

Research Group on Higher Education – University of Konstanz

ISSUE – International Student Survey in Europe

Theoretical Frame of the Student Survey and the Questionnaire (QUISS) about Study Quality and Qualification in Higher Education

Explanation of theoretical concepts

Student surveys cannot be based on a one dimensional theory. The research on the situation and ideas of students on subjects like their study and their university, jobs and job situation has to be more complex using theories on different levels and scope.

There are mainly two levels of argument:

1. **General theories** about the university and its relation to society and employment (general theories). These are the frame of reference for the whole questionnaire.
2. **Middle range theories:** They claim to sort and explain important fields of the survey: like students strategies to cope with the study (coping), quality of study and teaching (evaluation), choice of job, and anticipated transition to employment (professions).

On the one hand the theoretical conceptions, dimensions, and statements for instance about presuppositions, connexions, and consequences are used for the choice of questions and items. They are looked upon as "indicators" to describe the theoretical models as closely as possible. On the other hand it is possible to connect the results of the survey to these theories, and to use them to interpret the data.

But the concept of the student surveys does not only refer to scientific theories and concepts of answers. It proposes to give answers to more pragmatic and political questions, for instance concerning the age to students, duration of study, observance of rules of study, demands to improve course situation, and opinions concerning actual concepts about university development.

1 General Theories about Universities and Higher Education

These are the theories which rearrange the whole area of the university and put it in relation to society. These theories give an anatomy (or pathology) of the university. They have to be appropriate in order to grasp on the one hand the social institution university, its structure and its processes, and on the other hand the individual ideas and actions of students.

1.1. Socialization at the university: integration, professionalism, identity

The theory of Talcott Parsons/Platt about structure and function of universities serves here. It is productive because it is closely connected to theories about academic professions and functions of social systems.

The main points are the **values, rules** and **standards** of the structural and functional nucleus of reproduction (by research) and passing on (by teaching) of the "scientific rationalization" (special branch of science) to the "building of a culture" (education and general culture), to the economic adaptation (job practice and job market), and to the social political orientation (political participation and social interpretations).

For the university it is important that these functions are tied together, and that the cultural, job orientated and political functions stay related to the main function. It is equally important that these functions are perceived autonomously and in trust. This means that the situation and the role of students are characterized by independence and responsibility for themselves.

This theory allows us to fix how students, concerning the demands put on them, experience these ties to the functional nucleus during their study, and whether they import them into their identity, therefore into their job values, and their social political bearings.

This way we get information about how these values and standards are advocated homogeneously or heterogeneously (multiversity), and what kind of displacements (or one-sidedness) occur. The integration of the university as an institution as well as the consistence of students' roles and their social identity can be stated.

It is totally possible to include **new developments** and challenges at the university, for example new teaching technologies and virtual learning/internet, into this theoretic approach, to estimate the consequences for the university, and to come to conclusions.

One advantage of this theory is the possibility to refer to **processes of social change**, the way they are discussed in "**modernization theories**". There are – roughly sketched here – four lines of thought:

1. general importance, expansion of basic values of rationalism and corresponding exchange of ideas (universalism and globalisation)
2. gathering specialization and division of labour (differentiation and individualization)
3. extended accessibility and social opening (equal chances and participation)
4. extension of science and scientific qualification into professions (importance of scientific character and professionalism)

Aspects of social inequality and different means of power (chances or authority) stay disregarded in the theoretical supply. This refers to the social situation, social selection, as well as social standing (in access to university, to job, as well as to the social position).

1.2. Academic appearances (habitus): status, capital, reproduction

The ideas of Bourdieu are mostly used to investigate the mechanism and processes of social selection, membership, and placing in society in the sense of the reproduction of social status and power.

They are investigations about the "academic milieu" which are connected to the general theory about appearances (habitus) and the theory about different "sorts of capital". The different academic milieus constitute themselves through sorts of capital, together with forms of action used for exchange among them and the fixing of limits between them.

Bourdieu uses three different sorts of capital: economic, social and cultural capital. Thus he describes social situations and especially the means of "earnings" and "chances of transformation" of these sorts of capital. Furthermore he states especially the results concerning conceptions, fixing of limits, and styles of capital. The advantage of these theoretical ideas are on the one hand the general claim put on it, and on the other hand the configuration of something new, which is taken methodically into consideration in empiricism and its interpretation.

Taste, style, preferences, as well as knowledge, limits, and own doings are taken for a granted rank as **cultural capital**. Acquisition of a foreign language and a study abroad belong to this list as well. Certificates (exams) in this sense are a combination of a public proof of cultural capital (knowledge) together with the public proof of social capital (membership, i.e. to the academic world).

Relationships in the sense of real membership as well as spiritual relations belong to **social capital**. This includes the idea of Dahrendorf's changing/improving social chances using "connexions" (*Ligaturen*). Insofar the access to university can be interpreted as a gain of social capital. The choice of subject to study can be interpreted likewise.

The finances as well as property and other money like donations are **economic capital**. The analyses belong to this idem, investigating whether access to university (through social background), course of study (own employment), and further future (chances in the job market) depend on economic capital.

On the whole one can enter with this theory into the mechanism of social reproduction or its dissolution respectively, as well as into future expectations or demands of status. Several items can be examined by including students' social background: access to university, choice of subject, financing of study and students' jobs, as well as time or study abroad. Moreover it is possible to discuss the demands of importance and power connected to a study with regard to the occupation of formal power and rules (in business, in the state) or informal power of influence or interpretation (in the media, in education).

2. Middle range theories

More or less elaborated theories have been used for more important areas, because they allow a more explicit grasp and interpretation of the taken fields of interest than general theories. These areas are the following: students' perception of the university environment and their behaviour, quality of teaching and study, choice of job, and transition to the labour market.

2.1. Perception of environment and coping of students

The registration of the environment at the university and at the *Fachhochschule* (technical college of higher education, university of applied sciences) as seen by students, and their way of reacting to it, is a very central field of the student survey. This is done in order to examine how students find their way about in the university environment, and cope with specific different demands and facts there. The coping with these "demands" (adaptation or coping) is seen as a result of "preferences" and "resources" on the side of students. This refers by no means not only to tests and examinations, but also to the social climate in social intercourse, relations, and contacts (social climate).

Nine different theoretical levels are used in order to represent the registration of environment adequately. They can all be applied to each other by questions, using three main areas: perceptions and experiences, strategies and conduct, recourse and reactions.

1. Expectations regarding study and university (scientific qualification, job chances, personal development, social influence)
2. Experiences at university and during study (rules, support, relation to jobs and research)
3. Reception and criticism of demands (achievements, responsibility, independence)
4. Perception of social climate, anonymity and consultation (among students, by teachers)
5. Strategies of study (regarding job qualification and personal development)
6. Behaviour during study (taking of courses, learning by doing/investigation, memberships, duration of study)
7. Resources to cope with study (information, intelligence, contacts, social background)
8. Difficulties and burden during study (demands, relationships, orientation, finances, expectations for the future) and the problem of anomie
9. Desires regarding better conditions of study (relation to jobs and research, cooperation, consultation)

On this ground it is possible to establish types of students' orientations and strategies of behaviour, regarding for example a rapid, intensive, and successful study. Furthermore it is possible to explain whether and how the different levels taken into account are linked together consistently. Or there may be tension and dilemmas, for example regarding the use of different strategies of study for personal development or job expectations.

Finally it is possible to write down whether expectations are realized or disappointed, and intended strategies are indeed followed or not, and on what does it depend (i.e. intensity and duration of study, time of study abroad, political participation at the university).

2.2. Choice of job and orientation at the job market

The role of a student is time limited, and implies a professional job and position continuously afterwards. This idea is captured in the concept of "professionalism" (or "towards professionalism"), meaning a job on a scientific basis in an autonomous form. Nevertheless one can pose the question whether the "social privilege" of graduates is still present, and whether they can maintain their professional claims.

To find out about this six perspectives are included in the questionnaire:

1. job values and claims on the job, regarding six dimensions: intrinsic autonomy, social values, financial aspects, leadership and responsibility, science, leisure time orientation
2. fields of activity wanted in the job, as in public service, in commerce or as a free-lancer, including especially an academic profession (young professionals in science)
3. job expectations and chances at the job market, individually and generally for graduates, as well as the burden connected to that, furthermore especially: chances for women
4. student's strategies to improve their own job expectations, regarding its projected benefit and its realization during study
5. intended reactions to problems on the job market, the flexibility of students regarding loss of status and burden in the job ranging in the centre of attention
6. wishes and demands regarding consultation and support on the way to the job market, especially if intending to become a free-lancer or to set up a business

These are anticipations which are all recorded with regard to their importance and probability.

By the way they can be related to indicators of general social conceptions, i.e. with regard to the function of competition, the importance of technology or the dimension of social inequality and openness (chances to rise in the job).

On the one hand it is of interest here to know to what extend processes of accommodation to another job situation take place, and on what elements they depend. These processes may be for instance to accept a non-professional job, to give up the job identity in relation to the perception of evil job chances, and the importance of material revenues.

On the other hand it is of equal interest, in which way the uncertain job perspectives influence the choice of subjects, the way of study, and the social-political orientation of students, and how these differ in several groups of students. It is assumed that irritations and uncertainties with regard to the job market affect students differently, depending of social background and gender leading to a restriction of aspirations and demands.

3. Pragmatic concepts and practical indicators

In a concept of a survey, dealing not only with scientific research regarding students' lives, but also with the more pragmatic issue of university politics and development, questions have to be added and concepts taken into account, which theoretical meaning as indicators remain open to begin with.

These questions, indicators, practical conclusions and advices belong to four fields of interest:

3.1. Efficiency of study

- duration of studies, delay during studies and reasons for this
- tendency to fail completing the course of study or to change the subject
- rules for studies: range and obligation
- structure of exams and new forms of studies

3.2. Financing of study and students' employment

- dimension and extent of employment, proximity to the subject of study
- reasons for employment and consequences for the duration of study
- estimation for employment (burden, benefit)

3.3. Behaviour during studies

- change of university, study at a foreign university (on purpose as well)
- acquisition of further qualifications (i.e. foreign languages, computer knowledge)
- use of counselling service and appraisal (course guidance and counselling service for students at the university, employment office)

3.4. Placing of graduates/transition to the labour market

- job expectations (general, personal) in different areas
- transition to the labour market and subsequent areas of work
- information about the labour market and job consultation

The integration of questions referring to new and actual topics belongs to this field of pragmatic questions for political information:

- use of new learning/teaching technologies
- students' opinions concerning new concepts of development at universities (final examinations, exams, cooperation) and their readiness to engage themselves in it
- the readiness of students to become a free-lancer or set up a business and the presuppositions as well as the desired support they ask for that

But connections to partial or general theories will be possible with all these questions, items and indicators, if an interpretation beyond the choice of the actual data is desired: i.e. duration of studies in relation to resources of economic, social and cultural capital. Another important question is the international mobility and the reasons of realization or renunciation. To get valid and useful information it is necessary to have a theoretical background for interpretation and understanding.

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(Editing of the English text: Birgitta Godt)