

Art.School.Differences. Exclusion through inclusion

The workings of institutional normativities and their camouflage in Higher Art Education

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“Artistic talent is hard to spot in young people but you can be damn sure that, two parents, a white skin, nice middle class manners and four A-levels are not very reliable indicators.” (Perry, 2010)

This quote very poignantly summarizes the motivating and conditioning framework that led to the research study of *Art.School.Differences* (2014–2016).² Indeed, art schools are a particularly interesting field as they offer educational degrees with rather low economic but high symbolic value (Rothmüller, Saner, Sonderegger, & Vögele, 2016). Ground-breaking for our own initiative within Switzerland was the earlier research *Art for a Few* led by Penny Jane Burke and Jackie McManus on art schools in Great Britain, interrogating the context of the *Widening participation* policy (late 1990’s). Despite the introduction of diversity policies to widen participation in education, they found that higher art education in Britain remained preserved to privileged white upper- and middle-class pupils, who are able to mobilize their legitimized cultural and social capitals during admission exams (Burke/McManus 2009).

A further conditioning case study for *Art.School.Differences* was conducted by Barbara Rothmüller at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna on candidates applying for art studies. She found that particularly students from working-class backgrounds, non-EU citizens as well as Austrian candidates with migration backgrounds experience restricted access (Rothmüller, 2010). To verify and compare the situation in Switzerland, Catrin Seefranz and Philippe Saner did a preliminary evaluation of Swiss art schools in 2011–2012 published as the pre-study *Making Differences* (2012). They found the admissions’ process at Swiss art schools to be a “selection chain,” in which different mechanisms of eliminating “untalented candidates” are at work, both within and outside the art schools.

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² This summary of the final report of *Art.School.Differences* is based on manifold presentations, keywords, and report-sections elaborated jointly with Philippe Saner since 2015.

Art.School.Differences. Researching Inequalities and Normativities in the field of Higher Art Education

Art.School.Differences was a cooperation between three Swiss art universities: the Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK, the Haute école d'art et de design de Genève (HEAD – Genève) and the Haute école de musique de Genève (HEM Genève). The study was conducted over a duration of three years (2014–2016) and funded by the participating schools, as well as the Haute École spécialisée de Suisse occidentale (HES-SO) and the Swiss State Secretariat of Education, Research and Innovation SERI. Carmen Mörsch and Catrin Seefranz initiated and designed the project that was conducted by the *Institute for Art Education, ZHdK*.³ Philippe Saner and myself directed the study with the support of Pauline Vessely, a research team⁴ and seven co-research groups.⁵

The endeavour of our research inquiry was on current practices of the admissions' procedure and the selection of candidates at the entry to the school. We wanted to question and assess the dynamics of inequality within institutional structures by particularly looking at their maintenance, perpetuation, and continued re-instatement to be able to propose transformative interventions into these by the end of the project. The leading inquiries were about subjectivities that are produced in institutional discourses and policies and how they determine the “ideal student”, about exclusionary processes of specific social groups, and about students' strategies to deal with the requirements they encounter. A further question focussed the adequacy of selection-practices for current dynamics around local and global structures pertinent to the field of the arts. Thereby, the intention was to look at implications of the internationalization of art schools and to ask about the risk, of “provincializing” Swiss art schools.

To identify exclusionary patterns, we, on one hand, conducted an institutional ethnography by observing the admissions' process and the deliberation among jury members, by taking semi-structured interviews with candidates and jury members, by conducting focus groups with current students and administrative staff, and by undertaking a selected analysis of statistical data. Furthermore, we did two case studies: a discourse-analysis of promotional print material and an analysis of curricula in music and design. On the other hand, a practice-related action research was part of the research design comprising seven co-research groups composed of faculty and students of each school who developed and pursued their own inquiry within the framework of the project. Together we worked out learning materials to anchor an informed discussion on in- and exclusion from a feminist theory's and post-colonial perspective.

³ Cf. <http://iae.zhdk.ch> (last access 03.08.2023).

⁴ Cf. <https://blog.zhdk.ch/artschooldifferences/en/team/> (last access 03.08.2023).

⁵ Cf. <https://blog.zhdk.ch/artschooldifferences/en/ko-forschung/> (last access 03.08.2023).

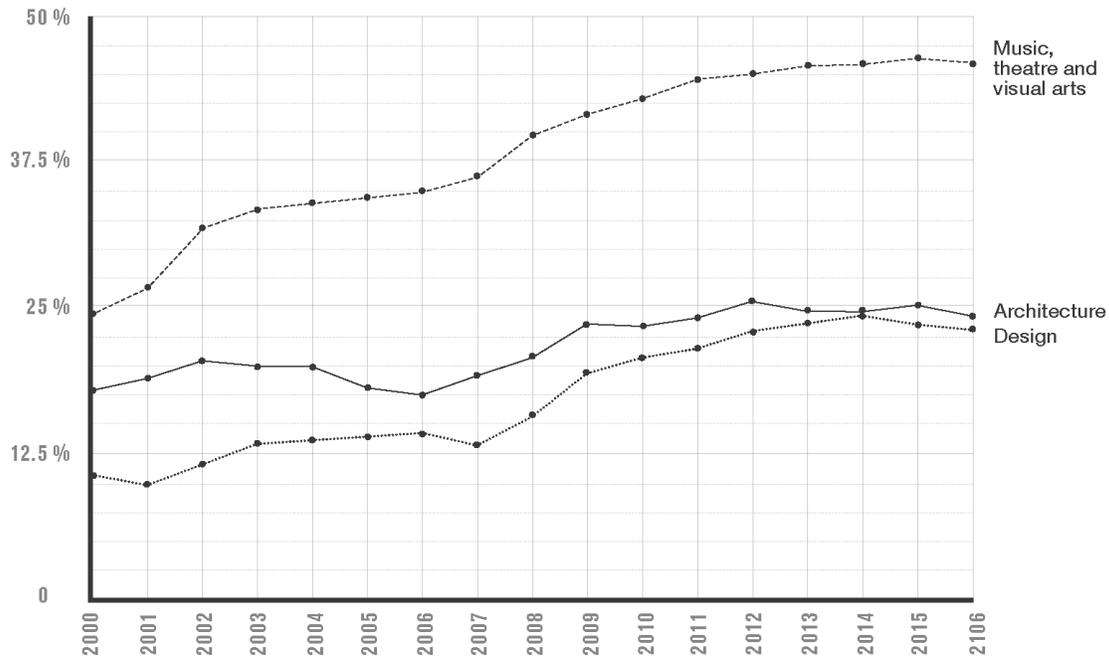
Statistical analysis

Our analyses of available data provided by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and by the three art schools confirm that art students have very privileged social and economic backgrounds compared to other student groups – which is even more pronounced in comparison to the general population. Especially students of fine arts and music are comparable to the ones of the elite Swiss science universities (i.e. the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology ETH and EPFL). For instance, the share of students in the field of visual art with at least one parent that holds a university degree or equivalent, rose from 35% in 2005 to 42% in 2013, and in design from 38% to 43%.

Compared to the resident population in general, all the three subjects pictured in figure 1 below, but especially architecture, can be considered as elite qualifications such as medicine or law. They all experienced a significant internationalization in the last 15 years: in 2015, 24% of students in design and architecture respectively and 46% in music, theatre and visual arts are so-called “international students”; i.e. students who came to Switzerland especially to study. Their number is considerably high compared to other fields of study at Universities of Applied Sciences.⁶

⁶ Cf. Saner, Vögele, & Vessely, 2016 for more detailed information and more graphics.

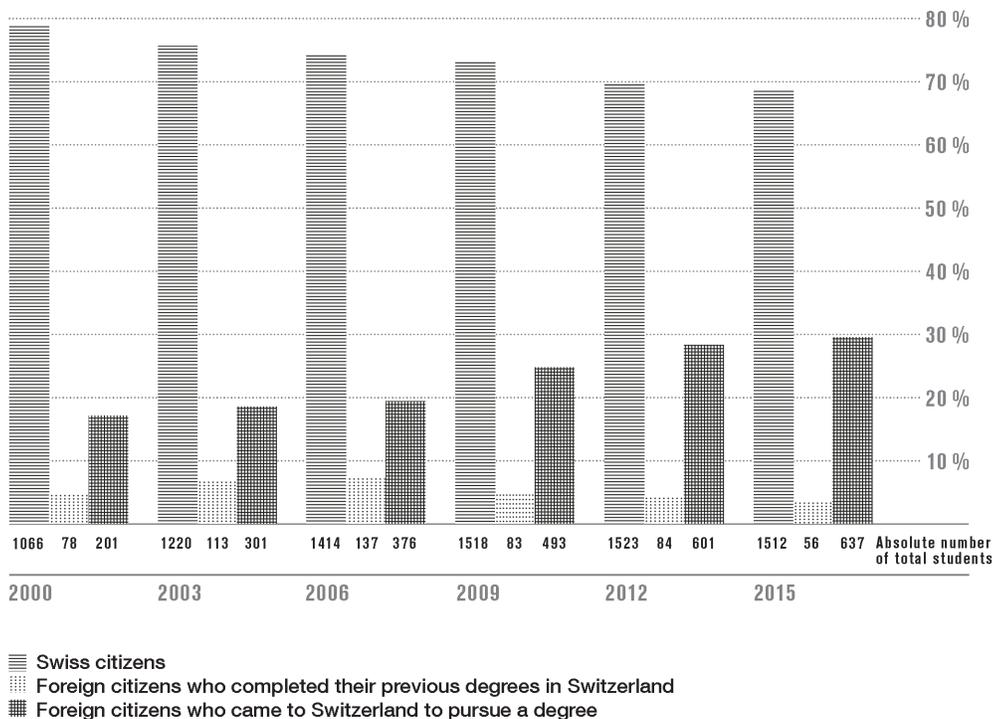
Fig. 1:
Internationalization of Swiss Art Schools
Share of Students without Swiss Citizenship (in %)



Source: FSO: Students and degrees in swiss higher education institutions

Furthermore, the increase in internationalization of the field of the art school is strongly visible in the rising numbers of international students, whereas members of the groups in Switzerland traditionally considered having migration experiences are missing. This becomes particularly visible, if we take the students' citizenship *and* their place of secondary education into account (s. figure 2). As the example of ZHdK shows, the proportion of students considered having migration experience starts to shrink in the mid-2000s when the number of international students starts to expand rapidly. The number of students with Swiss citizenship sinks relatively and in absolute numbers, and it stagnates since 2009, whereas the numbers of the in-country migrants continues to fall. A glance cast beyond the participating schools shows that ZHdK is representative to a dominant pattern.

Fig. 2:
International status of students at the ZHdK 2000–2015



Source: FSO: Educational degrees and certificates at swiss higher education institutions; own calculations

Here it is worthwhile to note that the internationality of Swiss art schools remains largely restricted to nationalities from affluent European Union countries and North America by 75%, and to English as the foreign language. There is an obvious overrepresentation of students from neighbouring Germany and France that is contrasted by an even more striking underrepresentation of students from former so-called *Gastarbeiter* (*guest workers*) countries in Southern Europe, Post-Yugoslavian states and Turkey (Seefranz & Saner, 2012). This missing of significant groups of the Swiss society is obscured by the schools' proclamation of their internationality: candidates from affluent states with transnational biographies are highly valued and considered international, whereas *domestic* migrants with origins from less privileged countries are not deemed international and remain excluded. The statistical analysis highlights that social class and the educational degrees of parents are the most important determinants. Specific ethnicities, sexualities, and certain kinds of bodies are constitutive for an appropriate class adherence: middle-upper class, white Swissness or a cosmopolitan internationality with a privileged background are favourable. The politics of class become especially apparent when reconsidering the figures of international students at art schools of figure 2: the declining number of students from working-class background

equally to the declining number of in-country migrants respectively (i.e. students born or grown up in Switzerland without Swiss citizenship) can be clearly related to the rising number of international students.

Burke and McManus in their work highlighted a quote by Pierre Bourdieu that also describes strikingly well our findings:

“University, in its impartiality, through pretending to recognise students as equal in rights and duties, divided only by inequalities of gifts and merits, in fact confers on individuals degrees judged according to their cultural heritage and therefore according to their social status.” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 235)

Qualitative analysis

Access to art schools is severely restricted through a thorough *numerus clausus* – comparable to the one in medicine. Although selection is at work before and especially the requirement of preliminary qualifications for all study branches has a vigorous effect of pre-selection, *Art.School.Differences* showed that the selection process eventually leads to an even more distinct composition of the student body, re-enforcing the status quo. As we could observe, this has to do with the openness of artistic criteria and jury deliberation *in combination* with evaluative principles of selection (Saner, Vögele, & Vessely, 2016). Criteria at work for the decision taking among jury members are often very vague, such as “potential”, “originality”, or “motivation”. It is only in their institutional and situational application that these terms obtain a meaning and become effective in describing which students have potential, are original or motivated. Interestingly, in the context of admission juries and contrary to the institutions’ discourses, “talent” is not mentioned in the list of criteria: jury members almost unanimously state, to not be able to assess “talent”. Also, the admission procedures apply very differing forms of evaluations of the desired artistic potential in the different study branches, including rehearsals, portfolio assessments, or interviews with tutors. In some of the study branches, these evaluative interactions are not standardized; this means that they are determined by the interactions between jury members and candidates as well as the settings, in which they are performed. This situation implies that the jury can adapt the circumstances due to needs and requirements from both sides: the candidates as well as the jury. On one hand, in this openness, there always remains a considerable space to accommodate the unexpected or unimaginable – a source for possibly radical innovation and transformation. On the other hand, there is the fact that the jury members have to *choose* between a more or less wide range of candidates that seem to be the most promising to them and with whom they would like to work. Thereby, often times, the jury members’ view differ from each other in quite substantial ways and the intensive and sometimes heated discussions on different positions clearly show an openness for negotiation instead of a rigidity of evaluation.

Nevertheless, the combination of openness of criteria with a thorough selection process due to restricted study places opens up various fields of tension that result in a simultaneity of arguments that are contradictory.

Conflictuous deliberations

The main goal of the admissions' process is the assessment of artistic aptitude. However, we found it being in tension with age, physical requirements, and social competencies. Despite being recognized by the jury for their artistic performance, older persons for instance are rejected because they are considered not fitting into the curricula of the art school that demand young, culturally educated and competitive people. Over the process, it became clear that this includes a normative physical appearance and fitness as well as required psychic health. These requirements are not only prerequisites to be accepted into studies of the performative arts (where candidates need to prove medical evidence of their physical integrity), also for other disciplines, ability is at stake in terms of enhanced flexibility, long working hours and only minor accommodations of workspaces available. Moreover, social competencies or reputable networks were highly valued – sometimes more than artistic practice. It was argued that these students would most likely succeed within the school structure and more probably earn a degree. Another important tension and outright contradiction is the situating of the art school between being an educational institution and wanting to provide education to meet the public interest and – at the same time – being the entrance gate and recruitment pool for the labour as well as the art market. Indeed, through competitions and collaborations with commercial agencies and companies, sometimes these lines are blurred. Discussions among jury members clearly articulated the tension between admitting a student because they want to teach her*him – or because the jury members thought the student to be fit for the market. It was interesting to observe that eventually, the argument of a candidate being able to qualify on the market was decisive, although most jury members we interviewed agreed that this should not be a major criterion.

Another conflictual field is the great desire for the *Other*, more precisely an interest in being creatively inspired by someone exotically *Other*. Among jury members, this interest often was articulated as a great opportunity to enrich the status quo of the institution. In a particular case, the *Other* was a student having had the experience of fleeing with a biography that elicited great interest among the jury members. During the assessment and in the subsequent interviews it was obvious that the jury members rated the students' work not to be particularly good. They instead deemed her biography to be a great opportunity for the school as it would “mix up” the students' cohort. Furthermore, the jury members agreed on the fact that if the life experience of the student was to become the subject of artistic production, it would get better in quality and thus voted to accept her into the school.

However, the student had stated during the admission as well as in the subsequent interview with us that she did not wish to use her biography for her artwork. She also described to have been uncomfortable in general during the admissions' interview and thereby especially mentioned the fact to have been asked so many questions about her background (Saner,

Vögele, & Vessely, 2016). Our analysis of this case shows that the desire for the *Other* articulates itself as a particular case of tokenisation: it is a singular interest for the own interpretation of the *Other*. A form of appropriation – or even usurpation – that comes in the guise of an appreciation and recognition. Such an Othering as a desire for the *Other* is hierarchized and enforces power relations. It not only entails a denial of the *Other* but also means to invigorate existing racist and sexist differentiations.⁷

The schools' strive for internationalization inscribes itself into very similar contradicting processes, comprising two dimensions: the first entails the denying of internationality to the multilingual und multinational resident population, be it with or without experiences of migration. This results in the de-legitimization of the cultural capital of students considered having migration experience.⁸ The second pertains to the situation of international students in Switzerland: despite the evidence that they are issued from privileged backgrounds, it became very clear during our interviews with candidates of all study fields, that the daily struggles to secure their living and meet requirements for their residency, study and work permits is extremely stressful and psychologically harmful (Saner & Vögele, 2016).

Furthermore, many international students drew attention to the fact that although the institutions established international offices, the support provided is very limited and the overall institutional way of teaching and learning remains strictly oriented toward a normative student familiar with local languages, culture, and needs.⁹

Ultimately, students are chosen that fit into the mould or that are deemed to be successful on the market, which leads to a reinstatement of the norm and an image of the “ideal student” that eventually (re-)produces existing inclusions and exclusions. We furthermore assessed that this is not restricted to the admissions process. On the contrary, this specific instatement of the norm goes on throughout the years of study.

Who is included? Who is excluded?

Included are:

- People who have benefitted from support by their families or other mentors and have had teaching in art and music as well as access to a social network in this domain and know the codes and “rules”
- People who, beyond having artistic capabilities, prove to be socially competent and communicative *and* have considerable financial means

⁷ We also encountered *Othering* that articulated itself in the refusal of the foreign and unknown. Both the forms of *Othering* – the desire for the *Other* as a form of appropriation and the fear of the *Other* with a preference for the known – prove to be the other side of the same medal with the same re-instatement of racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism.

⁸ Our findings from the statistical analysis and those from the qualitative analysis confirmed each other.

⁹ To draw attention to these deficiencies and with the aim to improve the situation of international students, one of the co-research groups created a guide in short videos for international students in Geneva. “How to survive the Swiss art school jungle” was issued by Daniel Zea, Hyunji Lee and Andrea Nucamendi, online under “video interviews” <https://blog.zhdk.ch/artschooldifferences/en/2017/10/31/netzwerktagung-aktionsforschung-1-bildersprache-web-hgk/> (last access 03.08.2023).

- People who are considered to “fit” into previous cohorts and that will get along well with faculty
- Young persons (although there is no official age limit)
- People having a normative educational path (college degree, preliminary artistic education, application to art school)
- People who convey a cosmopolitan identity, are white and perform middle-class manners

Excluded are all the people who do not fit into the categories of the included ones – the exclusion happens through inclusion, leaving no space for¹⁰:

- People who can be identified as lower class
- People with experiences of migration
- People having non-normative bodies and sexualities,
- People of older age

The initial sincere openness for *Others* in the process of selection eventually was replaced by choosing candidates deemed most likely to reflect the “values of the institution”. Among the students and within the institutions it was interesting to observe that there was no questioning of the selection process per se. Furthermore, members and leadership of the art universities relegate the responsibility for the social closure of the art school to the educational institutions earlier in the students’ careers and blame the ones excluded, to not even apply or seek an admission. Eventually, the admissions’ process revealed the following paradox: the more homogeneous the educational biography of the candidates, the more “other” positions are desired – that unfortunately are more and more impossible on the grounds of the increased instatement of a specific norm art students have to conform to. Indeed, we found art schools to be centred within a Eurocentric perspective, having classist appreciation in verifying the habitus, being an elite field and diversity insensitive. The constant institutional re-instatement of the norm results in sometimes violent experiences of normalization or in processes of *Othering*.

Perspectives of students who struggle with the structures

Students who were aware of being *othered* by the institution had varying reactions and claims toward the experience. Roughly, there was, on one hand, a strong demand to be accepted *within* a (cultural) difference and on the other, a vehement rejection of the qualification as different. In common to all was the critique of witnessed ascriptions that renders self-definitions impossible.

¹⁰ In regard to people of non-identifying gender, especially among non-whites, our analysis suggests a huge blank. However, we do not have enough data to assess the working of this missing and would encourage further research in this regard.

Classicistic environment

Having a non-linear educational biography and living in another financial situation than your co-students represents an ongoing struggle to meet the requirements set by the institution throughout studies. So, although the person with working class or rural background is admitted and very happily so, our qualitative inquiry showed that she experiences a constant need to justify age, formative years or restricted flexibilities due to the need to earn money, etc. This adds to the feeling of having to prove oneself constantly to actually be entitled to be here. In the interviews, these students clearly stated that they were “different” from others, that they should do their best to adjust, and that the others were normal instead of them.

“The tuition fees are not too much but the preparation course to the ZHdK (Vorkurs) costs 10'000 CHF. If you are lucky, you will be amongst the 2% who are admitted sur dossier.¹¹ My parents think this study branch is a shit. I have to come up for the costs on my own. I have to work 40% in order to be able to my living and my studies. [...] Indeed, this is my situation, I did a vocational training as [profession]. I worked in [branch]. I wanted to study Design since I was 15 but did not get any support because I was supposed to learn something ‘real’. But, I shouldn’t go into academics neither as this was considered only something for the rich ‘moneybags’ from Zürich city.”

Eurocentric violence

Another quote illustrates how through a privileging of a certain aesthetic within teaching and the curriculum, faculty can claim the power of definition for themselves. Thereby, the hierarchy of the classroom legitimizes a culturalistic depreciation of the student.

“A teacher criticized my work and told me: ‘You cannot understand the culture here in Switzerland because you do not belong to this culture.’ This hurt me a lot because he meant to say that my work will never fit. But what is the meaning of culture anyways? What is Swiss culture, what is ZHdK culture? When they talk about culture shouldn’t they define and make transparent about what exactly they talk?”

Institutional normativity

The ignorance of existing privileges that occur from belonging to a favoured group secures existing power relations in the field and normalizes them to the point that the excluded

¹¹ “Sur dossier” refers to people accepted to the admissions on basis of their “extraordinary artistic aptitude” (Saner, Vögele, & Vessely, 2016) without having the necessary scholarly qualifications (baccalaureate). Sur dossier is intended as a tool to overcome restrictions in access to art school.

become invisible: privileges appear to be natural to especially these groups of persons, who are privileged. Through the contradictions within the selection for admission, these exclusions and their intersectional working are rendered invisible and its institutional anchorage is blurred. This has the effect that structural discrimination within higher education institutions largely remain unidentified by dominant decision makers.

A structurally and institutionally facilitated ignorance of privilege allows for ignoring ongoing processes of exclusion and inclusion that we termed “institutional normativity” in reference to research led by Sara Ahmed et al. In their study, they found an “Institutional Whiteness” being at work – meaning that institutional structures privilege white people at all levels (2006). By introducing “institutional normativity,” we would like to highlight the fact that within the art schools, ability, middle class or privileged backgrounds as well as a certain gendered and ethnicized aesthetic understanding are set as the norm along to whiteness. The art school is a “white space” with healthy, able, seemingly heteronormative bodies from privileged backgrounds. In the institutional normativity of Swiss art schools, it is classism that is primordially at work and that unfolds in its intersectional relationship with racism, ableism and sexism. Institutions reproduce and reinstate this norm albeit predominantly in a tacit and unreflected way. It is a process that deploys itself in ignorance and thus secures existing power relations in the field. Nonetheless, institutional normativity is an active process. It is continuously (re)produced by designing institutional structures and processes to secure privileges and deploy the tendency to constantly re-instate a privileged group of students and faculty. This results in an institutional normativity, which constantly works to dissimulate itself and its contradictions. Thereby, inclusion is a process of normalization that camouflages exclusion.

Contradictory simultaneity

The art institution simultaneously is a normative space that guards its exclusivity, and a heterogeneous space that fosters a self-understanding of openness, creativity and love of experimentation. The potential for change towards a less exclusive, more diverse and democratized institution lies within the contradiction of these simultaneities. In these frictions and fields of tension, the institutionally enabled opacity and occlusion become discernable.

The question of how it is possible to work towards inclusive and anti-discriminatory structures under these conditions of institutional normativity and contradictory simultaneity is a very challenging one. On a general basis, people within the institution are not aware of institutional normativity. Therefore, they have to be sensitized. Institutional structures, managerial styles, and dominant modes of communication have to constantly be addressed for an effective questioning of discrimination and exclusion.¹² The understanding and

¹² Within our final report, we identified six fields of action in the last section: public image and appearance, costs of study and financial support, selection criteria and ideas of the ideal student, admissions process, curriculum, the management’s commitment and responsibility towards diversity and inclusion.

acknowledgement of discrimination are very important first steps that have to be followed by next steps of interventions into the processes and structures. In their conclusion, Burke and McManus note: “Making admissions processes and practices clear and transparent does not render them ‘fair’ if they continue to discriminate against certain class, ethnic and gender groups.” (2009:14) An active critique and action from within and with the structures has to happen through teaching and collective, team-based initiatives that understand and implement diversity and apply a research perspective. For the admissions’ process and the promotion of internationalization, we suggest that art university policies do not necessarily have to focus exclusively on excellence. Rather, by re-defining quality, policies should be thought and conceptualized enabling reciprocal exchange and accessing common social goods such as art and higher education as a fundamental human right. An equal reciprocal exchange that achieves diversity and thus is able to address institutional normativity has to be aware of historical and colonial power relations that structure our thinking. For an equal exchange with reciprocal engagement, there is the need to establish a recognition based on respect and equal power of decision-making. The perspective employed has to be multiple and aware of hegemonies and processes of institutionalized discrimination within our society. Within the admissions process to art schools, the hiring of faculty, and international projects, there is the need for particular conditions of recognition that allow groups and individuals to experience themselves in relations of self-confidence, self-respect and self-assessment. If this is neglected, there necessarily will be a perspective and a decision taking conveyed that disregards the interest of those confined to a position of marginality. However, if taken seriously and promulgated by main decision makers of the educational institutions, structures can change and become more inclusive.

Published online under <https://blog.zhdk.ch/artschooldifferences/en/schlussbericht/>

4.8.2023

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