

Diversity Statement

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Economics departments are a particular case of diversity in research, intellectual, and cultural backgrounds of both faculty and students. On the other hand, our field also lacks diversity in the sense of female and minorities underrepresentation at all levels. Diversity is something that, if not experienced and improved in practice, is just another abstraction. Fortunately, my experience in different universities and countries over the years has made me more aware of the peculiarities of academic life. In this statement, I aim to motivate my experiences, both personal and professional, that brought me to my present understanding of diversity. Furthermore, I summarize some initiatives I have helped in and observed to promote stronger equity efforts both outside and inside the campus.

Diversity outside the classroom

Even though most of our time is spent at the university, our lives are not only defined by what we teach, research, or study. We all come from different backgrounds — in many cases, different countries —, and our departments allow for interpersonal exchanges that go beyond these interests. Coming to a new country, at first by myself, and having to face a whole new life within a short period of time was a very challenging and sometimes frustrating experience. First year's classes, TA assignments, and qualifying exams were already challenging enough, but a great portion of the time that could be dedicated to these needed to be allocated elsewhere. Bureaucratic tasks, such as health insurance plans, social security applications, and getting a driver's license are some examples of what mostly consumes our time as international students.

Things do get better. But there is a cost, especially in terms of mental health. Based on that experience, one of my main goals after the first year was to help incoming international students experiencing the least amount of suffering possible during their first year. I give special attention to out-of-campus issues, such as housing, necessary documentation, and also sharing past experiences that may help them in the future. The Heterodox Economics Students Association (HESA) from our department started to engage in an informal mentoring initiative to new Ph.D. students in Fall 2018, and since then I have had the opportunity to mentor new international students. From helping them finding apartments, to driving them to buy snow shoes, or simply hearing their fears and struggles, these experiences have made me believe even more that the university should be an environment of collective support, where no one should ever feel alone or underrepresented.

I've had the opportunity to be HESA's Vice President for the 2019–2020 academic year. Unfortunately, the pandemic interrupted some of our in-person activities, such as movie sessions at the department and picnics. However, the mentoring program has been up and running regardless of social distancing. I believe that these initiatives will be permanent in our department, and I will carry this experience wherever I go in the future. If possible, making such initiatives official department policies can represent a decisive step to any department in showing appreciation for any incoming student.

Classrooms as diverse and inclusive environments

The classroom environment gives diversity a broader meaning. Undoubtedly, diversity of identities between instructors and students is a necessary, but not sufficient feature if not accompanied by pedagogical diversity, especially in terms of content presentation. I vividly remember a lecture by Dr. Nilufer Cagatay, about how unpaid care work is not a quantitative part of development definitions, but a crucial prerequisite allowing for other economic activities to take place. Her research and teaching efforts focus on bringing attention to the role played by (mostly female) unpaid work in economic development and growth. And it does not matter which class I am teaching, this debate is present in several of my lectures. The more effort we put into making such “invisible” part of our economy visible, the closer to a developed society we will be. And the sooner students turn their attention to this fact, the greater the number of minds we will have to address this and other development issues over time.

The illustration above is just one example of dominant thinking of our science. Whenever talking to students about the names of several of the statistical tests we employ in Statistics and Econometrics, it is almost certain that those receive the name of their authors. And it is even more certain that these are male, white individuals. Such fact will not make us avoid using this or that test, but the key point is to call students’ attention to the fact that our science has been mostly developed and thought by male, white people. This way, how is it possible that the questions we ask are not influenced by the way in which Economics has been developed? Our field is underrepresented, and both students and instructors should progressively be introduced and exposed to individuals of diverse backgrounds, so that in the future we see more people from underrepresented ethnic groups, cultures, and regions joining us as Economics contributors.

Lastly, classrooms are also places to apply some of the initiatives described in the last section. Personally, I like to engage international students into sharing economic, social, and cultural features of their countries, whenever the lecture topic allows. For example, when I worked as an assistant for two Health Economics sections, international students had the opportunity to talk about their countries’ health care systems, and American students were also required to make presentations about other countries’ systems. This generated exciting interactions and more engagement from typically discreet students, who felt comfortable talking about something they grew up experiencing. Moreover, it was important for them to be aware of the differences between the local health care system and their countries’, in case of any need. This was another example of trying to engage with students for practical activities outside the classroom, where our lives resume.