

Study strategy and problems of ‚new students‘ - Some considerations and some results

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1 An old topic and a new discussion

In the last years in Germany a discussion is starting again about the amount of academics and the diversity of the students - and which problems all this generate to teaching, jobs and society (cf. Nida-Rümelin, J. 2010; Schultz, T./ Hurrelmann, K. 2013). We might remind that the topic of heterogeneity and new students is a rather traditional, old topic of our ‘Network Uni 21’. It is exactly ten years ago, that we organized a meeting - as a conference of FREREF - with the title: ‘Heterogeneity and Inequality of Students – an International Comparison’ (cf. Bargel, T. 2004).

In this document of the meeting Werner Georg presents an interesting article about ‘Social Inequality and the University’ - comparing the three regions of Rhone-Alpes (France), Catalonia (Spain) and Baden-Württemberg (Germany). At the end he pointed out to some important results (Georg, W. 2004, p. 53):

- (1) Inequality (of social categories) shows the same pattern in all three regions, with Baden-Württemberg as the most selective region.
- (2) Most distinctive between the students was the disposal over or lack of economic resources with the consequence of working much more during the term, not factors of ability.
- (3) In all regions the access to public subsidies (money) is insufficient with negative consequences for the successful course of studies for the new students from the lower class, because especially they have less time for studying.
- (4) Some more difficulties of these students exist in their relation to the teaching staff, and to present themselves in discussions. They need more and better consultation and support, because of their lower self-confidence in the academic surrounding.

In general this means that it is a mistake to look only to the new students and their abilities. We must also look to their living conditions and the study conditions at the universities.

In the meantime the questions about the new students have found more interest in scientific research as well as in political discussions. We have even an international review about the studies and results concerning the ‘first-generation students’ (cf. Spiegler, T. / Bednarek, A. 2013); generally this review confirms the findings of our international comparisons (cf. Hadji, Bargel, Masjuan 2005) as well as the results of the German Student Survey (Bargel 2007; Bargel/Bargel 2012).

2 New students: what does it mean?

If we speak about the ‘**new students**’, we must confess, that the term or concept of the ‘new students’ is not so clear as the simple usage may suggest. Therefore we give you some considerations about the development of this term.

At the beginning of the expansion of the student numbers at universities in the sixties of the last century there have been three main social groups, which then have been seen as the ‘new students’: the one group has been the women (studying girls) and the other the working class kids. But also, students of new regions should be included - because of the foundation of many new universities (as Constance for example). All these new students represented broad ‘social categories’ and constitute more ‘social heterogeneity’ at the universities.

At about fifteen years ago, starting with the so-called Bologna Process, we have many different groups of ‘new students’: those with a migration background, those seriously ill or with disablement, those with children, those who have to nurse their parents, or those who have

an occupation beside studying etc. .This is a rather new field of different **social settings**, and we named all this '**diversity**' – in consequence inventing '**diversity management**'.

Now we are at the beginning of even a new, a third phase: It is marked by the official aim, that even 60% per cent of the population of the country should go to higher education and finish a study to become scientifically qualified. Now we ask: What to do, to reach a good study outcome for them all, how different they may be concerning their preparation for studying, their interests and capacities, their expectations and engagement. How much '**individuality**' (flexibility) is now necessary in the structure (e.g. part-time studies) and in teaching (e.g. blended learning) at our universities.

So much for a short orientation about the possible meanings of the category "new students". What are the experiences with them in our systems of higher education: what are the results of student surveys? In our presentation we will concentrate as new students to the social heritage, which means: **New students** are those, who are the first persons in their family going on to higher education, meaning Level 5/6 of OECD-System of educational levels. Their parents have not visited a university or polytechnic or teacher academy. The reason for this concentration is, that the situation at university and the problems with studying are exemplary connected and visible in this group of 'educational climbers' or 'first generation students'.

Sample of students at universities and applied universities (FH)

The last wave of the German Students Survey has been in winter semester 2012/13. At the whole 4.884 students participated and send usable questionnaires back to the research group. Of these we have 46% first generation students (fgs) that means without parents, father or mother, being absolvent of a university or another academic institution e.g. teaching seminar or polytechnic. On the other hand 52% of the students have parents, of whom one or both finished university and therefore having an academic heritage (ach).

In Germany there is quite a big difference between the amount of first generation students at the university (in a traditional sense) and at the new "Fachhochschule", which means nowadays "university of applied sciences". At the traditional university level 58% of the students are of academic heritage, at the level of applied universities only 37% have this family background. At the other hand nearly two third at the applied universities are 'new students' (63%), whereas at the traditional universities we count 42% who are the first of the family trying to get an academic degree.

3 Study strategies and efficiency

One important point of the debate about the new students is the apprehension, that they might be less efficient and less systematic in studying, because the academic world is an unknown landscape for them. The findings are against such expectations: A quick finishing is even a little bit more important for the new students, even more useful for their personal development than for their professional chances.

To reach a good result in the exam is of equal utility for both groups of students, independently from social background, if they judge it under the perspective of further job chances – at a general higher level. But for the personal development it seems to be somewhat more useful for the new students – at a general lower level (cf. table 1).

It is a general conviction of the students, that efficiency in studying (short in time and good in results) is helpful for getting a job: about three quarters of them think that both strategies are useful. For the personal development, for becoming an educated personality, there is a low degree of difference: the new students support the usefulness of efficiency as a factor of personal development somewhat more.

Table 1

The assessment of students in Germany with different social background about the usefulness of study-strategies for efficiency in the perspective of the personal development and the occupational career – (WS 2012/13)

(Scale: a = rather adversely, b = somewhat useful, c = useful, d = very useful, e = cannot rate; indication in percentage for “very usefulness”)

		Usefulness for ...			
		Personal development		Occupational career	
		fgs ¹	ach ²	fgs	ach
		(2.166)	(1.934)	(2.166)	(1.934)
Study strategies ... for efficiency		Usefulness			
Complete studies quickly	useful	35	32	36	36
and with determination	very useful	27	21	42	39
	together	62	53	78	75
Achieving the highest	useful	39	39	28	28
possible degree	very useful	34	30	63	64
	together	73	69	91	92

1) *fgs* = first-generation-students, parents with non-academic education; 2) *ach* = academic heritage, parents with academic education (father or mother).

The usefulness of additional chances

We may also have a short look at three other indicators about the study strategies of students: (1) to continue with a master program, (2) to study abroad, and (3) to participate in the research process. These are indicators for the inclination of the students to capture these additive chances, which offers the university. The students of academic families rank the usefulness of all three aspects higher and are therefore better prepared to capture these chances.

All three aspects of additional chances (Studying abroad, research participation and continuing with a master's degree) are always better evaluated by the “old” students from families with academic heritage (*ach*) for their later job chances at the labor market; even more usefulness they ascribe for the personal development. The greatest difference to the new students exist concerning the possibility to study abroad temporarily: here we find a difference of nine percentage points for the category ‘very useful’ in respect to the personal development between the “new” and the “old students” (cf. table 2).

Table 2

The assessment of students in Germany with different social background about the usefulness of study-strategies for additional chances under the perspective of the personal development and occupational career (WS 2012/13)

(Scale: a = rather adversely, b = somewhat useful, c = useful, d = very useful, e = cannot rate; indication in percentage for “very usefulness”)

		Usefulness for ...			
		Personal development		Occupational career	
		fgs ¹	ach ²	fgs	ach
		(2.166)	(1.934)	(2.166)	(1.934)
Study strategies for additional chances		Usefulness			
- Continue with master	useful	27	23	19	13
after the bachelor	very useful	42	44	55	60
	together	69	67	74	73
- Studying abroad temporarily	useful	27	26	31	30
	very useful	48	57	49	53
	together	75	83	80	83
- Participating in a research-	useful	40	37	34	33
project or -training	very useful	40	44	46	49
	together	80	81	80	82

1) *fgs* = first-generation-students, parents with non-academic education; 2) *ach* = academic heritage, parents with academic education (father or mother).

Intentions of studying efficiently

The estimation of different strategies may be for efficiency or other aims, is the one side, the other are the concrete intentions of the students to be efficient: Perhaps there exist greater differences between the two groups of students, the “new” and the “old” ones.

There is really no difference in the intention to work intensive for the study field. Also a good exam has the same importance for the first-generation-students as well as for the students with academic parents. We may conclude: All students intend more or less the same efforts and outcome, independently of their social origin. Only in the motive to complete the study as quick as possible we found some difference: The children of academics are not so eager to finish studying in as short as possible (cf. table 3).

Table 3

Study habits of students in Germany with different social background concerning effectiveness of studying (WS 2012/13)

(Scale from 0 = 'applies not at all' till 6 = applies entirely; Percentage for 3 – 4 = applies predominantly and 5 – 6 = applies entirely)

	All Students		Trad.Universities		Appl.Universities	
	fgs ¹ (2.166)	ach ² (1.934)	fgs (1.467)	ach (1.656)	fgs (649)	ach (278)
Study habits of efficiency						
I work hard and intensive for my studies						
Predominantly	46	45	46	45	49	46
entirely	36	37	37	37	32	32
together	82	82	83	82	81	78
For me, it is very important to achieve a good degree in exam						
predominantly	33	32	31	33	37	29
entirely	58	58	59	57	56	60
together	91	90	90	90	93	89
For me, it is essential to complete my studies as quickly as possible						
predominantly	36	33	36	33	37	30
entirely	33	29	30	27	39	43
together	69	62	66	60	74	73

1) **fgs** = first-generation-students, parents with non-academic education; 2) **ach** = academic heritage, parents with academic education (father or mother).

All data of the different indicators shows in the same direction: The habit of studying in Germany is nearly the same between ‘old’ and ‘new’ students. But perhaps the realization of these intentions is not the same; may be the realization is not so easy for the new students, because of missing funding and the need to have a job during term, which impedes a concentrated studying in full-time.

Learning capacity and competence

In the actual debates about the increasing diversity of students it is often pointed out, that not the differences of ‘social categories’ are of major interest, but the ‘individual differences’ of the students in learning capacities, cultural engagement and social competences are more important. For the teaching process at universities this shift is quite understandable; nevertheless for the structural and general perspective of the ‘diversity management’ it is of even interest, if exist correlations between these abilities and the social origin of the students.

In our survey we are interested in the three learning capacities, which are esteemed as very important for the study success and outcome. We ask the students to evaluate their own capacity and ability: (1) to learn and keep new facts easily; (2) to organize and schedule the learning matter, and (3) to concentrate for long periods in learning and to complete the tasks.

In the case of learning abilities we detect only small differences between the 'new' and 'old' students. In the case of the capacity for longer concentration and getting things done the amount of difference between these two groups is seven percentage points (category 'entirely'); concerning the easy comprehension and good memory it is six points and concerning the organization of learning the difference is even less (three percentage points). There are some small differences, but it is exaggerated to interpret them as deficiencies of new students (cf. table 4).

Table 4

Learning Capacity and Competence of students in Germany with different social background: first generation students and students with academic heritage (WS 2012/13)

(Scale from 0 = 'applies not at all' til 6 = applies entirely; Percentage for 3 – 4 = applies predominantly and 5 – 6 = applies entirely)

	All Students		Trad.Universities		Appl.Universities	
	fgs ¹ (2.166)	ach ² (1.934)	fgs (1.454)	ach (1.640)	fgs (645)	ach (275)
Learning Competence						
It is easy for me to learn and keep new facts and contents of my subject						
predominantly	56	54	57	54	55	54
entirely	26	32	26	32	26	31
together	82	86	83	86	81	85
I am capable to organize and to schedule well my learning matter						
predominantly	50	49	49	49	50	48
entirely	28	31	29	31	28	31
together	78	80	78	80	78	79
I am able to concentrate for long periods and to complete my tasks						
predominantly	44	38	44	38	44	40
entirely	40	47	41	48	39	40
together	84	85	85	86	83	80

1) *fgs* = first-generation-students, parents with non-academic education; 2) *ach* = academic heritage, parents with academic education (father or mother).

4 Causes and amount of stress

If students feel stress in their study situation the reason might be various. Three main areas might be distinguished: (1) achievement demands and academic orientation, (2) anonymity and social life (partnership), and (3) material life situation (financing) and the need for doing a job. For every case we include two examples (indicators):

Concerning achievement and orientation there are some differences between 'new' and 'old' students, but they are not enormous (only four or five percentage points). Concerning personal well-being, as anonymity or personal partnership, there is really no difference between students of different social heritage (cf. table 5).

The greatest differences exist concerning the financial situation and the need to going to work beside studying. In these cases the stress is much higher for first generation students than for students out of academic families: with differences from twelve to fifteen point of percentage between these two groups.

Table 5

Causes of strains and stress for students in Germany with different social background: first generation students and students with academic heritage (WS 2012/13)

(Figures in per cent)

	All Students		Trad. Universities		Appl. Universities	
	fgs ¹ (2.166)	ach ² (1.934)	fgs (1.454)	ach (1.640)	fgs (645)	ach (275)
Strains and stress with...						
... demands and orientation						
Demands of the course of studies						
some strains	48	45	47	45	50	44
great stress	31	29	33	30	24	23
together	79	74	80	75	74	67
Course choices and academic orientation						
some strains	39	34	39	34	38	33
great stress	8	9	10	10	5	7
together	47	43	49	44	43	40
... social life and partnership						
The anonymity at university						
some strains	24	24	25	24	21	19
great stress	7	9	9	10	4	3
together	31	33	34	34	25	22
Missing a strict partnership						
some strains	17	18	16	17	18	21
great stress	12	11	12	11	11	10
together	29	29	28	28	29	31
... work and financing						
Need of doing a job beside studying						
some strains	29	27	30	27	27	31
great stress	24	14	23	14	25	14
together	53	41	53	41	52	45
The current financial situation						
some strains	32	27	32	27	32	29
great stress	28	18	27	18	31	19
together	60	45	59	45	63	48

1) *fgs* = first-generation-students, parents with non-academic education; 2) *ach* = academic heritage, parents with academic education (father or mother).

5 Consequences

As we think about the consequences of these findings we propose four theses for a necessary 'new thinking':

- (1) To often we point out shortages on the side of the 'new students', to attest them a missing study ability, by which they disturb normal teaching.
- (2) We overlook, that the assumed deficits of the new students are mainly caused by their life conditions (less money) or by the study conditions.
- (3) As we omit the positive possibilities of the new students, we produce – as institution or teacher - many of those deficits, we then complain.
- (4) Often it is more useful to change the conditions of studying and to accept the diversity of students as a productive element at the universities.

This means for our **research**: We must combine more often different levels and factors, asking how individual and institutional elements and traits contribute to study success and study

outcome. We must investigate more often: Which elements of the organization, the courses and the teaching at universities sustain and support all students, which social background they may have. Because study conditions which are helpful for all students are mostly especially good and useful for the 'new students'

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