Statement for a Culture of Reflexivity and Care

as part of the initiative on Responsibilty in Teaching and Research

within the

Network 'Gender, Queer, Intersectionality and Diversity Studies' (GeQuInDi)

at the University of Bayreuth

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GeQuInDi was created in 2016 as a place for transdisciplinary exchange around Gender, Queer, Intersectionality and Diversity Studies at the University of Bayreuth (UBT). Its main aims are to provide a platform for the joint organization of academic events and teaching formats as well as for the discussion of current socio-political issues and developments. Moreover, the network and its members are invited to dedicate themselves to furthering equality and diversity policy as well as anti-discrimination in higher education. Apart from cooperating with equality and diversity agencies and centers of the university, various network members have over the past few years explicitly expressed a commitment to combating discrimination and power structures in the everyday life and practice at institutions such as the university. In effect, following the wave of anti-racist social movements globally in 2020, the network also issued a Statement for Black Lives Matter and in 2021 an Open Letter of Solidarity for Prof. Maureen Maisha Auma. It is this commitment that we seek to further with this statement, as we think that reflexivity and a practice of care should be integral to the network activities.

In recent years, certain conflicts between academic staff and students or supervisees brought into relief how power imbalances may be reinforced rather than interrogated in the course of such conflicts. This statement was prompted in large part as a consequence thereof. The ways in which these cases unfolded have thus revealed a certain incapacity of the network to act as a place for critical reflection and care towards those structurally disadvantaged – specifically due to racism, academic hierarchy, ageism, and unequal material resources. While there might be manifold (including banal) reasons for this (partial) incapacity, we seek to use these experiences as a call for a renewed cultivation of practices of reflexivity and care within the network and beyond. For this purpose, we offer a brief reflection on some potential failures in the past, to then move towards future steps.

A recent case deserves some reflection here as it involves a former network member. The conflict unfolded after a student, a young Black woman, voiced her discomfort and feeling of discrimination in class by the teacher, a *white* female early-career scholar working in the fields of education and critical race theory. Specifically, the conflict took on a hurtful dynamic (probably to both) after the teacher involved took the matter to court and the issue became public. Subsequently, the credibility of GeQuInDi as a network working on anti-discrimination was seriously challenged.

The conflict was brought to the network's attention several months before the court case in an email in which the teacher explained their perspective. While the explanations provided some context for the escalation of the conflict, they did not consider that the Black student might have perceived the situation differently. Regrettably, this alarming communication neither prompted most of us as individuals, nor as a network dedicated to equality, diversity and anti-discrimination to engage more deeply with the issue, potentially also reaching out to the student and providing any form of appropriate support in line with the aforementioned goals of the network. What the case highlights,

therefore, is a need for the network to engage with such conflicts within a university that understands itself as a cosmopolitan institution of international quality knowledge production. This involves reflecting on the structural power relations that are at work in our daily interactions with colleagues and students, especially concerning minorities, in order to transform our academic praxis as power-critical educators and researchers.

Our self-critical retrospection has a forward-looking orientation. We see the urgent need to look at and debate the conditions that structure our relations of research, teaching and academic networking. Such conditions are in need of critical engagement if we are to follow up on our commitment to seek and implement anti-discrimination settings and engagement in the everyday practice at the university. In particular, ongoing reflections in the network will enable systematic critical reflections on how teachers' concerns, affects and interests get privileged over students' when only one perspective is known, and on how the structure of an academic network might foster such privileging. For instance, network members may accept the reasoning of colleagues, fellow academics and teachers vis à vis students somewhat uncritically. Red flags signaling discriminatory situations may be overlooked because one believes that someone else is already taking care of a situation, whether or not that is the case. Our past experience signals that scholarly networks – especially those loosely structured – can promote a dissolution of responsibility as well as lopsided forms of solidarity and collegiality. This, in turn, can impede students' efforts to engage critically with what and how they are taught, thus shaping their views and feelings towards German institutions of higher education. With regard to young BPoC students and other minoritized groups, such silencing can have longitudinal social consequences beyond the 'closing' of case files and 'settling' of bills.

The present statement, then, is a call to jointly develop tools, practices and orientations that promote a cultivation of reflexivity and care as part of our professional practise. This is to emphasise that 'scholarly networking' can be realised as a form of community building that practices anti-discriminatory ethics as part of quality knowledge production. Especially where conflicts arise across asymmetrical positions of power and privilege, care should be taken towards creating formats and processes where different views, positions and concerns can be voiced and discussed openly. Both denunciatory and punitive styles of action are more likely to occur where other forms of networked engagement and discourse may fail or seem unfeasible.

A first step towards a more care-ful network practice would be the inclusion of reflexive conversations into ordinary meeting agendas. Therefore, we call for persistent efforts to hold accountable ourselves, our colleagues, as well as relevant university agencies to an anti-discriminatory ethics, especially across status groups. In doing so, the network aims to enable the strengthening of university structures that support students and other university members who happen to be in a conflict situation structured by discriminatory practices. In other words, GeQuInDi takes its first explicit and concerted steps towards cultivating an academic culture of reflexivity and care, so as to contribute to the commitment to diversity of the University of Bayreuth.

- *GeQuInDi Initiative on Responsibilty in Teaching and Research*