

ESU – European Students' Convention 23 - Kopenhagen, 17. – 19. März

Keynote:

Bachelor Students and the Labour Market: Employability or Professionalism?

1 Introduction

Many thanks for Your friendly invitation to give a keynote about “Bachelor Students and the Labour Market: Employability or Professionalism?”

As I guess, why I got this honour, despite I am rather old, I think of our occupation with a great student survey since 30 years about the cultural dimension of studying (as important as the social dimension), with many reports and recommendations; or I think of our moderation of an international association about developments in higher education with colleagues of eleven countries in Europe, as France, Spain, Ukraina, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and so on; or I think of our intention to establish ISSUE, that means a coordinated International Survey of Students in Europe about topics like study quality and teaching, integration and participation, selectivity and equity, qualification and professionalism, democratic attitudes and citizenship. If You are interested google “Studierendensurvey” and You will find our homepage, if you click the British flag, you even get it all in English.

Enough advertising, let's go to answer the question: Employability or Professionalism? This is an important, but not an easy question. It means, to investigate the complex interrelation of education and labour.

I want to present four arguments and to explain them a little bit:

- (1) Employability is a nice promise, but it is a trap for the students.*
- (2) It is necessary to make a difference between employability and professionalism.*
- (3) Internships are useful, but they are not the best way to gain practical skills.*
- (4) The main responsibility for employability have the employers.*

2 The discovery of the gap between university and labour market

Let me start with an observation about the university; this short glance at history seems necessary, to understand the present occupation or preoccupation with employability. For a long time the gap between university and labour market had been quite unknown or ignored. Two developments made this gap visible.

In many countries we had an enormous expansion of the student number already in the seventies and eighties, a reaction to the growing demand for high qualified people. In the same time the labour market for graduates became worse, even engineers did not find an occupation. Because of this shock of unemployability of academics the universities get under pressure.

It was the industry, which discovered the concept of employability, unknown until then, created especially to explain why young engineers did not find a job in the beginning of the nineties. It was an effective strategy to give their responsibility back to universities and students. This concept was integrated in a general philosophy of neo-liberalism with students regarded as consumers. In establishing the European Higher Education Area and starting the Bologna-Process this concept even became dominant (*if we look in the documents of the annual meetings of the responsible ministries of the participating countries, like the communiqés of London or Louvain*).

The intention sounds quite good: to do more for the vocational preparation, to emphasize practical work, to care more about how applicable the learning content is into life, in short to do more for the “employability” of the Bachelors. This might be an honourable intention, but we cannot ignore, that the concept of “employability” is oriented at the labour market; therefore the signals of the labour market govern more and more the construction of study and the pathway of qualification. Finally, this concept of employability proves to be like a trap, in which students are caught.

3 Practical orientation and preparation for the job

In order to get and prove their “employability” students do a lot; they gather certificates, credit-points, learn foreign languages and further allowances; they continually chase it. But there is always a sense of not-enough left, when students think of the results of their university life.

In addition, the students are confronted with demands very complex and changing. There is an unmanageable amount of key qualifications, from team spirit to body language, from leadership ability to willingness to adapt oneself, from problem awareness to power of persuasion. The “important skills” for managers amount to 67, as

listed in an American dissertation (Ogbeide 2006); and those for engineers, we collect them some years ago, seem to be rather endless, I remember more than ninety.

The students evaluate the acquisition of subject knowledge as generally good – even in a high amount to their minds. But the aspired employability does not materialize, especially at the universities. The efforts of the students, to fulfil all the exigencies, finally turn out to be something like a “Fata Morgana”, a mirage: this is a special form of a seductive illusion, the students run after, but they will never catch.

Why is this so? The one-sided accentuation of applied usefulness of study as well as the dominating orientation at the labour market, only is producing more confusion and uncertainty, and is undermining the promise of better preparation for jobs and better chances to get an occupation. It only leads to more unclear demands and uncertainty for students, not at least because of incalculable economic developments and decisions. In addition, the conventional employment policy of companies does not much reward something new or special. This disaccord between own efforts and missing opportunities stresses students, many of them so much, that they started protest and demonstrations.

4 The need of differentiation Employability or Professionalism

This leads to the controversy discussion between “employability” and “professionalism”. If we deal with the interdependencies between studying and working life, it is necessary to make a differentiation:

1. One problem is the **qualification for a profession**: this means, to gain abilities and competences necessary for an occupation.
2. The other problem is the **opportunity to get a job**: that means, to get a stable and good working position after exams.

This differentiation seems necessary not to get confused or to make wrong decisions. This is the case, because the concept of employability is very unclear, changing and even with controversial elements. Such a concept is not useful for guiding activities, personal or political ones, they end up in misunderstandings and disappointments, general confusion and last but not least wrong responsibilities.

To make it clear: The universities and faculties are mainly responsible for the first task: to educate and to qualify students, that they might fulfil their professional obligations in a good manner. Economy and enterprises are mainly in charge of the second task: to offer adequate working places and to introduce students and graduates to working life (by internships and trainee programs). - In this duty they should cooper-

ate with the universities, there should be an exchange about tasks and exigencies, especially concerning all questions of further education and Life Long Learning.

We have to remind, that “professionalism” is more far-reaching than “employability”, demanding a scientific, research based formation on the grounds of autonomy and argumentation, combined with an orientation at public welfare and cultural participation. At the core of the professions are independency, quality, participation and responsibility. May be, some stakeholders are not so interested in these outcomes of university education?

If external instances (mainly industrial companies and industrial unions) fix the aims of university education and the conditions for their acceptance of graduates, students continually get the impression of not being qualified enough, even if they try to fulfill all these exigencies. Accordingly, this increases the pressure on students at the expense of cogitation and creativity. Therefore the “labour market” should not be too much of a counsellor regarding the choice of subject, the course of study and the professional qualification.

On the other hand, it would be an error, to forget or to neglect the problems of transition and of employability, because difficulties evoke some negative reactions of students: they can demotivate or irritate students (some may even quit the university). Therefore universities should have an interest to support and help students to prepare and to solve the transition period.

5 Suitability of practice during study: internship is not the best way

It is not necessary to discuss the need of practical experience – there is no doubt that it is useful. But we must discuss the forms and ways that are taken. *Different empirical investigations, our student survey as well as other studies about graduates, document it: practical examples and hint offered in lessons and exercises during studies are reflected even more positively in all aspects of qualifications and general competencies. Whereas internships do not add an additional benefit to this knowledge and these skills.*

If the professional education is the aim of the formation at university, than we will have to point to other forms of studying and practical experiences than internships, which are more effective and which should be primarily developed:

- Most important, the practical experiences in lessons or courses at university, also during special exercises,
- then the improvement of the style of teaching and of learning: it should be more active, communicative, with exchange and debates.

- Also: participation in research and in projects seems to be the best practice for students.

This is the part of the universities and of the teacher: to look for the practical suitability of study program and teaching, to enhance practical skills, key-qualifications and general competencies of the students.

Additionally, the universities should support students getting internships and offer services for the transition period. We can observe, that many of them started some efforts in establishing “offices or internships”, “career centre” or “international offices”.

6 The responsibility of economy: the part of the employers

But we must also look to the part of economy, that means, industry, business, organizations and administration, more exactly the employers. They have mainly the responsibility for the employability of the students. Therefore, I feel obliged to strengthen their part and duties, as they strengthen the part of universities and students. I mention seven points, very shortly, to demonstrate their responsibility:

- (1) **Money**: that’s the currency, which economy understands best. The support of students with more and better loans and grants, then the students have the opportunity to study more intensely and concentrated with better success – and in the consequence they will have a better employability.
- (2) **Interaction** with universities and students in the educational process by offering internships and trainee programs. Often the internships are not well prepared without any learning program or a good guidance.
- (3) **Support** of research, which means again: more money, especially for young researcher; but also giving more insights to the great part of research and development, may be during internship or other opportunities.
- (4) **Cooperation** with universities concerning further education and life long learning; in many countries industry is too reluctant, to invest more in the important task of further learning.
- (5) **Flexibility** in the forms of offered occupations and openness for new ideas of newcomers – the slogan “welcome the bachelors” is not enough, it is necessary to give better entrance and starting conditions for the newcomers.
- (6) **Creativity** in creating more opportunities for occupation and in developing new forms of positions (time-budget); more active efforts in this direction and also a better information policy are needed.

(7) **Acceptance** of the own responsibility for employment and therefore also for the employability of graduates.

It is not so easy to remind the industry, that they cannot demand flexibility from students when they themselves are rather inflexible to install new positions. Or to insist on their responsibility for the labour market, for example concerning the amount of students, who choose a technical subject to become engineer.

Nevertheless we must do it, and politicians, universities and also the students should do it. It is an astonishing habit of the leaders in industry, that all the others are responsible (and make errors) as politicians, university staff and students, when things go bad, but that the leaders in industry are responsible, when things go well. It is exactly the concept of “employability” which is very useful in this game.

7 Future Perspectives: principals for teaching and learning:

By the way, also “citizenship” is an important target for education at universities. It should have an equal importance as professionalism (or employability), and furthermore it has perhaps even more relevance for “practice” – that means: the work and life outside university and after studying.

Therefore, coming back to the university and its obligations, let me end my contribution with some hints to study conditions or principles, which offer the best preparation for later life, as citizen or as professional:

- (1) More active teaching and learning styles, for instance project studies, cooperative tasks and more exercises in groups. Deeper Engagement and motivation; curiosity and the feeling for science have to be stimulated or reanimated.
- (2) Research is the base of studying and an area for practical usage: research-oriented learning and participation in the adventure of research (general or applied) are the basic and best conditions.
- (3) Internationality is at the heart of higher education: there must be more exchange for all students (better loans, information and support); more students should go abroad, may be for a study phase, an internship or a language course.
- (4) Opportunities for students to think through something and to discuss it, to reflect something together, not the worst case, if it is controversial. More flexibility and differences in the study cycle, in the curriculum and in the lessons.
- (5) What we really need for the future of universities and students, if we sum it up, are individuality as well as participation, are in general and everywhere: more autonomy and more responsibility.

8 In spite of a summary: The essence in five sentences

Let me summarize the many words in five short sentences, which we should remind:

- (1) The concept of employability is too narrow, it is even dangerous, especially for the students.
- (2) Higher education must prepare for professionals, also if they are employees, not for a changing labour market.
- (3) An internship is a good experience, but better is good teaching: as in projects or through problem based and active learning.
- (4) Even more important is a reanimation of principles: as research based learning, internationality, participation, above all: autonomy and responsibility,
- (5) The responsibility for employability has the employers: they like to forget it, therefore we must always remind them and we have to point to their obligations.

I think, I presented enough observations, arguments and positions, and I hope, that they might be useful for our debate. Many thanks for your interest and patience.