

Contribution to the Bologna-Conference of DSW (Deutsches Studentenwerk)
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The Bachelor Generation in Germany: Survey of Students' Needs and Expectations

1 The cultural dimension and the German Student Survey

If we want to know how the “Student Affairs & Services” (SAS) gain an impact on students, their well-being, their success and development, we need reliable and systematic information about students – we all agree here. In a first step this is information about their financial situation and loans, their accommodation and nourishment, being the “social dimension”. In addition, however, we need information about students' expectations, needs and motives, their orientations, values and wishes as well – this we call the “cultural dimension” of studying.

Remembering the discussion about missing reliable data, I have to say: we are in the fortunate position in Germany to be able to say something about both dimensions with quite a firm empirical basis of data sets. We not only have the traditional “Social Survey of the Studentenwerke” covering the social dimension already since 1951, but the German Students Survey as well. This exists since 1982. I am responsible for that and will rely on its data in my contribution. Both are huge projects and are being financed by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) which knows – in the meantime – that both enquiries are worthwhile and important.

This large inventory started thirty years ago, and up to now eleven enquiries are available. This is quite a long time-series for observing developments and trends. At every enquiry about 9.000 students of universities all over Germany took part which is rather a representative sample of German students.

With every enquiry we gather nearly 600 bits of information on seven general problems: on **efficiency** and **study quality**, on social **integration and socialisation** of values and concepts, on **qualification** of students and the general educational outcome, on **social selection** and **future placement** in the world of labour. These data show us the wishes and expectations of students.

Regularly we write and publish a general report about the study situation and students' orientation. In addition there are some special reports; the last one has been on “Bachelor students, their experiences in study and with teaching”. Important empirical results about the Bachelor students and the Bologna process are also available in a blue booklet in English (reference at the end of this contribution).

2 Profile of the Bachelor generation: some important traits

Indeed, the Bachelor generation of students in Germany shows some essentially new features. Cooperating with research groups in France, Spain, Ukraine, Lithuania, Switzerland or Austria, we know that the realisation of the Bologna process takes place quite differently in Europe. Furthermore, students have special profiles in some respects regarding their orientations, expectations or experiences, but they also show some common features of needs, motives or wishes.

I will point out some of these traits of German students. It seems essential to me to understand them, and it might be useful to compare them to those of the students in other nations.

1. **Going abroad.** Students express more interest in international aspects than in the last century; especially to go abroad in order to study there, to make an internship or to visit language courses. The value of these experiences are being estimated by them not only as being very useful for their personal development, but also for their professional chances and career. Therefore they urgently ask for more information, loans, and social as cultural support for going abroad.
2. **Practical experiences.** They put more importance on practical experiences. They mainly want to gain employability and qualifications, and they ask for more cooperation between universities and economy or industry. A great part of the students support the demand of an internship being obligatory in every field of study. Often it seems that to them the practical relevance is more important than scientific learning or research orientation.
3. **Efficiency and Success.** Present students are very eager to study efficiently, that means to gain very good results, to finish in a short study period, and to work hard for that. Good results in exams are very important to them, because they have to fight intensively for good chances at the labour market. – In order to reach this aim, they show an astonishing conformance with the official prescriptions, and more adaptation to the regulations than before. They want to meet their obligations.

The consequence of these three aims is: a short, efficient study, going abroad and also doing an internship are often not so easy to combine and to fulfil, when you want or you should finish your study after three years with an excellent exam. Consequently students have to confront contradictory aims, and they become uncertain what might be the right decision and way to go.

4. **Gratifications and security.** The need for security is therefore very widespread in this generation of students, not only regarding their present study-situation, but also their expectation of security in the future. They are not really interested in alternatives of working or living, to try them out themselves, to look for or to follow new ways of life. Their interest to get a secure place of employment is much higher now than some years ago; additionally students attach more value to gratifications.

5. **Fear of failure.** Despite of their efforts and their commitment to obligations, many students are in doubt whether they will achieve their study; they worry that they might fail. This constant worry is rather prevalent in the Bachelor generation. They show much more anxiety concerning their exams and have many problems to be well prepared. All this leads to more fear of failure, and the feeling to loose control about the biographical pathway and the professional future.
6. **Participation and Engagement:** It might be already known that students show less interest in politics and in participation than before. That is the case at universities with students being less involved in student unions and political activities. It's also the case in public life, that means students hesitate to be a member of a political party or to take part in social initiatives. The engagement in social affairs has diminished as well as the cultural interest and activities.
7. **General responsibility.** Bachelor students hesitate to build their own opinion or to develop broader concepts. On the contrary, they expect more support and services. They often have the mindset of consumers demanding well-prepared lessons and easily offerings which they later might evaluate, stating whether they were contend or not. When considering to engage themselves, they often ask about direct gratifications, for example the amount of ECTS points to get. They seem to be less idealistic, and they show greater absence of general responsibility.

3 Consequences for study situation and problems

These traits of Bachelor students in interaction with study conditions lead to constellations at our universities which are of relevance for the activities of the different services, or the offices for student affairs. We observe five such constellations, I suppose this is the case not only in Germany.

- (1) **More stress and difficulties:** Bachelor students are exposed to more stress, they feel more stress, and they generate more stress, because they want to be efficient and successful in a situation with too many and strict regulations, mountains of exams with far reaching sanctions, more concurrence and dependencies. Especially with the exams they have much more difficulties (not with their mere time-budget). The consequences – quite unexpectedly – are a higher number of drop-outs, reduced international mobility, and more visitors at psychiatric offices. Even students in Germany protested against these study conditions last year.
- (2) **More uncertainties:** Especially in the generation of Bachelor students we observe more irritations and uncertainties. They admit more difficulties to gain orientation in their field of subject and to plan their future studies. They miss orientation despite of all the regulations, and they miss transparency concerning the multitude of exams. They are also more uncertain about their future after studying, though they are quite optimistic at the moment. But they distrust the business cycles in the long run. Therefore all forms of counselling and of services, also of career services, are more requested by them and should be offered.

- (3) **Less research orientation.** Lessons and courses of studies offered are more standardized in order to gain employability after the first university degree as a Bachelor. That is consistent with the more practical orientation of students. On the other side the research orientation is widely lost. The open, active, creative, critical, autonomous learning, we call “research oriented learning”, has been geared down. In consequence the output is smaller: the functional-technical knowledge is quite well, but the professional qualification and the general competencies decline.
- (4) **Less activity and responsibility:** Often courses are offered which are too well prepared. Students are in consequence not motivated to discuss, to decide, to make proposals, to criticize, and to follow own ideas. These conditions enforce their avoidance of responsibility and mislead them into the role of a consumer. This seems to be a sweet seduction both for teachers as for students, but it does not foster autonomy and responsibility. It is an error to assume that students might learn these general competencies in special “qualification courses”, as offered by some universities. On the contrary: it has to be fundamental in all lessons and of studying from the first day of entrance to reach effectively and a profound result.
- (5) **Lack of social fairness:** Strict schedule of the Bachelor and the two cycles of Bachelor and Master, greater importance of experiences abroad and of internationality for the career, and in addition results in exams have major consequences for the social position of students – all this put together, we are in risk to produce more inequality between students of different social background. We observe less social fairness for the educational climbers at universities, concerning the contact to professors, the work as a tutor, the planning of a doctorate, the fellowship in a foundation for the most talented students. And we have found some hints that we might get a greater social selection after the Bachelor, when passing into a Master program.

The question of social fairness is directly connected with the different social chances to study abroad. Too often it depends on the social background of students, whether they plan or realize a study phase in another country. Though the barriers are not only financial deficits, they are very important. However, this topic is not only of interest because it belongs to the central focus of the Bologna process, but social differences depend on social and cultural factors as well.

These results confirm the “cultural dimension” to be established beside the social dimension (in the narrow sense). There is an urgent need, I am convinced, for this cultural dimension to be integrated into (the construction of) the European Higher Education Area as an open and productive area of exchange and prosperity for all.

4 Subject Differences and Model of Economy

It would be a misunderstanding to assume that there is no continuity of trends or no comparability to other degree programs. We have clearly more standardisation, especially in the Bachelor programs, and a decrease of variety. Nevertheless we find

great differences in the realisation of the Bachelor study, and further differences between fields of subjects.

It seems useful to add some results about these differences between the fields of subjects. To give a short summary: there is a big variety of successful and unsuccessful realisations of the Bologna process at our universities. There are the economists on the one side: they have been the first and the best; and the engineers on the other side: they have been the last, the most reluctant, and the students are mostly discontent with the realisation until now.

The success of economy in transforming their study structure has some reasons: this faculty is more consistent with the study model which is implemented by the Bologna-process. It fits to students who attach more importance on employability, want more standardization and show more interest in gratifications, less curiosity and research interests, more importance of practice, greater focus on material success.

I doubt, whether this, as to say, “economic model or culture of studying and teaching” should be the generalised model for the universities in Europe, but at the moment it seems to dominate the development. I would like therefore to recommend looking at the universal functions of studying, not only qualifying for employability, but also education for citizenship with a more ambitious and active study program. This universal model would be better adopted to the more scientific and experimental, curious and individual, and also to the more reflective and discussing students (to give for the moment a rough idea for further discussion). In my opinion the universal model of a democratic and social university education is more in accordance with the modern knowledge world, and in addition it would especially be more adapt to the function and task of Student Services.

5 Perspectives: Internationality, Citizenship and Social Fairness

Concerning further support of students, some special efforts are necessary to be done in the years before us. I want to mention three: international mobility, educational aim of citizenship and the principle of social fairness (as a necessary counterbalance to competition).

A main task is to promote **the international mobility** of students even during the Bachelor study, I think we all agree. It is especially important to develop international cooperation everywhere and to give to all students a realistic chance of international mobility. The support for going international is not installed already often enough. This means counselling, adjustment of workloads, special contracts, integration into the study, better funding by loans for going abroad.

Giving one example: Students Affairs & Services should bring together students of different national, cultural or social background, should facilitate exchange and mutual support. We really are in need of a “welcome culture”, and it is especially a fruitful task for the Student Services to develop this and to exchange programs and experiences.

It is necessary to see individual autonomy and **citizenship** as equally important educational goals as employability – students and society need all three elements. In consequence it is important to offer arrangements, activities, tasks to students where they can develop engagement and exercise responsibility. Every field of activity should be used, building up opinions and participating actively.

The Students Affairs & Services have many possibilities to encourage and support such cultural work, social engagement and political orientation of students – which ways they prefer, might be an interesting point of exchange and discussion. One way might be to give impulses for activities and to incorporate students into decisions and work of the Services.

Last not least we have to attend more to the **social fairness for all students** during the presence at university (not only looking to the access). We are in need of a broader culture of grants and loans, not only given by the state and the public sector, but also by the economy and the private sector, also for the possibility of going abroad or for special groups like the engineers – as students want it. Without these supports we will not reach equity as an important part of quality. There are a lot of social disadvantages for the students coming from lower classes or workers families. We have too many barriers for the educational climbers.

To reach more fairness, it seems indispensable to establish a **monitoring system with social and cultural indicators** in all countries at every university in Europe. We might call it an “observatory”, but it is very necessary not to neglect the indicators of the cultural dimension.

6 Need of General and Reliable Information

This leads to a special, really the last, point. We already have Euro-Student, covering the social dimension, a very useful effort, comparing the social and economic situation of students in 25 countries.

In addition, we need an international comparative investigation about the cultural dimension of studying. The German Student Survey and its instrument proved to be useful to offer empirical evidence for practical and political discussions and decisions in higher education, especially concerning the Bologna-process. The central topics here are international exchange, study conditions and outcomes or social equity. This instrument, or parts of it, have already been translated, adopted, used and tested in some other countries as in France, Spain, Ukraine and Lithuania, for example.

The results and comparisons encourage us to propose the development and establishment of an international comparable inventory about the cultural dimension at the European universities: we would like to call such an instrument and inventory the “International Student Survey in Europe” (abbreviated: ISSUE). - I know such an effort needs time, it takes perhaps some years. But it is worthwhile to start this process, and to incorporate not only indicators of the social into the planned observatory, but of the cultural dimension as well.

References

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Further information

Link: <http://uni-konstanz.de/ag-hochschulforschung>. (*German and English*).

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