

# **Social Background of Students and international Activities - some Results of the Student Survey in Germany:**

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## **1 Introduction**

I must confess, that I have presented my contribution about “Social Background of Students and international Activities” already two times this autumn, even the results are rather new (from our last enquete in winter 2009/10). It was at two conferences of our DAAD (that is the German Institution for international exchange of students, graduates and scientists), at Berlin and Constance that I presented results to discuss social inequality hidden in the exchange programs. This, it seems to me, is an example of our intention, to offer empirical evidence for practical and political discussions – in this case for the central topics of international exchange and of social inequality.

It is interesting, that questions of social inequality in access and in performance of studying did not find any interest at universities or in official politics for a long time. It is one result of the european development in higher education, that this topic become more and more crucial, especially concerning the international exchange and the creation of the European Area of Higher Education than ever before.

The Importance of the **social dimension** – which is now the official term – has been shown, not least of all, through international mobility and studying abroad. The “social dimension” has been established during the Bologna process. It has been talked about for the first time in the communiqué of Prague in 2001, strengthened by the communiqué of Berlin in 2003, confirmed officially as “essential” in the communiqué of Bergen (2005), further explained, enlarged and described more concretely in the communiqués of London (2007) and Leuven (2009).

Thus the battle against social inequality in study, deriving from the social origin of students, is declared to be an important job when realizing the European Area of Higher Education. I want to present some results, deriving mainly from our student survey, hoping to give some ideas and hints to you as well how to cope practically with social inequality, using the example of going abroad.

## **2 Definitions of social background**

This is indeed not the place here to give a methodical lecture on how to define and measure the social background or origin of students. But it seems to be appropriate to shortly clarify the necessary terms.

The term “social background” of a student tells us something about the social status and the cultural environment of his or her parents. When contrasting **working-class children** to **children with an academic background**, a frequent and popular comparison, two different criteria are being used, that of profession (worker) and that of qualification (graduate of higher education). Status of profession and of education are indeed two different criteria. Both are used to classify people with regard to social standing, influence and payment.

Because education, job position and financial income are closely connected, it is obvious to define social classes using an index which integrates all these factors. These index uses points for each factor, and finally leads to the **definition of social classes**. Mostly three to six classes are build up: mostly from the lower to the middle and upper or higher social class.

We are using the term “**educational climbers**” (members of a lower class who use education in order to rise to a higher social layer) at the student survey for several reasons, also political ones. For us these students have non-academic parents, a simple but a definition of many consequences.

## **3 Students with different social origin**

### **3.1 Choice of university and subject**

Social origin in itself is already effective when choosing the kind of university – university or university of applied sciences – as well as the subject. When looking at the **kind of university** the facts are clear: **universities** stay to be a place where the majority of students (58%) reproduce the status of their parents, who also graduated there.

**Universities of applied sciences**, however, noticeably are institutions chosen by educational climbers and lateral entrants. --- If you care for some figures deriving from the student survey: At universities there are 42 per cent educational climbers; among the universities of applied sciences things are different: here are 69 per cent of the students educational climbers (according to the definition above.)

With regard to the **subjects taken by students** we get the following picture: At universities the **reproduction rate of university graduates** are similar in all subjects mostly ranging from 54 per cent in social science and 63 per cent in engineering; the quota is highest in **medicine**: 71 per cent. In former years jurisprudence had a reproduction rate above proportion, whereas educational climbers more often chose engineering even at universities.

Among the prospective young **engineers** an interesting splitting has taken place: children of graduates now keep to themselves at universities more and more, and children of educational climbers are mainly to be found at universities of applied sciences. However we are going to interpret these differences, the fact remains that when choosing universities and subjects students show **social differences** which are noticeable and persistent with even new ones appearing (as in engineering).

### **3.2 Indicators, features and conditions**

It is possible to go through every single condition for students with regard to subjects or to universities, and to find out about their relation to social background. However, though it is not possible to do so here in detail, but I want to point out some important open or covered conditions, using three examples in doing so.

When beginning their study **students' assurances** vary whether or not they will be able to cope with it. This is an elementary element of **social capital** (first example). It differs very much with regard to their social background, its rate has been between 19 and 21 per cent of late years – a remarkable margin. This amount of social security, regarding the entrance to university and the milieu at universities, by the way is very far fetching: it helps to cope with demands and difficulties of a study; it is helpful, and a protection against external disturbances (like fluctuation of the labour market).

The economic situation covers an important area (the second example): the nucleus here is **financing of study and social scholarships (BaföG)**. The social background is very important – as expected – when looking at the way students finance their study: only one

out of five students coming from lower classes can fully count on their parents. Contrary to that two out of three students with parents having a university degree can be sure of being financed by them. This is a far better precondition in order to do a study consistently.

It is true that working-class children receive BaföG above proportion: about half of them compared to 15 per cent of higher social classes. But on the other hand this rate had been much higher with about 63 per cent in 1993, it receded to only 41 per cent in 1998, and has gone up again lately without having touched the mark of former times.

Far too many educational climbers therefore have to cope with a large amount of uncertainties and financial straits during their study, just for securing their bare living. Furthermore they more often have the burden, for example, to do a job outside university for their living, parallel to their study and during term. The payment by BaföG partly compensates disadvantages of the lower social classes, but it is not enough by far.

With regard to **coping with study** educational climbers more often have problems in connection to cultural, academic styles at universities (third example). Life and dealings with each other are more often strange and unusual to them. Subsequently orientation in study and planing of study is more troublesome for them. The unfavourable social climate – for instance the prevailing anonymity – poses more difficulties, especially at universities.

To summarize the findings about the situation of students from lower social classes: they more frequently are troubled whether or not they will be able to do the study successfully, and in the allotted time. This pressure has augmented since the introduction of the Bachelor study. Furthermore educational climbers, especially students of working-class origin, have some more difficulties in communicating with teachers, and in participating in discussions during class. Thus they are less able to show their capacities, and are more reserved to present themselves. This could be a reason why they get less frequently a job as a tutor or as a student assistant at universities.

### **3.3 Disadvantages – one main factor or a set of factors?**

In the face of these different factors, ranging from economic, to social and to cultural dimensions and possibly having all a connection to social class, it is important to put a basic question: Can they be regarded as a fixed set of factors, or are there some main ones, or does every factor occur only singularly?

Our results show us that there is an obvious **axis of social inequality** during study, leading from students' social origin. They are especially determined by economic resources, especially in Baden-Württemberg, compared to Rhone-Alpes (France) or to Catalunya (Spain). But furthermore having social capital is important, and finally elements of cultural capital have some relations to the social background which is noticeable.

All the different factors are closely intermingled with economic, social and cultural elements. This result is very marked. How difficult it is to dissolve social inequality is verified by this result. It shows how important the role of money is in order to take part in social and cultural life, how important financial support and social scholarships (BaföG) are, being certainly a crucial point of discussion.

## **4 Study abroad and social background**

It has been the question how to promote and multiply a study abroad. This accounts for the fact that the social dimension in building the European Area of Higher Education has lately got more into focus for a lot of researchers.

### **4.1 Strategic value of a study abroad**

More and more, experiences abroad are being valued by students. A study phase abroad is not only deemed important for personal development but for employability as well. This positive view of a study abroad has increased of late years. It has been supported by economy and guidelines of politics.

If this is indeed the case, then the study aboard will be a special example for a lasting social inequality in study. Because how to plan and to carry out a time spent abroad – be it as a study phase, an internship or a language course – vary, depending very much on the social background of students.

### **4.2 Amount of information on possibilities to study abroad**

Let's start with the amount of information for students existing about possibilities to do a study abroad. This has considerably and continuously increased since the eighties. Until the beginning of the nineties less than one out of four (22 to 24 per cent) students felt to be sufficiently or well informed. In the meantime this figure has more than doubled: nearly half of them (46 per cent) ascribe this factor to themselves now (2009/10).

Students coming from parents of “low social class” describe themselves to be less well

informed, but the gap has lessened since the nineties and can be regarded as to be small now (1 to 6 per cent). But the amount of students who are **disinterested** from the first, is larger among students coming from a lower social class, and has kept persistently at the same level over the years.

### **4.3 Activities and study phase abroad**

Regarding a **study phase abroad already accomplished**, the student survey offers three quota with reference to social classes: 4 per cent of students coming from the near-illiterate social class, 7 per cent of middle class students, but 11 per cent of students with a parental social background of higher civil servants and freelancers have already been abroad for study.

These differences continue to be quantitative impressive even in the **planning of a study phase abroad**: 15 per cent of students from lower educated social class, but 27 per cent of students coming from the middle group of educational climbers, and even 33 per cent of students with an academic parental background are planning such a study phase in earnest.

Looking at **other activities abroad**, for example internships/work placements or language courses, similar differences with regard to the social background of students occur. They are noticeable throughout, and the according figures have been stable in the last years. In social classes having a higher education activities abroad, including a study phase, are tripled in relation to those of the low educated social class. This is a considerable lead, which has been often proved, especially when measured in absolute figures.

### **4.4 Reasons against a study phase abroad**

When examining questions regarding international mobility, it is useful to get to know students' reasons against a study phase abroad. Are these reasons weighted differently and in accordance with the social background, as it is the case concerning the necessity to work and earn money beside studying?

The biggest difference, to be expected in relation to social background, exists on account of financing the time abroad. It is a noticeable one indeed: 45 per cent of students with parents of lower qualification in contrast to 27 per cent of students with parents coming from an academic world (so not without troubles as well) state that problems of financing weight heavily with them, and prevent them to go abroad. – The parental purse is even

more important for the decision to do a study phase abroad than to start a study at all; we may say: economic inequality has an even greater effect here.

Some kind of social difference exists with reference to the knowledge of a foreign language (as a cultural factor) as well: 22 per cent of students coming from a class with a low educational level, in relation to 15 per cent with a high educational level, state that insufficient knowledge of a foreign language is an important reason for them not to go abroad for study. – That is true: Let us take a look at the knowledge of the English language: 34 per cent of German students whose parents have an academic profession think their English is very good, but only 21 per cent of educational risers think so; at universities of applied sciences this figure is even less.

All other criteria amount to a similar level. The difference regarding their fear to lose time when studying abroad, remains rather small (plus 2 to 4 per cent) between students of different social backgrounds. Similarly the factors getting credit points excepted at home and receiving information are not more important to students with a lower educational background than to others – these factors are even rarely mentioned.

#### **4.5 “International Offices” as Student’s Service’**

I should like to add a positive result here immediately to prevent the impression that social scientists only know how to criticise the efforts of others. It regards the “**Auslandsämter**” more frequently known now as **International Offices**.

First of all it is noticeable that the rush of students calling at the office keeps within clear bounds. Though the frequent feeling at the office itself of having too much work is justified, only one out of ten students calls at the office in order to get information or council. This is not a high rate, it has been even a bit higher in the late nineties. There is a noticeable social difference: a higher social background leads to nearly twice as many calls at that office (lately: 9 per cent coming from a low to 17 per cent coming from a high social layer). Before, that is in 1998, there were clearly more calls, but the difference was the same: 14 to 23 per cent.

Students, regardless of their social background, give a feedback about the work of the International Office which is far, far more positive than negative: 75 per cent, to only 16 per cent of students who are not satisfied. – It is highly possible that as a result of this counselling, as well as of other activities, students are nowadays far better informed about a study abroad than before.

The social background has no influence on how students judge the quality of the received counsel at the International Office: students of the low, middle and high social classes, with regard to the educational level of the parents, they all give positive feedbacks with above 70 per cent. The positive vote is equally high regardless to the social class. One should recommend to students, and especially to those with a lower educational background, to use the offers of the International Office.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

A lot has happened in the past years with regard to the question of students' social background together with a fair and equal treatment at universities. I do not only want to direct the focus on the established "Eurostudent", project for a permanent surveillance of students' social-economic situation in Europe. But I want to stress the fact as well that the problem itself is more in focus now. It will be important to pick up such new attention and targets in earnest, if the European Area of Higher Education is to fulfil the social and democratic concept of higher education.

**Activities and measures** with regard to a social balance, with equity and fairness being more in the centre of activities and studies abroad, could be taken on three levels:

First: the importance of internationality and international mobility should not only be stressed verbally on the side of the **state, foundations and enterprises**, but the financing of it should be more open and transparent: Therefore, one of the main demands of students here are more scholarships for a study abroad.

Secondly two demands are to be made on **institutes prior to universities**:

1. Social equality in education with regard to the access to universities, including the learning of foreign languages.

2. Far more information about a study abroad should be given to young people before they start to study (for example during the last years at school).

3. The **universities** themselves, their **faculties** and **service offices** should fulfil the following tasks developing the study programs for the Bachelor:

– organisational rulings for study, for example "windows" or "phases" for studying abroad, and giving faculties pattern how to cope with them;

– establish internationality and relation to research as principles of study from the very beginning, not imploring that during the introduction only, but to take it always to heart



during class;

- better adaptation of ECTS points to the work and expenses in connection with a study abroad;
- underline the importance of language courses and conversation lectures as additional learning possibilities.

To notice: Social diversification is lowest at **universities** where a time abroad is part of the course of study, and thus integrated organisationally. The international exchange here is part of the study and is supported.

Finally this should be the basis for a “**social main-streaming and monitoring**” on the condition that a reduction of social inequality is an important part for the quality of study. In accreditation as well as in evaluation far more weight should be put on this fact. Faculties and universities should have an transparency policy here, giving information about development and success in this field, and accounting for it. - We all should really understand that equity and fairness are important factors for the quality of study.