

Students Under Pressure. European Study Reforms and their Impact on Students' Practice.

Roland Bloch

Introduction

In the wake of structural changes promoted by the Bologna process, such as the general implementation of a two-tiered study system, a variety of regulative techniques have been adapted at the institutional level to regulate the practice of studying, such as generic descriptors, personal development planning, progress files etc. These techniques impose systems of documentation and assessment on the concrete practice of students, with the goal of efficiently managing this practice. However, contemporary study reforms are legitimized by a discourse that focusses on the individual student. Taking the employability concept as an example, this discourse claims to empower students by equipping them with key skills. Furthermore, employability normalizes the notion that coping with labor market demands is an individual responsibility. Instead of being subject to macropolitical planning by the state, problems in the relation between education and employment are now being individualized.

The practice of students is exposed to both regulative techniques and normative interventions. Following a distinction proposed by Feeley and Simon (1992), regulative techniques identify, classify and manage groups or categories, while normative demands are corrective and normalize patterns of individual behavior. From this perspective, students are part of two types of power relations: as objects of knowledge, students are categorized, measured, and ranked; as subjects, they face increasing demands for instrumental and competitive behavior. Yet discourse and practice are not conceptualized as being identical, but as dynamic power relations. Practical responses to normative and regulative claims may encompass for example assimilation, acquiescence, mastering, resistance.

In the first section, I present some findings from a discourse analysis of European study reforms with focus on key skills and employability as normalizing concepts, and assessment, descriptors and documentation as regulative techniques. The second section refers to the micro level on the empirical basis of problem-centered interviews (Witzel 2000) that I have conducted with German students.¹ I see these interviews as the students' accounts of their everyday practice and analyze them in relation to organization, motivation and control.

¹ In my dissertation I analyze two groups of students: one group is composed of graduate students in traditional study structures at German public universities, the other of Bachelor-/Masterstudents in reformed study structures at two German private Business Schools. In relation to each other, both groups represent extreme types (Kluge 1999: 88) so that the interviews can be expected to cover a broad range of practices. Here, I interpret only passages from interviews with students in traditional study structures. Interview questions address for example

Key skills and employability – normalizing uncertainty and individual responsibility

The concept of key skills

Key skills aim at mediating between education and employment. Central for shaping this relation is knowledge of the kind of qualifications supplied by education and of qualifications demanded by the labor market. As it turns out, there has been an ongoing discussion of key skills since the 1970s.

Prior to the conceptualization of key skills the relation between educational system and labor market was subject to macro-political planning. Interventions in the educational system, such as the expansion of the higher education system in the 1960s and 1970s, were based on the prognosis of future labor market demands. Yet, in the 1970s the inadequacy of such a macro-political perspective became apparent: Instead of forecasting qualification trends, prognoses of labor market demands are inherently conservative insofar as they highlight only presently observable trends. Furthermore, demand prognoses reduce the educational system to a supply function for skilled labor (Nuthmann 1979: 13). In the 1970s, macropolitical prognoses saw a decline in demand for high skilled labor, predicted graduate unemployment and promoted an end to higher education expansion.

However, graduate unemployment continues to be comparatively low and the number of students in higher education has been increasing steadily. Apparently, the relation between education and employment is more complex than a linear conception between subject specific qualifications and professional requirements suggests. Graduates are able to find employment unrelated to their subject or create new employment opportunities. These flexibilities are now under scrutiny: How do graduates acquire the ability to act flexible? To what extent does higher education support such ‘flexible qualifications’? How can such qualifications be rendered visible and used for efficiently shaping the relation between education and employment?

The concept of key skills addresses these questions by shifting the analytical focus to the individual. As the generation of knowledge accelerates more and more and the validity of subject specific qualifications declines ever faster, the relation between education and employment appears to be profoundly uncertain. In such a constantly changing environment, certain patterns of individual behavior and dispositions are seen as *key*² for coping with ever

study motivation, fundamental experiences in the course of studies, perception of demands, ways of organizing, the role of extra-curricular activities, and personal goals.

² There are three meanings of ‘key’ that show the broad semantic range: (a) an instrument for unlocking doors or starting engines, (b) to make suitable to, (c) very important (Longman 1987: 574).

present uncertainties. Key skills highlight the individual ability to adapt to unpredictable developments and should qualify the individual for a variety of positions and functions as alternative options at the same time (Mertens 1974: 40).

With the concept of key skills the meaning of qualification extends to individual behavior. Personal and social patterns of behavior are normalized as key skills for employment. This means a fundamental expansion in the meaning of qualification: Individual behavior and not subject specific qualifications is seen as decisive for responding successfully to labor market demands. Such behavior may originate in personal relations and is now utilized for employment (Laur-Ernst 1996: 22), such as communication skills. Thus, key skills do not denote a catalogue of normative goals but rather codify desired individual behavior. In doing so, key skills integrate four dimensions of individual behavior (vgl. Bunk/Kaiser/Zedler 1991):

- a. self-directed action: ability to cope with change;
- b. self-directed learning: learning how to learn, autonomous information seeking and processing;
- c. individual dispositions: initiative, motivation, flexibility;
- d. social patterns of behavior: being cooperative, communicative, tolerant, team-oriented.

Key skills center around the idea of the self. Doing things individually instead of depending on assistance becomes a skill. In this sense, the main purpose of key skills is to empower students. Rather than relying on macropolitical control, responsibility for effectively shaping the relation between education and employment is transferred to the individual student. Empowerment normalizes the notion that individuals are not responsible for the existence of problems, but for their solution (Bröckling 2003). Problems are framed as problems of deficient self-control. Key skills then denote ways of handling problems, not solving problems. It is a compensatory model aimed at overcoming a sense of powerlessness but not at changing power relations (ibid.: 328). It follows that key skills not only presuppose this sense of powerlessness but also reproduce uncertainty insofar as only uncertainty necessitates the use of key skills.

Key Skills and Employability

Key skills and employability gain their prominence by assuming that education, and a high skilled workforce respectively, are key factors for global competition. Employability stresses the use of key skills for employment demands. In the reform discourse, the distinction

between key skills and employability is blurred: Some use the concepts interchangeably whereas others see key skills as only one feature of employability (Yorke 2004a).

In contrast to key skills, employability is a frequently cited goal in the documents of the Bologna Process, though not a central one (Anz 2004: 4).³ In higher education reform discourse, it has become a powerful catchword to legitimize the integration of economic purposes into higher education curricula. Moreover, employability can be seen as the goal of key skills: the better students develop their key skills, the more they are employable. Nevertheless, calls for enhancing the practical relevance of higher education curricula do not acknowledge that since the Middle Ages the university has produced mainly practitioners rather than lecturers and researchers (Lenhardt 2004: 24). As recent graduate surveys show students have been able to find employment, either related to their subject or elsewhere. Students are already employable but the driving force of the employability concept is that the ways how students become employable have been neglected. Employability normalizes certain patterns of behavior to fill this gap.

Employability is based on the perception of a fundamental change in the structure of labor. This change is seen in the dissolution of traditional occupational structures and their replacement by flexible labor relations (Voß 2001). Flexibility refers to the structure of labor (organization, workplace, working times, temporary jobs, salaries) as well as to the contents of labor. Thus, employability means the systematic development of strategies and skills for entering the labor market, keeping employment, or, if necessary, seeking or creating new employment opportunities (Blancke/Roth/Schmid 2000: 9). Like key skills, employability normalizes the notion finding employment is an individual responsibility. To take on this responsibility individuals should develop self-competences (Pongratz/Voß 2001):

- a. Self-control replaces external control in labor relations.
- b. Individual labor is utilized and advertised individually.
- c. Labor as well as everyday practice have to be managed efficiently.

In stressing the self as locus of control, employability is an empowering concept. The relation between education and employment may be fuzzy and recent labor market development may be discouraging – the employable person is conceived as being autonomous and self-responsible, not depending on a specific employer or job but being able to find employment

³ In the Bologna-Declaration, employability is mentioned twice. First, the adoption of a system easily and readable degree is seen to promote European citizens employability. Second, there is a reference to the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) which “emphasised the creation of the European area of higher education as a key way to promote citizens’ mobility and employability and the Continent’s overall development” (European Ministers of Education 1999: 1f).

elsewhere at any time (Blancke/Roth/Schmid 2000: 8).⁴ Thus, empowering students means emphasizing self-organization, self-motivation, and self-control. Key skills are the ‘toolkit’ for empowered students.

Since employability focuses on the individual student, “the curricular process may facilitate the development of prerequisites appropriate to employment, but does not guarantee it. ...Employability derives from the ways in which the student learns from his or her experiences” (Yorke 2004a: 6). Consequentially, the following definition is put forth

“Employability is taken as a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (ibid.: 7).

At the heart of the concept is a probabilistic claim: employability increases the chances for employment, but the individual effort is decisive; therefore, employability is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for employment. While past critiques feared that the educational system would be reduced to its supply function for the labor market, this vision is now being radicalized: “What higher education can reasonably supply [is] a graduate prepared... to learn what the employer wants, and to perform accordingly” (ibid.: 9).

Regulative techniques – descriptors, assessment, documentation

Employability and key skills connect with a variety of regulative techniques that aim at the micro level. Those techniques shape the practice of students as they impose systems of documentation and assessment to which students are supposed to comply. Yet regulative techniques do not determine the practice of students. They have material consequences, for example exams, deadlines, course requirements, to which there can be a variety of practical reactions. These material consequences of regulative techniques (in contrast to normative demands) are well known: “Students can escape bad teaching, but they can’t avoid bad assessment” (Dearing 1997: 137). From this perspective, regulative techniques may be preferred by reformers since they have visible and material effects that may facilitate producing evidence for success. Accordingly, implementing the “skills agenda” (Fallows/Steven 2000b) means using instruments of quality assurance. Regulative techniques aim at identifying, assessing and documenting key skills.

„In the model’s [of key skills, r.b.] simplest form, the term ‘skill’ appears to be used to *refer to* (denote) some purported tool-like entity possessed by an individual, which is *used* in carrying out performances of particular kinds. Thus someone *has* and *uses* the skill of problem solving to attempt to solve problems; one *uses* oral communication skills in conducting a business conversa-

⁴ Employability involves adaptability and flexibility: “The choice of occupation is, for many graduates, likely to be constrained. They may have to accept that their first choice of post is not realistic in the prevailing circumstances, and aim instead for another option that calls on the skills etc. they have developed” (Yorke 2004a: 7)

tion.... Of course, such entities are not immediately visible.... Their existence (*in the individual*) is *inferred* from what the individual *does*; skills are thus viewed as *instrumentally causative* of performance, the use of a skill *results in* some desired or required performance. The goal then becomes one of identifying what the main skills ('tools') are that are used in the work undertaken by graduates, then developing methods by which students can *acquire* or *develop* them (skills development) and demonstrate *possession* of them (assessment)" (Holmes 2000: 202).

The most important task is to define a set of generic descriptors. However, there is no consensus on a definite set of key skills and no universally accepted terminology in higher education discourse (Barrie 2006; Bürger/Teichler 2004; Fallows/Steven 2000b).⁵ Correspondingly, there is considerable variation in the way key skills are understood and conceptualized by academics (Barrie 2006).

Especially universities in the UK⁶ and Australia⁷ have gained some experience with the skills agenda. At the outset universities have to engage in rigorous information seeking. Usually, employers and graduates are surveyed in order to shed light on skills required for employment.⁸ Another technique for gathering information is skills mapping. The curriculum is reviewed to render already existing skills visible and to identify "skills gaps" (Fallows/Steven 2000a: 26). In most cases, a list of key skills is compiled that may also refer to a National Qualifications Framework if existent. Further systematization involves setting a hierarchy of skills, defining levels of achievement, and linking skills to the degree structure. The so-called Dublin descriptors (Joint Quality Initiative 2004), for instance, define qualifications that signify completion of short, first, second, and third cycle studies in higher education with the

⁵ Fallows/Steven (2000b: 8f) identified a range of meanings for skill in the debate: "skills necessary for employment and for a life as a responsible citizen", "transferable skills", "key skills", "common skills", "core skills", "communication skills", "information management skills", "skills in using modern communication and information technologies", "people skills", "personal skills" and "citizenship skills". Note also the American term "survival skills".

⁶ The UK government began to support skills initiatives in the 1990s, for instance with the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) program. Initially, the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, a.k.a. as Dearing-Report, established the notion that "learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs and include the development of general skills, widely valued in employment" (Dearing 1997: 130).

⁷ In Australia, key skills have not been supported by central public policy initiatives. Moreover, so far no National Qualifications Framework has been introduced which mirrors the initial Australian understanding that the academic community has to agree on key skills. Nonetheless, "the current government has also foreshadowed calls in future quality assurance exercises for evidence that universities are actually achieving these claimed graduate outcomes" (Barrie 2006: 216).

⁸ Whereas Teichler (2000) supports the general use graduate surveys, Holmes questions whether surveys are methodologically appropriate for compiling key skills: „In many cases, it seems that lists have been drawn up by select groups of staff engaging in nothing more rigorous than a form of brainstorming. Whilst such groups may gain a sense of achievement, the conceptual validity of their products must surely be rated as low. Where it is claimed that 'research' has been undertaken, this usually involves nothing more systematic than surveying a sample of employers (or students, or staff, or some combination of these) with a predetermined list of purported skills" (Holmes 2000: 205).

purpose of providing “a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications” (European Ministers of Education 2003: 4) for the European Higher Education Area.⁹

It does not matter whether lists of key skills are compiled in bottom-up or top-down processes; the outcome has to be a set of generic descriptors. Once such a set has been catalogized, efficient skills provision and development has to be ensured in the curriculum. Key skills are spread over the curriculum, either embedded or through extra modules. The curriculum is revised in order to provide for all skills. Skills become a regular part of the curriculum and their existence is verified by course descriptions, transcripts and assessment. Some universities establish special centers for key skills or use career services for the provision of key skills. Others embed skills in the curriculum, either by simply adding skills to their course outcomes or by revising learning processes.

Yet regardless of whether skills provision is embedded or additive, “skills development is now brought to the attention of students whenever possible” (Fallows/Steven 2000a: 27). This does not take the form of persuasion.¹⁰ Rather, a variety of techniques are introduced that seek to regulate individual performance. Since the purpose of key skills and employability is to empower students, individual progress in self-organization, self-motivation, and self-control has to be monitored. Generally, in order to manage skills development efficiently regulative techniques aim at enhancing self-assessment. In 1997, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education recommended the use of so-called progress files in the context of skills development. These files should consist of two elements: “a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies; [and] a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development” (Dearing 1997: 141). Progress files should be implemented by UK higher education institutions by 2005/06. The QAA’s “Guidelines for HE Progress Files” specify progress files as containing a transcript, personal records of learning and achievement and involving a process termed “Personal Development Planning” (PDP):

“Personal Development Planning is a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development” (QAA 2001: [28]).

PDP regulates the self-assessment of students. If mandatory every student will be required to engage in reflective practice by articulating personal goals, initiating learning processes,

⁹ National Qualifications Frameworks are conceptualized with regard to the Dublin Descriptors and the outcomes of the Tuning Project. Some European higher education systems already possess such a framework, in other systems it is being developed, for example in Germany (cf. KMK 2005).

¹⁰ “Students do not participate in such processes for altruistic reasons: they have to perceive the investment they make will be valued” (QAA 2001: [47]).

evaluating and recording achievements.¹¹ Macropolitical planning has been transformed into an individual responsibility for self-monitoring and self-assessment. PDP is expected to lead to “enhanced self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses and directions for change ... [and to be a] record of learning experiences and achievement, personal reflections and plans for self-improvement” (QAA 2001: [32]). Students maintain their progress files and are responsible for the authenticity of information. Personal tutors, career advisors or work place mentors “support (and challenge) the student through the PDP process” (QAA 2001: [48]). Progress files may be graded to ensure their use by students.¹²

While the concepts of key skills and employability seek to empower students by normalizing individual responsibility, regulative techniques try to manage these empowerment processes. This is done by categorizing, measuring and ranking students’ self-concepts, based on data from the students’ self-surveying. Through assessment techniques key skills materialize in the everyday practice of students, and continuous monitoring and improvement become an imperative.¹³ Yet practical reactions vary.

Reforms and the everyday practice of students – organization, motivation, control

There are specific ways in which students appropriate (*aneignen*) (Lüdtke 1994: 72) demands and regulations. The analysis of the interviews follows the perspective that experience and action are more than just texts – there are experiences that can not be reduced to language (ibid. 1991: 17). The interviews account for these concrete experiences of students, and provide the data for an analysis of the micro-level where the impact of study reforms is felt. Here, the everyday practice of students is analyzed in relation to self-organization, self-control and self-motivation that key skills and employability seek to support. Although these students¹⁴

¹¹ “The primary objective for personal development planning is to improve the capacity of individuals to understand what and how they are learning and to review, plan and take responsibility for their own learning. It is intended to help students [to] become more effective, independent and confident self-directed learners; understand how they are learning and relate their learning to a wider context; improve their general skills for study and career management; articulate their personal goals and evaluate progress towards their achievement; and encourage a positive attitude to learning throughout life” (QAA 2001: [29]).

¹² Some universities report negative experiences with the implementation of Progress Files and PDP. For instance, at the University of Glamorgan implementation was followed by student apathy since “there was little attempt to introduce any element of the reflective process into assessment criteria, so that it came to be seen by students as something to be viewed in isolation that had little relevance to their everyday studies” (Varnava/James 2005). The grading of self assessment is also proposed in the context of portfolio approaches (Richter 2004) that are more popular in the German discussion.

¹³ „Students should not be expected to achieve all skills at the same level but be encouraged to be proactive in improving those skills that may enhance their academic and extracurricular profile” (Bloy/Williams 2000: 162).

¹⁴ The interviews were conducted in 2005. In this paper findings from the interviews with Anne D. (at that time aged 26, 10th semester, diploma studies in Political Science, University of Leipzig), Anne K. (24, 11th semester, diploma studies in Social Sciences, Humboldt University Berlin), Anne M. (26, 12th semester, Magister studies, University of Leipzig) and Melanie H. (24, 10th semester, Magister studies, University of Leipzig) are included in the analysis.

have not been subjected to study reforms yet, they have had ‘empowering experiences’ in their everyday practice. On this basis some conclusions are drawn concerning the impact of study reforms. Since problem-centered interviews are a qualitative methodology their analysis does not lead to universal conclusions, such as being valid for all German students. Instead, the interviews provide data on the qualitative range of practices at the micro-level.

Organization

Generally, traditional study structures at German public universities, especially in the liberal arts, allow for the individual organization of studies. There are general course requirements that have to be completed in a certain time span but students are not assessed in all courses and grades for coursework are usually not included in the final grading. In turn, lack of requirements necessitates self-organization that the interviewees did not feel prepared for:

“You study in an impressionist way and take what interests you, but you think the thread [*roter Faden*] will be given to you by somebody else. Until you understand at some point that you yourself have to knot the thread. And I have not understood this for a long time. I thought at some point comes the ‘I see!’ effect. Well, the first step were of course the intermediate exams because that had been the first time that I stepped out of anonymity. ...Then you also begin to take responsibility. It is really the case – which is a silly thing – that exams force you to reassure yourself what exactly you are doing and why you are doing it” (Anne M.).

For Anne M. the lack of clear organization and curricular goals leads to the insight that she herself is responsible for her studies. Moreover, the intermediate exams appear as the first time she felt challenged in the course of her studies; a view that is also supported by the other interviewees. The students did not feel prepared for these exams, especially for finding topics individually, yet mastering these exams is for them a watershed in their study experiences. In light of these findings, there are empowering experiences that happen precisely because of the lack of guidance. It is rather doubtful whether such experiences can also happen in the opposite situation when continuous self-assessment is compulsory. Furthermore, student empowerment is also directed against regulations and requirements:

“At the beginning there are lot of required courses and certificates [*Scheine*]. ...And as soon as this was gone and I did not have to take specific courses to acquire certificates, it became also really enjoyable. So there it stopped that I had to do things I didn’t want to do. Meanwhile, I had also learned to have certificates approved for areas of study to which they were not related officially. So at that point the real fun started” (Anne D.).

Anne D. sounds pretty much like an empowered student who has reached a level of self-organization that allows for a self-constructed curriculum. Yet to what extent is the experience of breaking or least manipulating rules connected with this development? There appears to be an antagonistic opposition between self organization and expansive regulation. Anne K. accounts for her ongoing struggles with university bureaucracies by stating that “what you

learn absolutely is to organize yourself – against all the resistance.” She literally had to fight against the university bureaucracy to change her subjects and the university, and to be allowed to study a year in Spain. That Anne K. succeeded eventually turns out to be contributing to her skills development, as some findings by Yorke on employability in the undergraduate curriculum suggest: “One student had had to press the institutions’s career service very hard in order to obtain needed help with the construction of her curriculum vitae:

Interviewer: Did you have to go to them or was it optional?

Graduate: Yes I had to go to them; yes they didn’t come to me.

Interviewer: So you were motivated then?

Graduate: Yes, I pestered them” (Yorke 2004b: 417).

It is a cynical argument if overcoming flaws in student support is seen to contribute to skills development. Nevertheless, even the students attribute such a Darwinist meaning to their studies. As Anne D. put it: “In the end, it leads to key skills when I learn how to come through.” Is it not the belief that if skills provision runs smoothly *then* students will acquire key skills? It would run counter to declared study reform purposes to argue that insufficient student support and study conditions increase opportunities for skills development; this would mean admitting that the current state of study conditions is fundamentally deficient while at the same time shedding a positive light on these deficiencies since they lead to desired outcomes.

However, at least at German universities students indeed have to cope with deficient study conditions and a lack of support. As the students progress in their studies they adopt routines:

“Then you always had the first week when you looked around if my expectations are met or not. Now this is a luxurious description. The less luxurious description is: Do I get a seat in there or not? Or is it so crowded that it is likely that I won’t have any fair chance to participate? Or the seminar is cancelled. So in the first week it was always something like an orientation week and the courses I wanted to take began to crystallize so that after approximately two weeks I had a fixed plan. And I stuck to this plan. It was not the case that I would not show up for class all the time” (Anne M.).

To sum up, there are students who are empowered by the lack of curricular organization. Although they acknowledge this lack it is difficult to conceive how increased regulative efforts could lead to similar empowering experiences. Moreover, even skills advocates see overcoming resistances at university as contributing to skills development which leads to the paradox that both systematic skills provision as well as the absence of such techniques lead to skills development. Facing the study conditions at German universities students develop routines to get along with ever present deficiencies. But developing routines does not necessarily mean developing skills.

Motivation

At the time the interviewees entered higher education they were pretty unsure about their motivation (“Not a conscious decision, simply the feeling that right now the university is for me the place to be” [Anne M.]). But *that* they would be studying had been beyond question for them. Nonetheless, the level of self-organization analyzed above needs more specified sources of motivation. Generally, the interviewees see the lack of standards as challenging them. Therefore, “in principle, you are not challenged really, actually you challenge yourself” (Melanie H.). To motivate oneself becomes *the* central challenge:

R.B.: “How did you deal with demands if there were no clear standards?”

Anne K.: “Well, I then tend to challenge myself autonomously. So then I always think ‘Yes, I have to try harder, I have to try harder. It ain’t enough yet’. I mean on the one hand, this is certainly good because the stress factor really makes you doing many things. But on the other hand, it’s totally stressful. That is certain. And I mean, motivating yourself all the time can also frustrate you. If you don’t get any feedback.”

Self-motivation is ambivalent. For Anne K., it is a good thing to be independent and to be able to push herself. But the interviewees all state a general lack of standards and feedback that would appreciate their efforts. Curiously, it is again the lack of regulations that supports the development of self-motivation. If regulative techniques such as PDP would allow for flexible use, i.e. students would decide when they need self-assessment and feedback, they might fill the perceived gap between effort and appreciation. Yet PDP presupposes unambiguous personal goals and offers some techniques for achieving these goals. As a consequence it oversees that goal setting often involves environmental influences, for instance peer group pressure:

“But I have the feeling, maybe in Berlin there is a raised consciousness for it because there are more opportunities here for internships and things like that, jobbing, outside the university also. And because you notice people doing this and that there is always the feeling ‘I must do this, too. I must do this, too’” (Anne K.).

For Anne K. the experience of peer group pressure may not be negative (putting her under pressure) but stimulating (boundless opportunities). The point is that in this context goal setting involves interactions with peers and is not a secluded process only accompanied by a tutor. The importance of peer group pressure is supported by Pascarella and Terenzini who analyzed the body of quantitative research on how college affects students: “The most consistent college environmental impact on career choice is *progressive conformity*, where choices are influenced in the direction of the dominant peer groups” (Pascarella/Terenzini 2005: 599). Progressive conformity draws the attention to the complexity of goal setting processes. In the everyday practice of students, a broad range of priorities exists and some goals are far away from curricular demands. Such priorities reach from further qualification efforts (for example

internships) over political engagement and community services to private concerns. Especially the latter are almost neglected by research on students. But in some instances private matters may become first priority. One example is the so-called 'distance relationship' (*Fernbeziehung*) where one partner lives in another town or even in another country. In any case, it poses a challenge to manage such a relationship. Moreover, the boundaries between studying, extra-curricular activities and private life are often blurred:

R.B.: "So how did you deal with your civil engagement and activities in relation to your private life? Were you able integrate all this without problems or were there also conflicts? With your private interests and your leisure time..."

Anne M.: "That was my leisure time. No, no, but that was, well it worked out pretty well. I have not, there were simply smooth transitions. Pretty strong, for example as I met my boyfriend in the context of this civil engagement. And it was evident in the first years that when I work I will be seeing him. And when I study in Leipzig I won't see him. So those were sometimes connections that were very pleasant."

The intermingling of contexts that all interviewees report contests the meaning of personal goals as it is defined by PDP and other self-assessment techniques. Is the goal of moving together a goal that can be reflected in PDP? Is it possible to apply key skills such as time management to shape distance relationships? It is rather doubtful that assessment and related techniques are suited for private interests. But the importance of such goals in the everyday practices of students can not be underestimated, for instance if moving together in another town has been a constant topic for years and has had a continuous impact on motivation and organization. Similarly, it is hard to imagine how PDP could be appropriate for assessing political activities, such as being active in an anti-fascist group or engaging in student politics that are critical university policies.

All in all, students are under pressure in their freedom to define their personal goals. PDP imposes classifications on previously self-determined goals – with the goal of empowering students. Although students may have already developed key skills or may develop them in alternative settings, regulative techniques follow a stimulus-response model of education (Blass 1999: 243) that presupposes a skills gap to be closed systematically. In light of the presented interview passages skills-related learning processes can be perceived to go beyond the university and the curriculum. Indeed, this is also acknowledged by advocates of curricular skills development: "Some achievements may result from engagement in co-curricular activities, such as placements, and some from activities that lie well beyond the curriculum's reach, such as part-time casual employment"(Yorke 2004b: 422).

Control

Key skills aim at enhancing self-control. In traditional study structures at German universities students are assessed comprehensively twice in the course of their studies with the intermediate and the final exams. In the meantime, they have to control themselves in order to progress. Students are required to write papers but they decide at what time, in which course and on what topic. During most semesters students themselves determine the scope of their studies:

„So there were intense semesters and less intense semesters. I have always tried, I have never quit completely in the middle of a semester. I have always tried to fulfill at least the formalities and to show up and to always attend the seminars, but I have put less effort in it” (Anne M.).

There is a general formal scheme that requires Anne M. to choose some courses but defining the scope (number of courses, frequency of attendance) and intensity (preparing for class, participate in seminar discussions, writing papers) is up to her. Self-controlling for scope and intensity may work out individually. Another point is whether other students are capable of self-control:

“Somebody does a presentation. He is allowed to talk crap for twenty minutes. Then the lecturer speaks for the rest of the time and you don’t know whether the presentation was good, you don’t know – also when you are presenting yourself you don’t know it – and you don’t know whether it was nonsense what the person had talked about. In any case, it was often very boring then. And maybe a text was presented you had already read anyway” (Anne K.).

For Anne K., there is a negative routine in some courses. Mainly, she is uncertain about the quality of presentations, including her own. Moreover, from her perspective, there appears to be no systematic relation between course preparation (reading texts) and course activity (retelling texts) as well as between teaching input and feedback (quality stays unclear). But this seems to be a matter of professional teaching or new learning methods rather than of a lack of assessment, as the redesigning of the curriculum into modules may presuppose (modules must include assessment). Lack of feedback then appears as lack of student support. This flaw is aggravated in times of increased pressure:

“That this time [preparing for the intermediate exams, r.b.] was valuable and intense, with learning groups etc., I wouldn’t want to deny but the emotional pressure was pretty high in between. And if you fail once, so much the worse. It is very unpleasant then. Especially, if you have to repeat exams. Well, I entered the auditorium and there were papers with different colors for intermediate, final and repeating exams so that everybody who had failed and was repeating the exam was marked with a special color. And that was so mortifying” (Anne M.).

As the interviewees all had to develop self-control in preparing for their intermediate exams, and passing these exams can be accounted for as an empowering experience, assessment can also have negative consequences. Papers with different colors rank the students visibly, as Anne M. experienced it. Differently colored papers probably do not aim at assessing students

and may rather be used for bureaucratic purposes but clearly indicate a lack of student support and missing sensitivity for students' psychological state, especially when repeating exams.

Another facet of self-control is that it may empower students to use techniques of quality assurance for their purposes.

Anne K.: „Oh I could be mad at those study advisors. I took revenge then.”

R.B.: “Revenge?”

Anne K.: “Yes, I had been active in the subject study committee [*Fachstudienkommission*], and then I had suggested to evaluate the study advisor. And he did not score well. Which had been obvious.”

So there is an impact of quality assurance on student participation that is seen either as positive (Winter 2005) or as negative (Morley 2003). Whereas the first position stresses increased opportunities for participation in the context of evaluation, accreditation, or generally shaping reforms in the study structures, the latter criticizes that techniques of quality assurance tend “to assume that the ‘voice’ of the consumer is stable, pure, concrete and is the authentic indicator of democracy. This view suggests that there is a culturally untainted place from which students speak and theorize. It homogenizes student voices and overlooks power relations within the student body. Furthermore, it suggests an algorithmic relationship between input (student evaluation) and output (organizational change)” (Morley 2003: 137). Because students are a diverse group there is a range of purposes quality assurance techniques may be used for: they can be used for consumerist purposes as well as for student politics (Bretschneider 2003) – or simply for “revenge”.

Finally, self-control is also said to be a feature of employability. If there is no explicit skills development, students have to construct their employability; “it becomes more important for them to appreciate that their employability often derives from the totality of their achievements in respect of the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and extra-curricular engagements, together with their personal qualities and attributes” (Yorke 2004b: 423). Nevertheless, although the interviewees at least had some empowering experiences and are generally able to exercise some self-control they are pessimistic when talking about their employment perspectives. For Anne K. finding employment is not a matter of skills development but rather a “matter of luck”, as she states repeatedly. Others see networks as being decisive. In any case, the interviewees felt more uncertain about their future employment opportunities than one would expect from their personal skills development:

R.B.: “What are your expectations or visions for the time after you will have graduated?”

Melanie: “I am still *very unsure*. I can account for this only very badly. So I would *maybe*, such a *wishful thinking*, but *maybe* I could work somewhere as assistant to a speaker in politics. That wouldn't be bad. And then sometime become a speaker myself. Or – *I don't know*. It is *very difficult* to say. If I could slip in somewhere and that is fun for me then I would stay there. If this is not possible for the moment then I would try *maybe* other ways to find some-

thing. *Maybe* in a Ph.D program. *I am not fixed on something yet*. Well, I have to look around at first. I mean there is a permanent change and the situation is said to improve for liberal arts graduates, supposedly. And that's why I have not dealt systematically with it yet. Let's see what's happening at the labor market next year in October. It is really *difficult* to say. *Maybe* I do something completely different, *maybe* I will be self-employed. *Maybe* I immigrate to Spain and work there for a newspaper. *I don't know it yet*. *Maybe* I'll have babies. And stay at home. No, not that" [my italics, r.b.].

Conclusion: Students under pressure

There is an inherent and productive opposition in the reform process between normative demands and regulative techniques that challenges students in their everyday practice. On the one hand, there is a rhetoric of individual responsibility that focusses on self-organization, self-motivation and self-control, while regulative techniques, on the other hand, enforce conformity and compliance. The analysis of students' everyday practice has shown that students have indeed empowering experiences during their studies at university. However, the empowering momentum lies in overcoming a lack of organization *and* in breaking or undermining rules at the same time. Consequentially, these students feel that self-organization, self-motivation and self-control are not only more important than conforming to rules, but also decisive for successfully completing their studies.

But the opposition between normative demands and regulative techniques is at the core of the reform process and has so far proven to be highly productive, as reforms in the course of the Bologna-Process continue to expand to ever more areas of higher education. Normative concepts such as key skills and employability codify more and more patterns of individual behavior. Regulative techniques then describe, assess and document the student population. There are no limits to the scope of regulative techniques as well as of normative demands; both are expansive modes of governing students.

While traditional study structures in Germany challenge students by a lack of organization and support, expansive regulation and normative demands now produce parallel pressures: students have to individualize for labor market success and to conform for study survival. This conflict is aggravated as regulative techniques such as PDP tend to "treat individuals as isolated subjects lacking any acknowledgement of diverse class, gendered, racialized or, indeed, disciplinary locations" (Clegg 2004: 292). Findings from interviews with staff by Clegg and Bradley (2006) confirm that there are problems on both sides of the pedagogic relationship with forcing students to engage in reflective practice. There appear to be different levels of reflection depending on the students' background – "people may not be able to tell" (Clegg 2004: 293). Moreover, failure to engage in reflective practice may be viewed as personal failure, especially if it is part of course requirements and is assessed. As their data

shows, students react to skills development with apathy (Clegg/Bradley 2006: 479) or by undermining reflective practice, presenting what is expected and avoiding to demonstrate a lack of ability (Blass 1999: 244; cf. Morley 2003). Which is another facet of the students' diverse everyday practice that current study reforms mostly ignore.

Roland Bloch
Institute of Higher Education Research – HoF Wittenberg
Collegienstraße 62
D-06886 Lutherstadt Wittenberg
Germany
phone +49 3491 466-246
fax +49 3491 466-255
E-Mail: roland.bloch@hof.uni-halle.de
Internet: <http://www.hof.uni-halle.de>

References

- Anz, Christoph (2004): "Beschäftigungsfähigkeit" - Vereinbarkeit oder Konflikt mit Wissenschaftsorientierung. In: Benz, Winfried u.a. (Hg.): Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre. Evaluation nutzen - Akkreditierung sichern - Profil schärfen. Stuttgart: Raabe,
- Barrie, Simon C. (2006): Understanding what we mean by generic attributes of graduates. In: Higher Education 2/2006, S. 215-241
- Blancke, Susanne/Roth, Christian/Schmid, Josef (2000): Employability ("Beschäftigungsfähigkeit") als Herausforderung für den Arbeitsmarkt. Auf dem Weg zur flexiblen Erwerbsgesellschaft. Stuttgart: Akademie für Technikfolgenabschätzung in Baden-Württemberg
- Blass, Eddie (1999): Changing the Concept of Skill in Higher Education in the UK: is it progress in the current environment? In: European Journal of Education 2/1999, S. 237-248
- Bloy, Sue/Williams, Jean (2000): Using the national key skills framework within a higher education context. In: Fallows, St./Holmes, Len (Hg.): Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education. London: Kogan Page, S. 151-163
- Bretschneider, Falk (2003): Studentische Partizipation zwischen Interessenvertretung und außengelenkter Selbstregulierung. Eine Analyse aus Akteurssicht am Beispiel der Akkreditierung. In: die hochschule 1/2003, S. 174-186
- Bröckling, Ulrich (2003): You are not responsible for being down, but you are responsible for getting up. Über Empowerment. In: Leviathan 31, 3/2003, S. 323-344
- Bunk, Gerhard P./Kaiser, Manfred/Zedler, Reinhard (1991): Schlüsselqualifikationen - Intention, Modifikation und Realisation in der beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung. In: Mitteilungen aus der Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung 2/1991, S. 365-374
- Bürger, Sandra/Teichler, Ulrich (2004): Besondere Komponenten der Studiengangsentwicklung. Zur berufsstrategischen Gestaltung von Studiengängen. In: Benz, Winfried u.a. (Hg.): Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre. Evaluation nutzen - Akkreditierung sichern - Profil schärfen. Stuttgart: Raabe, S. E 3.1
- Clegg, Sue (2004): Critical readings: progress files and the production of the autonomous learner. In: Teaching in Higher Education 3/2004, S. 287-298

- Clegg, Sue/Bradley, Sally (2006): The implementation of progress files in higher education: Reflection as national policy. In: Higher Education 51/2006, S. 465-486
- Dearing, Ron (1997): Higher Education in the Learning Society. Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. London: The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
- European Ministers of Education (1999): The Bologna-Declaration of 19 June 1999. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/990719BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.PDF (letzter Zugriff am 3.5.05)
- European Ministers of Education (2003): Realising the European Higher Education Area http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF (letzter Zugriff am 10.5.06)
- Fallows, Stephen/Steven, Christine (2000a): Embedding a skills programme for all students. In: ebd. (Hg.): Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education. Employability, Transferable Skills and Learning for Life. London: Kogan Page, S. 17-31
- Fallows, Stephen/Steven, Christine (2000b): The skills agenda. In: ebd. (Hg.): Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education. Employability, Transferable Skills and Learning for Life. London: Kogan Page, S. 3-12
- Feeley, Malcolm M./Simon, Jonathan (1992): The New Penology: Notes on the Emerging Strategy of Corrections and its Implications. In: Criminology 4/1992, S. 449-474
- Holmes, Len (2000): Questioning the skills agenda. In: Fallows, Stephen/Steven, Christine (Hg.): Integrating Key Skills in Higher Education. Employability, Transferable Skills and Learning for Life. London: Kogan Page, S. 201-214
- Joint Quality Initiative (2004): Shared 'Dublin' descriptors for Short Cycle, First Cycle, Second Cycle and Third Cycle Awards. <http://www.jointquality.org/content/descriptors/CompletesetDublinDescriptors.doc> (letzter Zugriff am 10.05.06)
- Kluge, Susann (1999): Empirisch begründete Typenbildung. Zur Konstruktion von Typen und Typologien in der qualitativen Sozialforschung. Opladen: Leske u. Budrich
- KMK (2005): Qualifikationsrahmen für Deutsche Hochschulabschlüsse. http://www.kmk.org/doc/beschl/BS_050421_Qualifikationsrahmen_AS_Ka.pdf (letzter Zugriff am 10.05.06)
- Laur-Ernst, Ute (1996): Schlüsselqualifikationen in Deutschland - ein ambivalentes Konzept zwischen Ungewissheitsbewältigung und Persönlichkeitsbildung. In: Gonon, Philipp (Hg.): Schlüsselqualifikationen kontrovers. Aarau: Verlag Sauerländer, S. 17-23
- Lenhardt, Gero (2004): Europäische und deutsche Perspektiven der Hochschulpolitik. In: die hochschule 2/2004, S. 17-28
- Longman (1987): Dictionary of Contemporary English. Berlin and Munich: Langenscheidt
- Lüdtke, Alf (1991): Einleitung: Herrschaft als soziale Praxis. In: ebd. (Hg.): Herrschaft als soziale Praxis. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, S. 9-63
- Lüdtke, Alf (1994): Stofflichkeit, Macht-Lust und Reiz der Oberflächen. Zu den Perspektiven von Alltagsgeschichte. In: Schulze, Winfried (Hg.): Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie. Eine Diskussion. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, S. 65-80
- Mertens, Dieter (1974): Schlüsselqualifikationen. Thesen zur Schulung für eine moderne Gesellschaft. In: Mitteilungen aus der Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung 1/1974, S. 36-43
- Morley, Louise (2003): Quality and Power in Higher Education. Berkshire: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press
- Nuthmann, Reinhard (1979): Bildungsexpansion, Berufs- und Qualifikationsentwicklung. In: Teichler, Ulrich (Hg.): Hochschule und Beruf. Problemlage und Aufgaben der Forschung. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, S. 9-39

- Pascarella, Ernest T./Terenzini, Patrick T. (2005): How College Affects Students Volume 2. A Third Decade of Research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Pongratz, Hans/Voß, Günter (2001): Erwerbstätige als "Arbeitskraftunternehmer". Unternehmer ihrer eigenen Arbeitskraft? In: SOWI 4/2001, S. 42-52
- QAA (2001): Guidelines for HE Progress Files.
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/progfile2001.asp> (letzter Zugriff am 9.5.06)
- Richter, Annette (2004): Portfolios als alternative Form der Leistungsbewertung. In: Berendt, Brigitte/Voss, Hans-Peter/Wildt, Johannes (Hg.): Neues Handbuch Hochschullehre: Lehren und Lernen effizient gestalten. Stuttgart: Raabe, S. 1-16
- Teichler, Ulrich (2000): Potenziale und Erträge von Absolventenstudien. In: ebd. (Hg.): Hochschule und Arbeitsmarkt. Konzeptionen, Diskussionen, Trends. Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, S. 141-159
- Varnava, Tracey/James, Helen (2005): A personal experience of PDP and progress files.
<http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/pdp/glamorgan.html> (letzter Zugriff am 10.05.06)
- Voß, Günter (2001): Auf dem Weg zum Individualberuf? Zur Beruflichkeit des Arbeitskraftunternehmers. In: Kurtz, Thomas (Hg.): Aspekte des Berufs in der Moderne. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, S. 287-314
- Winter, Martin (2005): Mitwirkungschancen der Studierenden bei Qualitätssicherung und Studienstrukturereform. In: Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung 2/2005, S. 112-130
- Witzel, Andreas (2000): Das problemzentrierte Interview. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-00/1-00witzel-d.htm> (letzter Zugriff am 18.10.05)
- Yorke, Mantz (2004a): Employability in Higher Education: what it is - what it is not. (letzter Zugriff am
- Yorke, Mantz (2004b): Employability in the Undergraduate Curriculum: some student perspectives. In: European Journal of Education 4/2004, S. 409-427