

## **The Introduction of the Bachelor – intentions, support, questions: perspectives in Germany**

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**The Bachelor – changes in Performance and Quality of Studying? Empirical Evidence in International Comparison**

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Implementing Bologna in Germany is developing into a true “success story” As of 2009, we can look back on ten years of this unprecedented reform process. The Bologna Agreement of 1999 set forth that after the first qualifying degree, a second one and then doctoral studies shall follow. No other rules or specifications were laid down with regard to the duration or structure of study programmes, education systems or the names of degrees. All other structural guidelines in Germany are a product of *national* politics, meaning they were determined by the federal government in close cooperation with the Germany's 16 State governments. Moreover, in cooperation with the societal “stakeholders”, such as the participating institutions of higher education, students, employers, and employee representatives, the Bologna “label” developed into a comprehensive modernisation of study programmes and stands for internationally comparably university degrees. From the outset, the German institutions of higher education have viewed the study reforms from the Bologna Process as the strategic focus of their realignment efforts. They have made the goals of the process their own. What's more, they understand these goals as an opportunity to internationalise their study programmes in a common European Higher Education Area, and to introduce necessary reforms that have long been discussed in the national context. In Germany, the process has expanded from a reform for increasing international mobility to a comprehensive reform of study and teaching that will improve the quality of study programmes profoundly.

So, what has actually been achieved so far? German universities are involved in implementing the new, tiered study programmes. According to the actual statistical data of the German Rectors' Conference, German institutions of higher education offered over 10,400 Bachelor and Master Programmes during the recent Winter Semester. By now, more than 79 percent of all study programmes at German higher education institutions are on Bologna track. The universities have converted more than 76 percent of their entire, comprehensive study offerings (8,595). At the universities of applied sciences, the figure has already reached 96 percent (3,748).

And the new study programmes are popular among students, especially beginning students. While, in the meantime, nearly 43% of all students (or 868,276) are in a bachelor or master programme (Winter semester 2008/09), almost three quarters start to study in a tiered programme (73, 8%) and the tendency is growing. On the other side, graduation rate is relatively low at 20% because the majority of bachelor and master students have not yet reached final exams.

The implementation of the Bologna process, by comparison, has progressed a great deal in Germany. The universities have taken on major responsibility and are making enormous efforts in the implementation process; and that's no small task given their ongoing, structurally underfinanced teaching apparatus and without additional funding.

## **National higher education reform is becoming and will remain a continuous political task**

We currently have a great opportunity to prepare a generation of academically well educated university graduates for Germany, but we are also very close to wasting that chance. In 1999, the Ministers of Education from the federal and State governments wanted, among other things, renewed study programmes, better support and advisory services, quality assurance, fewer university drop-outs, and shorter study durations. The universities took on this sensible challenge, but study reform will not be able to work without additional personnel and financial resources. As of now, the study reform appears to be rigid, bureaucratic, and formalistic, as was concluded at the London Minister Conference in last May.

Bologna can inspire, but why don't the good arguments for the Bologna reforms count for the state-examinations? Up to 35 percent of all students in Germany are in these one-phase study programmes that cannot be changed by the universities alone. Only a few States have begun with the implementation to bachelor and master in teacher education, but with mixed results. For universities, this situation is difficult and slows down the development. The universities are working hard to implement reforms, but they also need partners who support them consistently in the fine-tuning of the different profiles of various types of universities and degrees. Enhanced cooperation with consultants from industry and business for example in the accreditation process has proved beneficial for both sides: business representatives receive easier access to detailed information about study programmes, expand their informal network, and can actively contribute to the design of quality assurance processes at universities. The Universities profit as well from the practical evaluative skills of the consultants from the business sector and get the chance to gear their new study programmes more consistently with the needs of the labour market and student

interests. In the long-term, universities will be able to use their autonomy and leverage in study programmes competitively for recruiting the best students, much more so than in the past. This process is not about fortifying a uniform BA-/MA structure, but rather about flexibility and the coexistence of 6, 7 and 8 semester Bachelor as well as 4, 3, and 2 semester master programmes.

## **Institutions of Higher Education have to strengthen the qualifications profiles and employability of their Bachelor and Master graduates**

“Bologna” also means dedication to curricula reform that is geared toward learning results and that requires qualitative changes in teaching. It seems to be taking a while to realize the change in perspective toward the students and toward the skills to be gained in studies. The universities and individual departments need to work more on the quality of teaching in the new bachelor and master study programmes, which are fundamentally linked with the quality of the graduates for various job opportunities. The profile of higher education must be from the outset knowledge based and research oriented. This makes it necessary that the university graduates gain, in addition to subject related academic qualifications, methodical and soft skills already upon completion of the first qualifying degree, the bachelor. Future employers will look for this in university graduates. The career success of the graduates in turn provides the best proof of Germany’s high competitiveness. That is why it is essential to have a quality culture of study and teaching that is concerned with the basic “employability” of university graduates. This is also an important issue for a number of groups: for companies, who rely on solid higher education training of their specialists and future leaders; for students, who depend on gaining key competences and skills to become employable and have career opportunities; for the universities themselves, whose reputation in the future will be determined by the quality of teaching at their institution. If the reform toward study programmes geared toward learning results is to succeed, then close cooperation between institutions of higher education and especially local and regional employers must be expanded. Employers have a duty to promote the acceptance of bachelor and master graduates in exchange for continuous information on the skills development of the university graduates. The profile of a university degree, one that makes graduates fit for the working world, should also include proof of skills acquisition and training, such as the Diploma Supplement for BA-Graduates. Skills can also be demonstrated through a broad, academic education, through awareness for labour market and working demands, or extra-curricular and interdisciplinary key qualifications (for example, internships with companies, thesis papers on relevant issues, business skills and knowledge of project management, experience abroad and foreign language skills). Other areas include soft skills (such as communication, team playing, flexibility, persistence) and academic personal development (authenticity, credibility, and character). Academic qualification is shown through a certain, theoretical approach

to systematic problem-solving that is not contained in the degrees and training programmes of vocational education (see discussion on the controversial proposal for a future “Bachelor professional”). Consequently, the university Bachelor degree does not pose competition for vocational training schools. Competent university graduates help companies by challenging old patterns of thought and habit and thus adjust them for the demands of a dynamic, international labour market. Innovative, non-consecutive master and or doctoral programmes at universities are attractive building blocks for continuing education and qualification of working individuals as well as opportunities for leadership training.

The employers are finally called on to offer attractive jobs, career and development perspectives for Bachelor and Master graduates and to intensify their cooperation with institutions of higher education, for example through experience transfer, personnel exchanges and common continuing education programmes.

Institutions of Higher Education and the Business sector must be committed together to quality assurance in studies and teaching

Quality assurance in studies and teaching is of central importance for the success of the study reforms. Rigorous quality criteria at universities will have sustainable influence on future competitiveness of the German university graduates, the companies they work for and the universities that educate them. Universities are the one who organize and carry out study programmes and they use external and internal tools for quality assurance. They have also voiced their expertise in the German Rectors' Conference's demands for “increased efforts for improving quality of teaching”. The Quality assurance systems must be designed in a sustainable way, throughout the entire universities, and become a leitmotif for the teaching system.

Students will only profit from higher teaching quality in the long-term once the necessary structures for quality assurance and further development are established. The goal here, as opposed to competition in research, is to strengthen teaching in the German university system on the whole which should promote excellence by international standard. At the same time, the goals, strategies and measures must accommodate for the diversity of subjects and their specific cultures and they must include other areas such as student advisory services or the Career services.

In addition to strengthening quality-promoting structures and the professionalism of instructors at universities, certain minimum political and financial conditions must be met for the implementation of high-quality and high-value teaching.

Conditions for teaching soft skills in courses of study must be improved

Skills-oriented, career qualifying study programmes entail the fostering of academic and research-oriented quality and personality profiles. However, these programmes cannot be truly implemented on a wide scale basis until the States in Germany provide sufficient funding for teaching and support between teachers and students

and flexible legal parameters. And in order to improve the student to teacher ratio and thus the support quality, then changes to the rules and regulations on capacity at universities must be made. This is also in the interest of companies who urgently need high-qualified graduates. Additionally, there is the need for modernised employment and wage agreement laws that allow for performance-based salary and more flexible teaching requirements. In the modern knowledge economy, good teaching is just as important as good research, and moreover, good teaching relies on good research. In a similar way, the success of the study reform must also be empirically grounded in regular surveys of students and graduates by the universities. In accordance with Bologna, study reform means increasing the quality of study. Skills-orientation and gaining career-relevant qualifications are part of the important goals that a “Bologna”-type of reform seeks to attain.

## **Bologna has galvanized universities' cooperation with employers**

Universities carry the main responsibility for providing their graduates with the knowledge and skills they need for their career path. They need and increasingly receive impulses from the German business sector, which has entered relevant, dynamic partnerships with the universities. Employer representatives have been in close dialogue with universities concerning the creation of new study programmes and improving employability. Especially smaller and medium sized companies in the surrounding region can provide valuable support and advice to universities, for example, with regard to the skills the company is looking for and what they expect a beginner should be able to do. By now, a large number of company representatives are serving as consultants to University councils and Accreditation agencies, supporting the development of “Career Services” centres, teaching courses at the universities, and offering students and teachers insights into business practice. For the universities, it is a productive experience, being able to exchange with employers about the quality profiles of the study programmes. If such dialogue reveals that, for instance, small and medium-sized companies are looking for more flexible generalists with a broad knowledge base, while large companies look more for specialists with inter-disciplinary experience, then universities have the possibility to increase the attractiveness of their tiered study programmes further and thus strengthen the quality profiles of their graduates. This also means however, that the business sector can also take on more responsibility, for example through more commitment via scholarships and stipends for students. To be sure, close cooperation between universities and companies is worth it for both sides: for the development of dual study programmes, the recognition of achievements in vocational training as university qualification, and the promotion of continuing education of qualified employees, for example in special study programmes.

## **Bologna requires a great deal of publicity and informative work**

Regardless of the fruitful cooperation between companies and universities, in Germany there is still considerable mistrust in many subjects towards the bachelor degree. Some questions in this regard are: What can somebody with a degree that took only three or four years actually do? Which career can he or she enter? Will we lose quality through the tiered study structure?

Not every career, though, requires a five-year university study programme and therefore more flexible study offerings are necessary. For a long time now, companies have been calling for younger graduates who can gain further qualifications in the business practice. The new bachelor degree allows for this possibility and graduates can enter the working world after a few years of study. In order to make this project successful and in order to remove prejudices, companies should become well acquainted with and informed on these study programmes. That way, they can also create suitable career options with corresponding qualification and skill requirements, career development opportunities and appropriate payment scales. Otherwise, the opportunity to make the bachelor into an excellent qualification with cross-subject skills is at risk of failing. In the competition for the best graduates, salaries in the future will not be paid according to type of degree, but rather individual aptitude and performance. The campaign by the Federal Union of German Employer Associations, "More Bachelors and Masters Welcome!", is a step in precisely the right direction. The graduates of accredited bachelor study programmes should bring with them the knowledge, methodical and personal skills needed to adjust to the tasks and need of various companies in a short amount of time. They are particularly suitable for smaller and medium sized companies with a high potential for development (for example as project assistant with cross-over skills in marketing, sales, controlling, research etc.). Structured, and quality, high-valued study programmes are a convincing model for more professional diversity. It is up to the employers, however, to guarantee necessary opportunities for further education and career perspectives. Companies should take advantage of the academic further education possibilities at universities in order to promote their highly qualified staff.

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