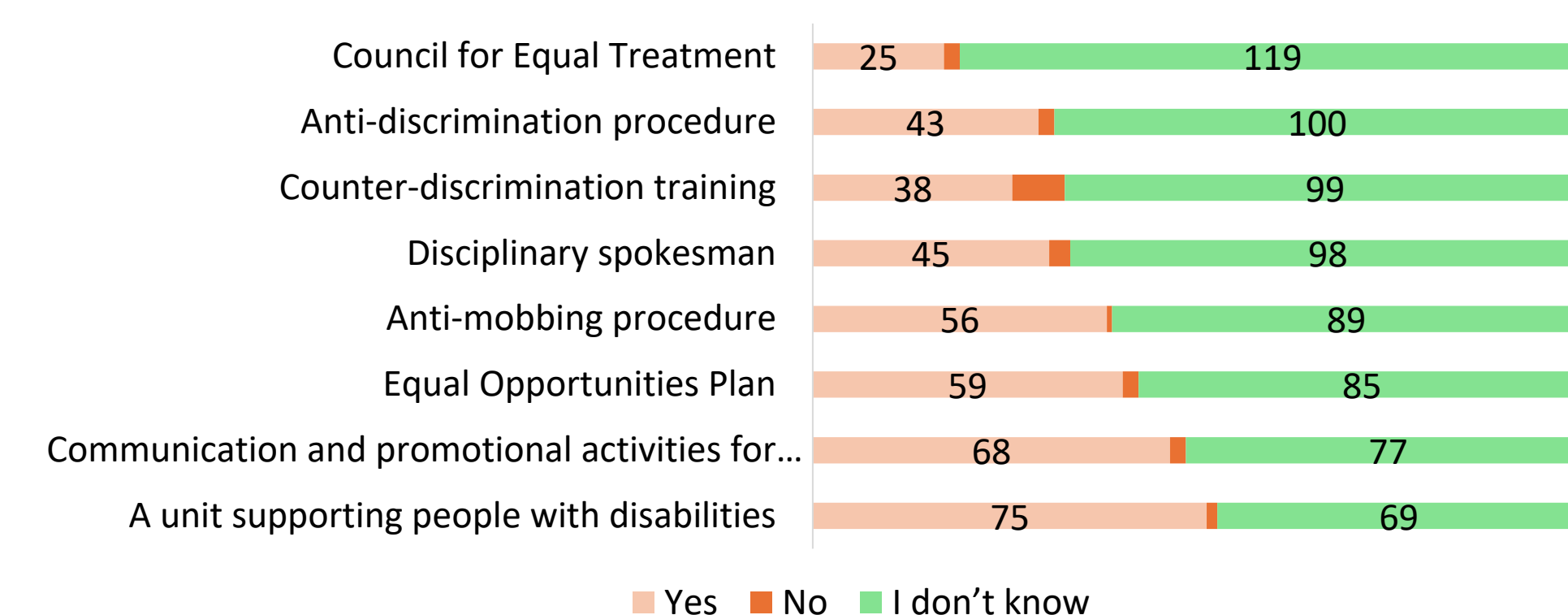|	Yes	I don't know
Council for Equal Treatment	25	119
Anti-discrimination procedure	43	100
Counter-discrimination training	38	99
Disciplinary spokesman	45	98
Anti-mobbing procedure	56	89
Equal Opportunities Plan	59	85
Communication and promotional activities for...	68	77
A unit supporting people with disabilities	75	69

■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

Figure 4. Which of the following activities does the University have? (no. of respondents)

The results show that there is a very low level of awareness of mechanisms and institutional solutions aimed at preventing discrimination and strengthening gender equality. For example, slightly more than a half of the respondents do not know to whom and where to report cases of discrimination (77 students, compared to 71 who declare that they know).

What activities do students expect to see to strengthen diversity and equality?

Despite quite positive opinions about the UL as an inclusive place of studying, respondents were asked what else could support activities aimed at creating friendly conditions (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2. What actions could the university take to be a friendly place to work and study? (no. of respondents)

Clear and widely known procedures for reporting inappropriate behaviour	81
Ad hoc psychological support	80
Training on diversity and anti-discrimination for lecturers and students	60
Educational and information campaigns on diversity and inclusion	57
Adapting the space to people with special needs	57
Adapting educational tools to people with special needs	48
Support groups for people at risk of exclusion	46
Online training to help the university to counteract inappropriate behaviour	43
Legal assistance for people experiencing discrimination	43
Raising issues related to counteracting discrimination during classes	37
An advocate dealing with counteracting discrimination	30
Using inclusive language in the university space	29
Availability of gender-neutral toilets	13

Students are open to training and communication on anti-discrimination issues. They expect clear procedures for reporting unacceptable situations. They are also interested in ad hoc psychological support.

Conclusions

The conducted study is part of a wider trend of research in the social sciences and humanities in relation to assessing the presence of these negative phenomena in HEIs [7]. The following conclusions can be derived:
- students starting their studies at the UL perceive this place as friendly and with sporadic cases of discrimination only,
- they are aware of the fact that discrimination can occur, and they name the most probable causes,
- -the low level of awareness of activities undertaken to eliminate discrimination and develop diversity at the UL is suprising, because the information is widely distributed. The latter is important information for the communication departments.

Even if the cases of discrimination reported by students are not frequent, it is the University's task to introduce solutions to counteract their occurrence and to develop awareness, sensitivity and respect for other people.

References: [1] Vasilescu, R., Barna, C., Epure, M. and Baicu, C. (2010), "Developing university social responsibility: a model for the challenges of the new civil society", *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 4177-4182. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.03.660., p.4178. [2] Garde, R., Rodríguez, M.P. and Lopez, A.M. (2013), "Online disclosure of university social responsibility: A comparative study of public and private US universities", *Environmental Education Research*, Vol. 19 No. 6, 709–746.; De la Cuesta, M., Porras, A., Saavedra, I. and Sanchez, D. (2010), "El Compromiso Social de la UNED", de la Cuesta Gonzales, M., de la Cruz Ayuso, C. and Rodríguez Fernandez, J.M. (Eds.), *Responsabilidad Social Universitaria*, Netbiblo, La Coruna, 232–272., p. 236). [3] See for example: Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM/2020/152 final; see also: Gender Equality Index, https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023. [4] Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, https://www.gov.pl/web/fundusze-regiony/spoleczna-odpowiedzialnosc-uczelni. [5] RESET - Redesigning Equality and Scientific Excellence Together, https://wereset.eu/. [6] EU Diversity Charters, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/tackling-discrimination/diversity-and-inclusion-initiatives/diversity-charters-eu-country_en. [7] e.g. Meriläinen, M., Sinkkonen, H.-M., Puhakka, H., & Käyhkö, K. (2016). Bullying and inappropriate behaviour among faculty personnel. Policy Futures in Education, 14(6), 617-634. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316639417; Toker Gökçe, A. (2013). University students' perception of discrimination on campus in Turkey. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 35(1), 72–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2013.748478; Mahlangu, V. P. (2019). Equality and Diversity of Students in Higher Education. In *Diversity within Diversity Management: Types of Diversity in Organizations* (pp. 115-130). Emerald Publishing Limited; Edwards, J. (2022). Discrimination and exclusion in higher education is reflected in multiple Autoethnographies. *The Qualitative Report*.