

GERMAN RESEARCHERS PUSH FOR MISSING DIVERSITY DATA

The European country is one of several reassessing its cultural unease with collecting information on scientists' race and ethnicity. **By Hristio Boytchev**

This article is part of a Nature series examining data on ethnic or racial diversity in science in different countries.

In November 2021, Isolde Karle's university in Germany appointed her to a newly created high-ranking role, which signalled the attention it was paying to diversity. As vice-rector for diversity, inclusion and talent development at the Ruhr University Bochum, Karle's job involves helping students from minority groups – including those discriminated against because of their skin colour – to participate fully in science.

"There is racism in society, and we universities are not free of it," says Karle, who is also a theologian and the university's pastor.

Survey data support Karle's concerns. This January, for instance, Germany's government issued its first annual report on racism. It cites, among other data, a large telephone survey that found more than one-fifth of people in the country had personally experienced racism (see go.nature.com/3zqsmvt; in German). And at universities, a *Nature* worldwide survey of graduate students last year found that, in Germany, 6% had experienced racial discrimination or harassment, but that this rose to 19% among those who identified as being in a racial or ethnic minority; findings similar to the survey's global results (see 'German graduate experiences').

Karle has talked to some researchers from minority ethnic groups at her university about their experiences. But she can't clearly track

racial or ethnic diversity among the scholars at her institution or how it might be changing, because she has no data. That is the norm for employers all over Germany, where there is general unease at the idea of collecting information on ethnicity – even though doing so is not legally prohibited – as well as a feeling that it is not a priority issue, according to many *Nature* talked to.

Such concerns are often explained with reference to the country's history and the horrific example of how the Nazis used census data to organize genocide. As a result, sensitivity over data protection and privacy is high: surveying people in Germany about their ethnicity has a strong negative connotation.

Karle expresses these reservations, too; asking employees about their race or heritage can itself be discrimination, she explains. "We want to make the differences that lead to discrimination disappear, but by asking about them, we would focus on them," she says. "This is part of the paradox."

The result in Germany is that, unlike in the United Kingdom, United States and several other countries, there are no census data on racial or ethnic diversity, and neither research funders nor universities collect this information. A spokesperson for the Bonn-based German Rectors' Conference, an association of 269 universities in Germany, told *Nature* that there was no recording of personal characteristics that could identify minority ethnic groups for "understandable" and "historical"

reasons, and because of data protection.

It is a similar situation in some other European countries: three research-funding agencies in France, Sweden and the Netherlands, for instance, told *Nature* that they don't collect diversity data on race or ethnicity, generally citing data-protection concerns.

"Of course, this makes it difficult to quantitatively measure success on ethnic diversity issues," says a spokesperson for Germany's Max Planck Society (MPS) in Munich, a large public association of research institutes.

But this cultural unease is starting to shift. Some researchers in countries including Germany are pushing to gather data on ethnicity and race in academia, arguing that the advantages of quantitative data collection outweigh the concerns. In July 2022, Germany's largest public research funder, the DFG, issued guidelines that put a greater emphasis on ethnic diversity in data gathering.

For now, there are only snapshots of information. In 2020, an association of PhD students at the MPS, called Max Planck PhDnet, organized its own survey, asking more than 2,000 doctoral students about their citizenship and ethnicity (P.-G Majeve *et al.* 2020 *Survey Report* <https://doi.org/j39n>; Max Planck PhDnet, 2021). It reported that 71% of the students who provided an ethnicity described themselves as of European descent, 10% as of East Asian or Southeast Asian descent, 7% as of South Asian descent and 0.7% (16 people) as of African descent. One-third of people describing themselves as non-European said they had felt discriminated against at work, compared with 18% of respondents identifying as European (see 'Representation among German doctoral students').

These findings are comparable to those in *Nature's* 2022 survey: almost one-quarter of German respondents identified as being in an ethnic or racial minority and, of those, more than one-third said they had experienced discrimination or harassment (not always racial); compared with 17% of the other German respondents.

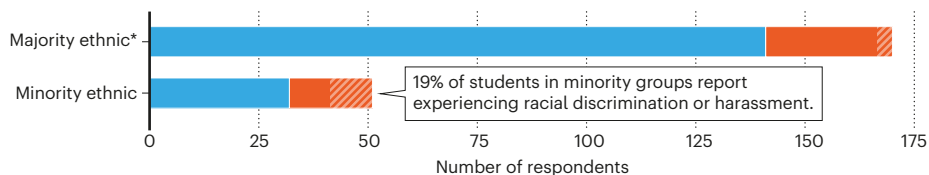
Larger surveys have tended to collect data using a coarse proxy called migration background. This typically refers to a person with at least one parent who was not born a German

GERMAN GRADUATE EXPERIENCES

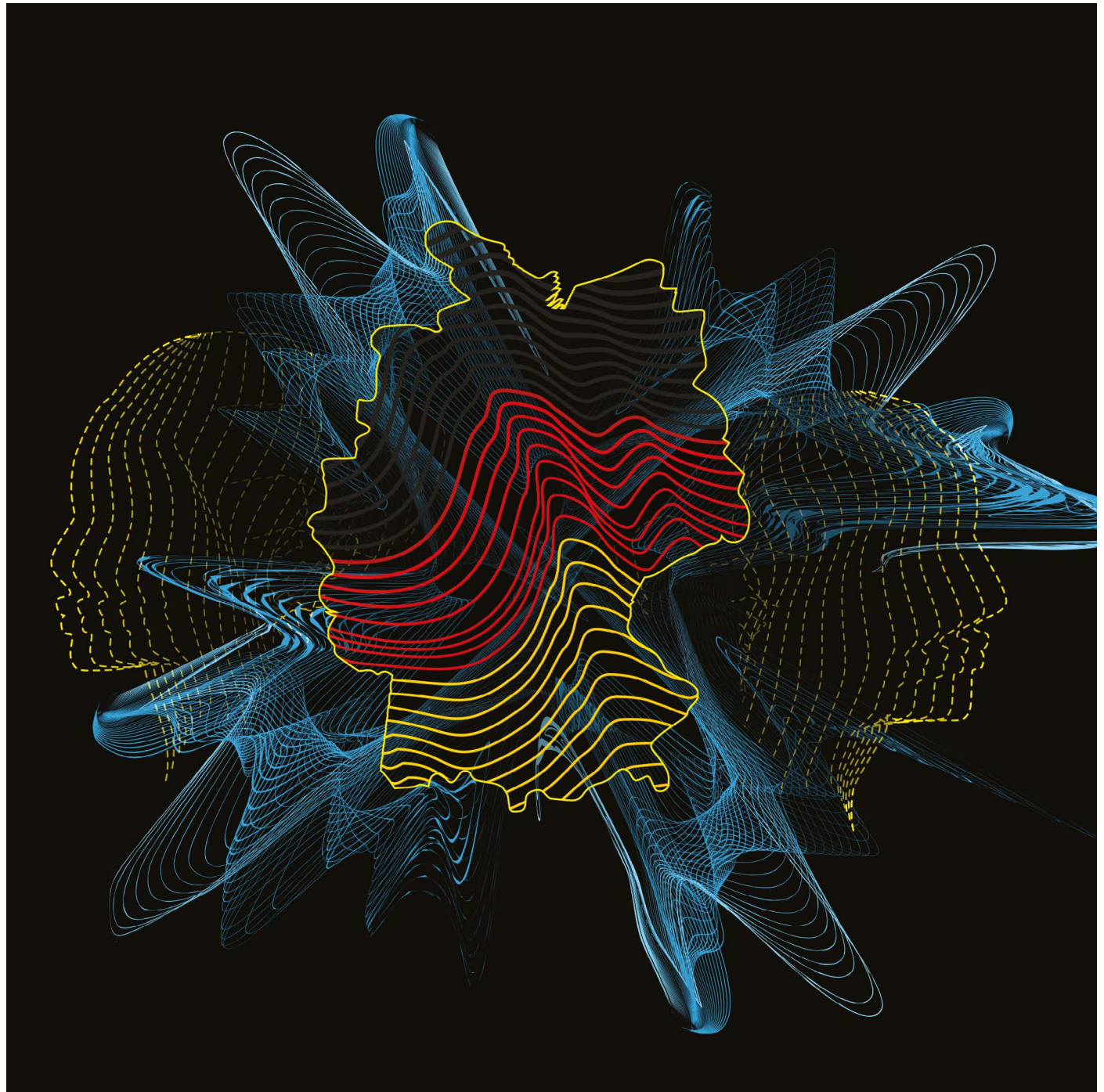
Although Germany doesn't record data on ethnicity or race in academia, a *Nature* survey of 226 graduate students in the country, part of a worldwide poll, offers some insights. About one-quarter of those surveyed considered themselves part of a minority racial or ethnic group. They were more likely than respondents from majority ethnic groups to say they had experienced discrimination or harassment, including specifically racial discrimination. Although the sample size is small, the findings are similar to those in the worldwide survey.

Do you feel that you have experienced discrimination or harassment during your graduate degree?

■ No ■ Yes ■ Racial discrimination or harassment



*Respondents were asked: "Do you consider yourself to be a member of a minority racial or ethnic group at your institution?"



THIS MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO QUANTITATIVELY MEASURE SUCCESS ON ETHNIC DIVERSITY ISSUES.”

citizen – which doesn't necessarily map well on to minority racial or ethnic status. In 2019, the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW), a research institute in Hanover, launched a longitudinal study called the National Academics Panel Study that aims to examine the demographics and career paths of doctoral researchers in Germany. It has started to collect data on factors that include migration background and country of birth, but not ethnicity (see go.nature.com/3kt68jv; in German).

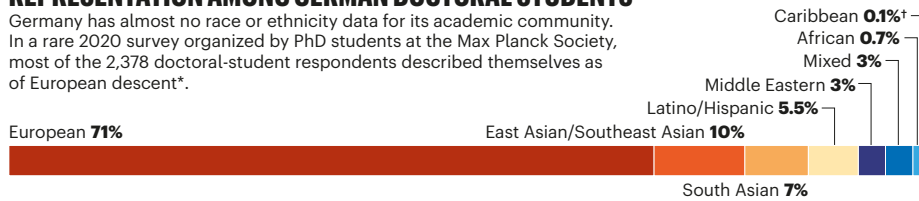
The DZHW's publicly available data define migration background as people who were born outside Germany. It found that this group accounted for 24% of some 14,000 doctoral

researchers surveyed in 2019–20. (Data using the wider definition of migration background – that is, including PhD students who have a parent born outside Germany – are available to researchers on request, the DZHW says). In a separate study of around 18,000 German students (including undergraduates) last year, the DZHW found that 6% of all students said they had been discriminated against because of their migration background (see go.nature.com/3kgcdj7; in German).

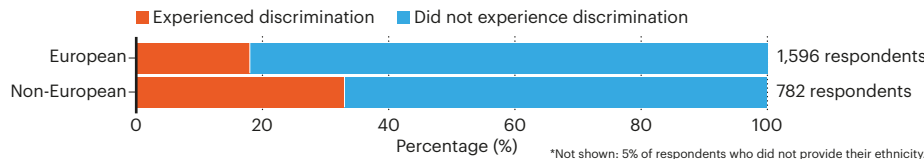
And last September, the German Education Union (GEW), which represents researchers and teachers, analysed data from multiple sources to suggest that 2% of German schoolchildren with a migration background might

REPRESENTATION AMONG GERMAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Germany has almost no race or ethnicity data for its academic community. In a rare 2020 survey organized by PhD students at the Max Planck Society, most of the 2,378 doctoral-student respondents described themselves as of European descent*.



All 2,378 participants stated whether or not they were European citizens. European respondents were roughly half as likely to report discrimination at work as non-European respondents.



*Not shown: 5% of respondents who did not provide their ethnicity.
*Percentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

go on to gain a doctorate, whereas those with two German-born parents had double the chance, at 4% (see go.nature.com/3tzwcuj; in German). (The union added that the main differences occurred in transitions from primary school to high school, and from high school to bachelor's degrees, rather than later in the academic pipeline.)

Such reports leave many questions about diversity in German science unanswered. But the picture might be changing. The Berlin non-governmental organization Citizens for Europe (CFE), for instance, aims to survey the full diversity of people in Germany – including the interplay of race, culture and social class, as well as gender. In 2021, CFE and another Berlin-based non-governmental organization, Each One Teach One (EOTO), released the results of 'Afrozensus', a survey of more than 6,000 "Black, African and Afro-Diasporic" people in Germany, which aimed to raise awareness about the experiences of Black people in the country (see go.nature.com/3nptj9m; in German). It did not specifically analyse academic professions, but more than 4% of respondents had a PhD.

In all, only 15.3% of Afrozensus respondents said they had never been discriminated against in a professional context. The lack of data on race and discrimination is part of a vicious circle, says Daniel Gyamerah, who worked on the survey while at CFE. He is now head of a new non-profit think tank, called zedela (Centre for Data Driven Empowerment, Leadership and Advocacy), and is also EOTO's chairperson. Without data, it is hard to grasp the extent of discrimination problems, Gyamerah says, which then makes it harder to convince organizations and policymakers that they should track the issue. Reservations over data-protection laws are often used as an excuse to avoid engaging with the topic, he says.

Sociologist Lucienne Wagner, a CFE researcher who is pursuing a PhD at the University of Koblenz-Landau on the discourses of diversity at German universities, sees a further challenge for raising awareness about racial discrimination and collecting data on diversity

at universities. With scant resources, people focused on gender equality can end up competing against – rather than working with – those exploring other dimensions of discrimination. But efforts in the field mean that attitudes in academia are changing, she adds.

The DFG's diversity guidelines, issued in July, could mark a significant shift. "Transparency of equality requires the collection and publication of continuous, differentiated data at all academic career levels, in particular concerning the participation of women and men. The same applies to other dimensions of diversity – as far as legally permissible," the guidelines say.

A STRIKINGLY MALE-DOMINATED ACADEME PERPETUATES RACIST, SEXIST AND CLASSIST DYNAMICS."

Asked for more details, the DFG told *Nature* that it doesn't have any specific rules on how to collect data on cultural or ethnic representation – besides recommending anonymous surveys that pay careful attention to data protection. The funder says that it is up to universities to decide how to conduct such surveys and what data to collect, and that it doesn't have an overview of these activities. "Universities and research institutions can and should already take measures to promote diversity in view of the evidence that is already available," a spokesperson said, referring to surveys by the DZHW and others. But the DFG also said that it is not aware of any universities already implementing such measures.

Last September, the German Rectors' Conference launched a federally funded initiative called Diversity at German Universities. Details

are limited, but the aim is to fund some universities to examine what hurdles and barriers need to be overcome to enable more diversity and inclusivity, with results due to be presented in 2024; monitoring diversity is also a goal.

For Joshua Kwesi Aikins, a political scientist and human-rights activist at the University of Kassel, who worked on the Afrozensus for CFE and is joining zedela, the time to collect information on race and on multiple forms of discrimination has already come. However, he adds, such data must be collected only with the full understanding and participation of the groups who are being asked for the information, so that the exercise is done in good faith.

"History has led Germany to be rightfully cautious about racial classification. But German institutions need to act," he says. "A strikingly male-dominated academe perpetuates racist, sexist and classist dynamics that add to structural hurdles on the way to what remains for too many a precarious academic career."

Aikins and Wagner are part of a three-year research network funded by the DFG and running until 2025, which aims to define new categories for data collection. This could include self-reported ethnicity, among other facets of identity. The group, coordinated by Anne-Kathrin Will, who studies migration at the Humboldt University of Berlin, and Linda Supik, a sociologist at Leibniz University in Hanover, is working with non-governmental and civil-society organizations.

Whether these efforts will change how German employers or universities collect race or ethnicity data remains to be seen. The DFG says that, in future, researchers wanting funding will need to address how they are promoting diversity, and that it plans to develop individual measures for this "over a period of approximately five years". It also notes that it is developing a survey to understand "needs and expectations" related to its promotion of diversity, but says it cannot comment further.

At the Ruhr University Bochum, meanwhile, Karle says work is being done to improve the understanding of concerns over discrimination. Last July, for instance, Hans Alves, a psychologist at the university who specializes in social cognition, ran a survey of more than 4,000 students asking about their gender, migration status, religion and experiences of various kinds of discrimination. It did not ask about race or ethnicity. The results have not yet been published, but Alves told *Nature* the survey showed that 10% of students with a parent born outside Germany said they had been the target of discrimination because they were perceived as 'foreign' or 'non-white'. Karle says the university is now thinking about conducting a similar project across all of its academic staff.

Hristio Boytchev is a journalist based in Berlin. Additional reporting by Quirin Schiermeier.

SOURCE: P.-G. MAJEV ET AL. [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.1038/S41586-021-03401-1](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03401-1) (MAX PLANCK PHDNET, 2021)