

The case of practical experiences and internship: between professionalism and employability

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Die AG Hochschulforschung wirkt seit längerem bei der FREREF mit (Federation Regionale Européenne pour la Recherche en Education et Formation). Innerhalb dieser Organisation gibt es Netzwerke (Reseaux) und die Sommeruniversität mit Ateliers. Seit einem Jahr moderiert die AG das Reseau Uni 21, in deren Rahmen der Studierendensurvey bereits in zwei Regionen repliziert wurde: in Rhone-Alpes und in Katalonien. Dazu fanden Workshops statt (Villa Vigoni, Grenoble, Barcelona, Konstanz) und Publikationen liegen vor (vgl. News Nr. 16, Januar 2005).

Es liegt nahe, dass Vertreter des Reseau an der Sommeruniversität von FREREF mitwirken. Die letzte fand im September in Luxemburg statt. Im Atelier 4 wurde behandelt: **Transition from University to Profession and Labour Market**; dieses Atelier wird moderiert von Frau Prof. Ivana Padoan (Venetien, Italien) und Frau Prof. Monica Vlad (Constanza, Rumänien). Der im Rahmen dieses Ateliers präsentierte Bericht greift auf Befunde des Studierendensurveys zurück, um die Spannung zwischen „Professionalität“ und „Beschäftigungsbefähigung“ darzustellen, ein wichtiger Aspekt des Bologna-Prozesses.

26.3 The case of practical experience and internship: between professionalism and employability

The need of differentiation between professionalism and employability

If we discuss problems of transition from university to labour market it seems necessary to make a differentiation between two problems:

1. One problem is the **qualification for the job**: to gain abilities and competencies, to make a good job. And the question: How are they developed by university studying?
2. The other problem is the **chance for a job**, to get a stable and good working opportunity quickly after exam. And the question: Is the university obliged, to support the transition of the students to the labour market?

We should call the first problem "**professionalization**", the second "**employability**". The educational system, in our case the universities and the faculties, is responsible for the first task. The economy and the enterprises are in charge for the second task.

It is much too narrow to speak only about employability when we discuss the transition period, as it is often done nowadays. It is even a mistake, because it is not useful for many students (orienting them in the wrong direction) and in the long run it is also not useful for industry and economic development (because it is of disadvantage for innovations). The one-sided view is problematic; especially when we forget the main task of the educational institutions as the university, because of the concentration to employability: This is the qualification and the professionalization; that means to develop knowledge, capacities, competencies, attitudes, and orientations of students.

On the other hand it would be an error to forget the problems of transition and of employability, because difficulties lead to reactions of students. They can demotivate or irritate them (some students may even quit the university). Therefore the university should have an interest to support the transition of the students. For a long time the German universities denied their responsibility in this field; they left the students alone. But nowadays, beginning in the seventies with some private initiatives, they have developed different forms of support (integrated counselling, cooperation's, practices, job exchange, alumni's etc.).

Orientation about practice, evaluation and perspectives

Nevertheless we have to talk about both problems; but we have to do it in a appropriate relevance and in correct steps. I will try this with the **example of "practical experience"**, especially with the concept of "internship", some months outside the university in "real working life".

Concerning this connection between study and practice I propose to deal with three topics:

1. **Practice and reality:** The concepts of "practical experience" and their realization in the different regions and institutions (for example cooperation's, supports);
2. **Experience and evaluation:** The experiences with these offers of practice and the consequences for competencies and job chances (done by research);
3. **Perspectives and development:** The political advices and possible perspectives in this field, especially for the future in the European Area of Higher Education.

Even when we investigate the more special problem of "practical experiences" and of "internships" of the students, it is of great importance for the discussion about the "transition from study to working life" to differentiate again: we find quite different forms of practice and there are very different situations depending on the subject - and different connections to the labour market (for medicines, teachers, engineers or economists).

The discovery of the gap between university and labour market

Not so long ago, about forty years, the gap between university and labour market was discovered – before that time it was quite unknown or ignored by the universities. One problem was the gap between the preparation of the graduates and the demands and the requirements of the professions, especially discussed for teachers and medicines. This problem was named "Praxis-Schock" (practice shock), because the gap was evaluated as dramatic. The second problem was titled as a "Bildungskatastrophe" (educational catastrophe), the dramatic gap between the number of graduates and the need for academics at the labour market. But for the students it was a very positive gap, because in that time there were not enough young academics - and "employability" was no problem.

We can assume that this development was the result of some change in society. In that time the number of students expanded enormously, new universities were built in many regions and - important for our topic – a new type of "tertiary education" was founded: the "Fachhochschule" (now "Applied Universities"). They offer a shorter study (planned 3 years) and should gain a new cliental for upward mobility. They realized three important reforms:

- the teaching is more applied and adopted to labour,
- the study is more structured, shorter and effective,
- practice and internship became obligatory (practical experience).

Because of this solution outside traditional universities, the older and bigger institutions were resistant to change. Mostly because of the difficult labour market since the eighties, at first for teachers, then for graduates of other subjects, later even for the engineers in the nineties, universities began (rather slowly) to think about problems of transition and entrance to the labour market. Often private initiatives or younger assistants started new programmes which need some time to establish.

New Developments: labour experience, practical orientation and internship

One of the most impressive developments in German Higher Education is the growing importance of "Praxis": practical phases outside the institution beside study. The former promise that "autonomous, research-oriented studying" would be the best preparation for the working life seems to be no longer convincing.

The orientation and experience with “practical, professional life and application of theoretical knowledge” was realized at universities in three parts:

1. in the curricula and the lessons, with examples, hints etc., given by the way by the professors (with more or less talent and interest);
2. in special courses, named “exercises” or “projects”, the application was trained, especially in the natural sciences but also in medicine, sometimes in social sciences;
3. in special practical phases outside the university in institutions of administration, or business as internships.

All three forms have the aim to offer a better preparation for professional life and to broaden the chances at the labour market. A better preparation is proved by more and better competencies and by greater chances for getting a stable and good working place.

We can observe that nearly all students at the traditional universities as well as at the newer applied universities are very interested in practical experiences outside university. For more than 80% an internship seems necessary and should be obligatory. The students have the opinion that such practical experiences outside university are very useful for their personal development as well as for their chances to get a job. And they are normally very eager to realize practical experience and internships.

More and more institutions of higher education try to offer practical phases beside other supports for the transition as professional counselling, job markets, invitation of alumni’s. At present in about 70% of the subjects a practical phase is obligatory. But they differ much in time and in form, even in the integration to the course of study.

Investigations about practical orientation and internships

The interest in such practical phases and their outcome for the transition period as well as for the competencies is rather high in Germany. Some research groups investigate these problems and the usefulness of such practical experience. Mostly they are questioning and testing graduates of different subjects. Our research group is interested in the orientations, activities, experiences and expectations of students concerning the values of the intended profession, the entrance to the labour market and their internships.

We should remember that already in the traditional universities there have been practical orientations and exercises. If we want to investigate them, so that we might decide about the most fruitful and relevant forms of practice, it will be necessary to define five different forms:

1. **Orientations about the relevance for the job** given during the courses – as a bridge to the practical relevance embedded in theory and general knowledge.
2. **Practical didactic of teaching:** active involvement of the students; controversy discussions, presentation of results, working in groups, research orientation.
3. **Exercises and projects** as offered in some subjects, special arrangements for practical training for example in laboratories or special courses as in statistics.
4. **Work at university** as a tutor or a student assistant may be in a research project – a special experience – offered for example in so called “premium studies”.
5. **Internship outside the university** as a rather new form – a special phase of labour about some months in administration, industry or other form of work.

Two questions are important for the further development; they are not only mere questions of research, but they have also some relevance for the politics in the higher institutions and for the strategies of the students.

1. Which sort of “practice” during study is the most powerful for gaining more and better abilities and competencies (also called “soft skills”)?

2. Which forms of practical experience give better chances for a smooth and appropriate access to the labour market?

The crucial question is: Which of these arrangements lead to a better "practice relevance" of the study and a better preparation for professional life – and therefore for "employability"?

We like to present some of our results and of other research which proves or shows that practical experience outside the university is quite useful (for practical abilities). But a good practice oriented study is even better – and research oriented learning may be the best for gaining disciplinary abilities and general competencies (and even a better employability).

The discussion of practical orientations and experiences

It is therefore 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 – especially the need of a special practical phase. We have some hints that they do not help much to gain general competencies; but they help to get contacts and better chances at the labour market.

We want to point to two forms of "practical experiences" which may be even more important and should be primarily developed: First the practical experiences in lessons or courses at university (during special exercises). Secondly, following research results, it is important for universities to improve the style of learning to be more active, communicative and research oriented: Participation in research and in projects seems to be the best form of practice for students.

This leads to the controversy discussion between "employability" and "professionalism". The task of higher education is to improve professionalism (knowledge and ability, autonomy and responsibility) and it has in addition the obligation to support the students to get a good job. The "employability" is mainly the task of the economy and the enterprises – and the best information about their expectations of the graduates are the announcements in the newspapers (could be an interesting common research topic).

Future perspectives and developments of universities and studying

For the discussion about the future of universities and students we have to look at the new structure of studies with its opportunities and risks. Furthermore we must talk about the new principles governing more and more the politics and practices of universities.

In the **European Area of Higher Education** (under construction) the two-phase-level of studying is one of the main traits. Especially the introduction of the "Bachelor" poses many questions: It is possible to develop qualification and professionalism and reach something like "employability" for the absolvent's of this short track? In Germany professors as well as students have many doubts that the graduates of the first cycle (named Bachelors) will be well equipped and will have good and equal chances at the labour market. Even the economy and many enterprises are uncertain what to do with the "Bachelors" and how much money they should earn.

It is of crucial importance to find solutions for this problem. We have many questions: How to ensure good qualification and to guarantee good job chances for the students with the "Bachelor"? How can "internships" be added or integrated in this short and already packed study? How long should they take and how many different forms should be offered? It is the task of empirical research to give grounded information's to these questions.

Tino Bargel